

In an apparent attempt to sound the alarm on the dangers facing the Mekong and the East Sea, Ngô Thế Vinh was first among “*The Friends of the Mekong*” to awaken public opinion to this immediate issue which undoubtedly will remain to be so for many decades to come. *Dr. Trần Nguyên Phiêu, author of “The North East Monsoon”*

In the last 20 years, Dr. Ngô Thế Vinh has intensely focused his attention on the Lancang-Mekong countries. He seeks to protect the cultural heritage and livelihood of the 65 million people living along the banks of this mighty river as well as the future of their children. *Phạm Phan Long, PE, Chairman, Viet Ecology Foundation*

We are in the year of 2016, the Mekong is drying up and its ecosystem gradually degraded. Those geological phenomena are no longer predictions but have become undisputed facts that sadly verify Ngô Thế Vinh’s forewarnings. He is an author who lives with his time and yet sees well ahead of it. *Ánh Nguyệt, former Radio France International / RFI Reporter*

Dr. Ngô Thế Vinh is deeply interested in measures that protect the ecosystem of the Mekong. He never tired of drawing the attention of the Vietnamese as well as international public opinion to this issue. He does not live in Vietnam, nevertheless his heart and mind are inextricably anchored to the bed of his river. *Prof. Võ Tòng Xuân, Rector Emeritus, An Giang University, Vietnam*

Dr. Ngô Thế Vinh is not only a medical doctor, he is also an ecologist deeply committed to the welfare of the people at large. In his 650-page

book *“The Nine Dragons Drained Dry, the East Sea in Turmoil”* he already alarmed the world of the disastrous consequences of the gigantic hydroelectric dams being built in the Upper Mekong by China. The voice of the Southeast Asian people has been raised. To this effect, Dr. Ngô Thế Vinh has made no small contribution. *Prof. Lê Xuân Khoa, President Emeritus Southeast Asia Resource Center*

When the reactions from the governments downstream turned mute, the voice raised by Ngô Thế Vinh and “the Friends of the Mekong” offers the most significant, objective forum [to discuss the issues pertaining to the Mekong] because it is free of any self-serving regional interests. *Phạm Phú Minh, former editor 21st Century Magazine, author of “Hanoi in my Eyes”*

In my eyes, Ngô Thế Vinh is not merely a medical doctor, more than that, he is “a pulse taker of rivers” exploring for ways to mobilize public opinion to rally to the protection of the rivers’ natural flow. A case in point is the Mekong that represents the “life-line” of over 65 million souls who inhabit her banks. At this moment, sections of this river are occluding on account of historical circumstances and narrow considerations aiming only for short-term gains. *Hoàng Khởi Phong, author of “Men of One Hundred Yesteryears”*

“The Nine Dragons Drained Dry, the East Sea in Turmoil” first published in 2000, is a well-researched yet prophetic book about the Mekong River. More than a decade has passed. The impacts of poorly planned and uncoordinated exploitation of the Mekong River are becoming more and more obvious. A physician, a writer and most importantly a humanist, Dr. Ngô Thế Vinh is sounding again the call for a socially and ecologically responsible management of the resources of this life-giving river. *Prof. Đặng Văn Chất, Editor of “The Vietnamese Mayflowers of 1975”*

The book titled *“The Nine Dragons Drained Dry, the East Sea in Turmoil”* is the fruit of an arduous labor of love by a medical doctor turned

environmental advocate who is totally committed to the preservation of the Mekong River. He wants to sound the alarms before the court of world public opinion about the political scheming and short sighted calculations of world leaders who are willing to put at risk this river's very survival and at the same time endanger all of her life forms as well as civilizations that took millenniums to develop along her more than 4,800 km long current. *Dr. Nguyễn Xuân Xanh, Author of "the Einstein"*

A case in point: In addition to the stacks of books and newspapers he had to read, in order to write *"The Nine Dragons Drained Dry, the East Sea in Turmoil"*, Ngô Thế Vinh had spent countless days traveling alone through many countries that lie between the Mekong's source to its estuary to conduct his research, take photographs and keep notes to get to the root of why this river is "occluding". Furthermore, he also has to document the past, present and future havoc this environmental disaster visits on the countries bordering the river's current – particularly the Mekong Delta in Vietnam. *Khánh Trường, Editor of Hợp Lưu Magazine*

"The Nine Dragons Drained Dry – The East Sea in Turmoil" is the title of a "faction" written by author, scientist, and explorer... Ngô Thế Vinh. This exceedingly useful, captivating, prophetic and hopeful book is written by a Vietnamese. Regrettably, it was not issued an official permit to be published in the country because it is...too candid. Even though, the domestic Giấy Vụn Publisher and the overseas Viet Ecology Press collaborated closely, its edition and readership remain extremely limited. The Mekong is being drained dry, the East Sea in turmoil and China seems to be the real culprit behind everything. Besides issuing weak and perfunctory protestations what are the authorities doing to save the people from those enormous threats that hover over their heads? *Nguyễn Đình Bốn, author of Mút Mùa Lê Thuỷ*

Ngô Thế Vinh's work - The Nine Dragons Drained Dry The East Sea In Turmoil is an urgent and serious warning about a disaster that a lot of his compatriots – particularly those who are being in charge of Viet Nam – do not know of or do not care to deal with. *Tướng Năng Tiến, freelance journalist*

The 23 chapters in the book cover a multitude of topics pertaining to nature, people, the concerns of typical individuals, the ecology, and political intrigues. The author succeeded in presenting them at times in the forms of research works extremely rich in the history, traditions, beliefs or customs of many tribes. At other times, he reverted to facts, figures and precise scientific statistics. But most fascinating of all, were the pages of the travelogue bursting with life, colors of the exotic highlands, delta, deep jungles or open sea. Those marvelous pages will surely captivate the readers especially those who have never ventured into new lands or discovered foreign ways of life. *Nhật Tiến, Author of Thềm Hoang*

“The Nine Dragons Drained Dry, the East Sea in Turmoil” is described as a novel. However, while reading it, one comes to the realization that it actually deals with the issues of a deteriorating environment that endangers the survival of a beloved river and its nefarious impacts on a great number of people, on generations to come, and on many nations – at the least seven - in Southeast Asia. Ngô Thế Vinh writes about the building of dams wreaking havoc on the Mekong and their implications. Ngô Thế Vinh’s book is a muffled cry sounding the alarm about a disaster that is about to befall not only Vietnam, our homeland, but the entire region. *Nguyễn Đình Toàn, Author of Con Đường.*

Readers who grew up in Vietnam after 1975 may only know author Ngô Thế Vinh through the interview he gave to Tuổi Trẻ newspaper (August 30, 2009) on the threats to the Mekong River posed by China’s upstream dams. However, he is well-known overseas for his monumental works in 2000, in which he exposed the long-term adverse effects of the Chinese dams on the livelihoods of millions of people dependent on the river. If an intellectual is defined as someone who is ahead of his time with long-term vision, then Ngô Thế Vinh’s 646-page book, “The Nine Dragons Drained Dry, the East Sea in Turmoil”, amply qualifies him as a true intellectual. *Professor Nguyễn Văn Tuấn, Garvan Institute of Medical Research and UNSW Australia.*

NGÔ THẾ VINH

THE NINE DRAGONS DRAINED DRY
THE EAST SEA IN TURMOIL

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Jacket photographs

Front

Nuozhadu 5,850 MW, the sixth and the largest hydroelectric dam on the Mekong River, started in 2006 and completed in 2014. The white letters on the right: “Power comes from water – Ability to contain generates great things” (source: Ying Qiu, International Rivers)

Back

Woody Island, Đảo Phú Lâm in Vietnamese, Yongxing Dao in Chinese, is the largest island of the Paracels. China took over the Paracels from South Vietnam in the “Bloody Battle of the Paracels” in January 1974 (source: Google earth satellite)

THE NINE DRAGONS DRAINED DRY
THE EAST SEA IN TURMOIL

To the Friends of the Mekong

The Nine Dragons Drained Dry

The East Sea in Turmoil

Ngô Thế Vinh

Translated from the Vietnamese by

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Also by Ngô Thế Vinh

The Green Belt

The Battle of Saigon

Mekong The Occluding River

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A Note on Names and Places

Foreign names used in this Book

- All Tibetan names and places, have been Romanized.
- All Chinese names and places are rendered in pinyin.
- All Burmese, Laotian, Thai, Cambodian names and terms, have been Romanized according to the commonly accepted Romanization practice.
- All Vietnamese names and terms keep their usual diacritical markings.

** Photographs, not my own, are shown with captions referring to their sources.*

FOREWORD I

FIRST EDITION

The Mekong, this life-giving waterway, is and will continue to be inextricably intertwined with the future or destiny of the countries in Southeast Asia of which Vietnam lies at the southernmost end. This river courses through seven countries including Tibet over a distance of 4,800 kilometers – almost half of it within China’s borders. Long gone is the day the Mekong still retained its primeval wilderness state.

This majestic river has existed from time immemorial before Western explorers came and christened it “The Mekong”. Because it runs through regions inhabited by peoples speaking different languages, the river is known under various names. To the Tibetans it is “Dza Chu” (the water flowing from the stones). In China, it becomes “Lancang Jiang” (the turbulent river). Upon entering Laos and Thailand it is called “Mae Nam Khong” (the mother of streams) then “Tonle Thom” (the great river) in Cambodia. In Vietnam, its final stop, the river divides into nine estuaries resembling nine dragons before diving into the East Sea. For that reason, the Vietnamese give it the colorful name “Sông Cửu Long” (the river of nine-dragons).

The name “Mekong” was adopted for cartographic purposes by the Western diplomatic circles of the day – mainly British and French - probably based on the Portuguese pronunciation of the name given to the river by the Thai which bears the romantic meaning “the mother of streams”.

Since the first century of our era, a civilization known as Óc Eo had flourished in the Mekong Delta. Going into the 12th century, a mighty fleet from the kingdom of Champa sailed along the Mekong and ransacked Angkor, the capital city of the Khmer. In the following century, Marco Polo crossed the Mekong in Yunnan as he bid farewell to China. About that same time, Chou Ta-Kuan, a Chinese marine traveler, entered the Mekong from the East Sea and sailed upstream to reach the Tonle Sap Lake. He landed in Angkor and wrote an engaging long diary about his trip. The French naturalist and explorer Henri Mouhot came to this river and “rediscovered” the famed temple complex of Angkor.

Although the French succeeded in establishing their colonial rule in the South of Vietnam, the colonists soon became disenchanted with the limited commercial potentials of their new colony. As a result, they began to turn their eye to the Mekong. There were heated debates concerning the implementation of the “great idea” whose proponent was none other than Francis Garnier, the 25 year-old Mayor of Cholon. Indefatigably passionate for adventure and discovery of “unknown lands”, Garnier was also a staunch believer that “Nations, like France, without colonies are dead”. This line of reasoning led to the launching of an expedition of six men considered the best and the brightest representatives of French youth in the 19th century known as an era of forbearance and stoicism. Full of optimism, they departed from Saigon for the capital city of Phnom Penh in the first leg of their trip. However, their journey dragged on into its second year (1866-1868) on account of the unpredictable obstacles and difficulties they met on their track. This heroic but tragic endeavor ended with the death of the group’s leader when he set foot in Yunnan. Though the explorers were unable to reach the source of the river, they had seen enough to conclude that this waterway could not serve as a trade route to China.

Three decades later, another group of French explorers led by Dutreuil de Rhins and his companion J-F Grenard left Paris en route first to Russia then China. They traveled on the ancient Silk Road to

arrive at the Tibetan high plateau. Of the French explorers, they were the ones who came nearest to the source of the Mekong. However, Dutreuil de Rhins met an untimely death when he was shot by the villagers of Khamba. As for Grenard, he made it back to Paris to announce that he had found the Mekong's source without being able to provide any evidence to substantiate his claim.

Things stayed fairly unchanged until the 1950's as the source of the Mekong still remained shrouded in an enigma waiting to be unwrapped. Forgotten for a time, this river again came under the spotlight during the tumultuous years of the Vietnam War. At the height of the War (1968), the farthest the reporters Peter T. White and W. E. Garrett of the National Geographic Magazine could reach from the Golden Triangle was the lower section of the Mekong. The Beijing Government which was in full control of the upper Mekong at that time imposed a strict ban on newsmen to travel to this area. From their location, our two explorers sailed downstream to Thailand, Laos, Cambodia then all the way to the Mekong Delta in Vietnam.

It was not until after the Vietnam War, more precisely in the post Cold War, that the two correspondents Thomas O'Neill and Michael S. Yamashita were able to complete a quasi trans-Mekong trip (1992) from its Tibetan head source down to Yunnan then southward to Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, Cambodia to reach their final destination in Vietnam. It was also the first time that the Tibetan nomads led them to Zadoi at an elevation of 4,600 meters, the furthestmost reaches of the Mekong. "We rode behind the mountain and found in a shallow draw a sheet of ice some 300 yards long – shaped like an hourglass. Crouching down on the frozen surface, I could hear below a trickle of water. It was the beginning notes of the Mekong. Mike and I were, as far as I can discover, the first Western journalists to hear them." [National Geographic, Vol. 183, No.2, Feb. 1993].

Unfortunately, no verification of the coordinates and name of

the mountain could be established on the map and the claim put forth by those two men to have located the source of the Mekong turned out eventually to be a myth.

The world had to wait until September 17, 1994, for the Franco-British expedition led by Michel Peissel to climb to the top of Rupsa Pass and have a real look at the source of the Mekong. This historic date for the Mekong took place about twenty years after man first set foot on the moon. This most desolate place of Central Asia's highland stands at an elevation of 4,975 meters, hundreds of kilometers away from the nearest populated area. Most importantly, Michel Peissel was able to ascertain its exact coordinates: latitude 33° 16' 534 North, longitude 93° 52' 929 East. Hence, regardless of time and place, one can easily pinpoint the exact address of the Mekong's source on the map. Peissel recorded his thoughts about the event in the following lines:

“This was what geography and exploration were all about. Just a few numbers, yet what a struggle to record them – how much bloodshed, tears, and sweat so that what had been spelled out in 1866 as the goal of the Mekong Committee of the French Société de Géographie could at long last be fulfilled. Suddenly it became important to record the day, September 17, 1994. Twenty five years after man had set foot on the moon, here we were recording for the first time the source of the third-largest river of Asia.” [The Last Barbarians, Michael Peissel, p.210]

Discovering its source also means – sadly enough – having to witness the heart wrenching gradual degradation of that historic river unfold before our very eyes. With the passage of time, this river runs the risk of turning into the last river as well. This book deals with what could turn out to be the final remaining days of the Mekong with the fervent hope that the D+ Day of this river of destiny will only take place in a very distant future, at least not during this third millennium.

This book is not a research work in the traditional sense of the

word. More precisely, it takes the form of a novel consisting of 23 chapters that are not linked together by a single plot with complex turns of events. Instead, it includes different settings so that the chapters could be read as separate short stories with the Mekong, the common theme, acting like a crimson thread running through each of them. Nevertheless, this book should not be looked at simply as a “fiction”, a product of pure imagination. It is rather a mixture of “facts and fiction”, a “faction”, with a small number of protagonists interacting with each other in imagined circumstances. Together, they introduced the readers to the lands the majestic Mekong meanders through.

This is a river of time which reflects the dawn and twilight of civilizations drenched in the blood and tears of wars through the ages – a big river rich in history and extremely diverse in geography and human cultures. It is not through the bird’s eye but through the lenses of a satellite that we become dazzled and overwhelmed by the tragic vicissitudes the Mekong has to endure – much of it caused by humans.

The author truly hopes that this book can convey to the readers a general as well as updated picture of the Mekong and draw their attention to the dreadful fate awaiting this river which ranks 11th in the world.

The bibliography will help refer interested readers to our research materials. Hopefully, in the not too distant future, knowledge about the Mekong will grow thanks to the research works by young Vietnamese scholars in Vietnam as well as overseas. That this book, in a small way, may contribute some thoughts and ideas for their works is what we aspire for.

NGÔ THẾ VINH
Cà Mau Năm Căn 11/1999

FOREWORD II

SECOND EDITION

SOME PERSONAL NOTES

The non-fiction, “Cứu Long Cận Dòng – Biển Đông Dậy Sóng”, was first published by Văn Nghệ in 2000 to be followed by a second edition in the succeeding year. Another work, this time a reportage titled “Mekong -The Occluding River”, went into print with Văn Nghệ Mới in March, 2007. Its second edition saw the day nine months later along with an audio book which was presented by Ánh Nguyệt’s authentic southern accent to the accompaniment of background music by Đoàn Văn Nghệ Dân Tộc Lạc Hồng. The harmony was arranged by Tuấn Thảo. The third edition (2008) of “Cứu Long Cận Dòng – Biển Đông Dậy Sóng” is in the ebook format. It is supplemented with numerous new photographs and updated information. Though this book was first written in 2000, it still retains its original relevancy to today’s world.

China continues to build mammoth hydroelectric dams in the Mekong Cascades in the earthquake-prone zone of Yunnan. Taking into account the widespread devastations caused by past powerful earthquakes in the Sichuan and Yunnan provinces, one cannot dismiss the threat that a disastrous great flood triggered by a collapsing dam would spell disaster on the countries downstream.

What's more, China recently introduced another audacious project named "Navigation Channel Improvement Project on the Upper Mekong River" calling for the use of dynamites to blast rock formations in sections of the Mekong River running from Yunnan to Laos where rapids and islets were found. Backhoe boats will be used to fill deep cavities in the riverbed with pulverized rocks in order to render the riverbed wider and deeper permitting the use of cargo ships with 500 to 700 ton displacements to transport Chinese made surplus goods from the river port of Simao, Yunnan to the Thai cities of Chiang Khong and Chiang Sean then further south to Luang Prabang and the capital city of Vientiane in Laos. On their return trip, those ships will bring back minerals and raw materials to satisfy China's industrial development needs that were growing by leaps and bounds.

Right from day one of the project, numerous species of fish were wiped out causing grave imbalances to the region's hydrology. The current also courses faster and more turbulently causing the caving of the riverbanks and the destruction of crops planted along the river. Consequently, immediate and detrimental effects are brought to bear on the natural habitat and the livelihood of the inhabitants downstream.

Then, just two days prior to the New Year of 2007, another earth-shaking event stunned the environmentalists. On December 29, 2006, the China News Agency announced that for the first time the Beijing government had successfully completed via the Mekong two shipments totaling 300 tons of oil from the port of Chiang Rai in northern Thailand to the port city of Jinghong in Yunnan Province.

Presently, the series of gigantic hydroelectric dams known as the Mekong Cascades in the province of Yunnan is creating havoc in the lives of the sixty million people who reside in the Lower Mekong Basin. To add insult to injury, the fact that the Mekong is being used as a strategic waterway to transport crude oil from the Middle East to feed the industrial zones of Southwestern China bypassing the straits of Malacca is viewed as another fatal blow to this river's very existence.

Then, just a while back on 12/03/2007, the East Sea was again threatened with disturbance when the People's Republic of China State

Council announced the establishment of the Shansa District. This district encompasses Vietnam's Paracel and Spratly Archipelagoes. With this act, Beijing has practically asserted its dominance over the region by virtue of the age-old adage that might makes right. The Director of the Institute of Maritime Research of Malaysia, Mr. B.A. Hamzak, has coined this very descriptive term: "the Tibetization of the East Sea" to describe this new development. It is widely used by the press and diplomatic corps to depict the prospect for the countries of Southeast Asia to wake up, an early morning, and face the fait-accompli that the East Sea has fallen under Chinese control – just like Tibet did in the 1950's.

With an overall view of past intra-regional relationships, we can ascertain that the "threat – like a historical obsession – emanating from the unrelenting expansion of big countries like China" invariably leads to territorial disputes be it over a river (in this case the Mekong) or the East Sea and its multitude of islands or international land boundaries. This view continues to be the unchanging theme in this book. As she crosses the threshold of the 21st century, the dilemma facing Vietnam is not any internal conflicts among her people but in effect it is with China itself.

A few additional personal thoughts for this new edition: on my return visit to the Mekong Delta in September of 2006, I had the pleasure to visit with Son Nam, the author. Though he had undergone surgical therapy, he still had difficulties moving around. His overall physical health might not be as good as before but his mind still stayed extremely sharp. It was the first time for us to meet. Nevertheless, I had the feeling we had known each other for a long time already because I had read most of the works on "Miền Tây", the Western region of South Vietnam, written by this "old Vietnamese man living among Khmer neighbors" as his pen name Son Nam implies.

On that visit, I brought with me a gift to Son Nam: a DVD copy of the film "*Mùa Len Trâu – the Buffalo Boy*" by director Nguyễn Võ Nghiêm Minh. The film was inspired by a short story in Son Nam's book "*Hương Rừng Cà Mau/ The Fragrance of the Forest of Cà Mau*".

My friendly gesture made my host happy and he confided in me that he had read “Cửu Long Cạn Dòng – Biển Đông Dậy Sóng” more than once. A copy of the second edition of the book published by Văn Nghệ with a rather worn out cover that he held in his hand bore witness to his words. He also repeated a couple of times the suggestion that the book should be published in Vietnam and invited me to stay at his home for several days to allow us to go over its content. Regrettably, I did not have the chance to take him up on this offer because, soon afterward, he passed away on August 13, 2008 at the age of 82.

The bird of the land named “*đồ quỳên*” had flapped its wing to soar up high in the sky carrying on its wings Sơn Nam, the people’s writer. Thus, the curtain has dropped for good on the stage where that folksy old man used to take his leisurely time to narrate the ancient tales about the pioneering days of his beloved South. Certainly, there still remain tales left to be written but future generations will sorely miss the joy to learn about them from that dear special author.

Probably more than anybody else, uncle Sơn Nam and the author understand full well that there is a dim chance for the book to be approved for publication in Vietnam in view of my unwillingness – as a matter of principle, to submit “Cửu Long Cạn Dòng – Biển Đông Dậy Sóng” to censorship. On top of that, the book’s subject matter deals with sensitive issues pertaining to China. Therefore, the odds do not look any better when one considers the current unsettling political climate and the absence of freedom of speech in Vietnam.

From a foreign land, this author would like to dedicate these notes in the English version of the book in memory of uncle Sơn Nam for his works on the “*Văn Minh Miệt Vườn*” or Civilization of Orchard. In spite of its recent birth, this young Civilization is approaching a point of no return as it is heading toward potential extinction.

NGÔ THẾ VINH

California 01/2009 – 04/2016

ABBREVIATIONS:

ACG	American Conservation Groups
ACMECS	Ayeyawady-Chao Praya-Mekong Economic Cooperation Strategy
ADB	Asian Development Bank
AFP	Agence France Presse
ARVN	Army of the Republic of Vietnam
ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
ASEAN-CCI	ASEAN Chambers of Commerce and Industry
APEC	Asian Pacific Economic Commission
AWOL	Absence Without Leave
BOOT	Build Own Operate Transfer
CIA-SGU	Central Intelligence Agency - Special Guerilla Unit
CGIAR	Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research
CNRS	Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique
CORDS	Civil Operations and Rural Development Support
CPT	Communist Party of Thailand
DIIR	Development Desk of the Department of Information and International Relations
EGAT	Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand
DEA	Drug Enforcement Agency

ECAFE	Economic Commission for Asia and Far East
EEZ	Exclusive Economic Zone
EMS	Environmental Monitoring System
ENSO	El Nino Southern Oscillation
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization
FULRO	Front Unifié de la Libération des Races Opprimées
GMS	Greater Mekong Subregion
HYV	High Yield Variety
ICC	International Control Commission
ICF	International Crane Foundation
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IRRI	International Rice Research Institute
ISAW	Institute for the Study of American Wars
IVS	International Voluntary Service
IWMI	International Water Management Institute
JYC	Jacques-Yves Cousteau
KMT	Kuomintang
MIT	Massachusetts Institute of Technology
MRC 1957	Mekong River Committee
MRC 1995	Mekong River Commission
MSD	Mekong Sea Dyke
NERICA	New Rice of Africa
NLD	National League for Democracy
PDJ	Plaine des Jarres
PRG B40	Rocket Propelled Grenade B40
RFA	Radio Free Asia
RID	Royal Irrigation Department
SEAMEO	Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization
SEAP	Southeast Asian Peninsular
SLOC	State Law and Order Council
SOAS	School of Oriental and African Studies
STOL	Short Take Off and Landing
TVA	Tennessee Valley Authority
UCSF	University of California in San Francisco

UNCLOS	United Nations Convention on Law of the Sea
UNDP	United Nations Development Program
UNESCO	U.N. Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Emergency Fund
UNTAC	United Nations Transitional Agency in Cambodia
USAID	U.S. Agency for International Development
USIS	United States Information Service
VFA	Vietnam Food Association
WB	World Bank
WTO	World Tourism Organization
WTO	World Trade Organization
WWF	World Wild Life Fund

CHRONOLOGY OF THE SEVEN MEKONG COUNTRIES

(1) Tibet, (2) China, (3) Myanmar / Burma, (4) Thailand / Siam, (5) Laos / Lan Xang, (6) Cambodia / Khmer / Chenla, (7) Vietnam / An Nam / Đai Nam

FIRST TO SIXTH CENTURY

– Han Dynasty incorporated Vietnam into China, renamed it Giao Chi / Jiaozi. Trưng sisters led uprising against the Chinese and set up an independent state.

– Existence of the Funan kingdom in Mekong Delta with Óc Eo civilization and seaport links to China and the Mediterranean region.

SEVENTH CENTURY

– Songtsan Gambo unified

various tribes on Tibetan Plateau, established the Tubo Kingdom, today's Tibet, a powerful nation located at the source of the Mekong. Tibet is the cradle of the major rivers in Asia.

– Songtsan Gambo married the Chinese Princess Wencheng of the Tang royal family in 641. As a result, Buddhist culture was introduced into Tibet.

– In 679, Tang Dynasty established the Protectorate General unit to pacify Jiaozi and named it An Nam đô hộ phủ.

– Chenla incorporated Funan. Chenla was divided into two parts: Water Chenla in today's Cambodia, and Land Chenla in southern Laos.

NINTH TO TENTH CENTURY

– Đinh Bộ Lĩnh, unified 12 warlords, liberated the country from the rule of the Chinese Southern Han. He became emperor and named his state Đại Cồ Việt.

– Ngô Quyền defeated the Chinese Southern Han on Bạch Đằng River and expelled the Chinese. He ushered in a new era of independence.

– A perpetual treaty between Tibet and China bearing witness to the historical power of Tibet as a nation [821BC-2 A.D.] was engraved on a stone monument at Jokhang Temple in Lhasa.

– Jayavarman II secured Chenla independence from Java. Later Chenla became the Khmer Empire and chose Angkor as its capital.

ELEVENTH TO TWELVETH CENTURY

– Burmese from Southern China entered the upper Irrawaddy valley (the early home of the Pyu, the Mon) and established the Pagan Empire in the 1050s.

– Vietnam became a prosperous country during the Lý Dynasty. Emperor Lý Thái Tông conquered the Champa Kingdom.

– Suryavarman I expanded the Khmer Empire to Lopburi in Thailand and into Laos. Suryavarman II built the Angkor Wat.

1177_Angkor Empire invaded and destroyed by a powerful army of Champa Kingdom.

1181_Jayavarman VII defeated Champa, beginning of the most glorious eras of the Khmer Empire. Angkor Thom and Bayon temples were built.

THIRTEENTH CENTURY

– The Mongol conquests of China marked the subjugation of China to Mongol rule. The Yuan Dynasty ruled China for about a century.

– Vietnam twice defeated the Mongol invasions resulting in long lasting independence and prosperity from Lý to Trần Dynasties.

1288_ Trần Hưng Đạo defeated the third Mongol invasion by the same tactic used by Ngô Quyền on Bạch Đằng River.

– Marco Polo crossed the Lancang-Mekong in Yunnan leaving China to proceed on his way to the Bay of Bengal.

– Chou Ta-Kuan, an envoy from China, sailed up the Mekong, visited Angkor, wrote a memoir with descriptions of the Cambodian customs.

– Tai people from Yunnan, escaped the Mongol invasion, migrated south and established the Kingdom Ayutthaya in the Chao Phraya Delta.

– Jayavarman VII's death, Angkor became the battlefield between two neighboring kingdoms: Siamese in the west and Vietnamese in the east.

FOURTEENTH TO FIFTEENTH CENTURY

1306_ Trần Anh Tông married Princess Huyền Trân to Champa King Jaya Sinhavarman III Chế Mân in return for Châu Ô and Châu Lý that became today's Quảng Bình, Quảng Trị, and Thừa Thiên Huế.

1354_ Lan Xang Kingdom established in 1354 by Prince Fa Ngum of Muang Sua, present day Luang Prabang. He is the first monarch of Laos.

1434_ Siam twice conquered Angkor; the third attack was a disaster for the Khmer Kingdom. Survivors abandoned their capital and escaped to the South.

1460_ Lê Thánh Tông ruled Vietnam for 37 years, introduced comprehensive legal codes and reforms, and extended the territory southward.

– Half of the western territory of Cambodia annexed by Siam. Angkor became the forgotten kingdom for several years.

SIXTEENTH CENTURY

1511_The Portuguese captured the Strait of Malacca, then years later the name of “Mekong” was found in their records.

1555_Da Cruz, a Portuguese priest, was considered the first European to visit Cambodia.

1569_Burmese attempted to expand their territory eastward, invaded Siam, then attacked Lan Xang.

SEVENTEENTH TO EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

– Faifo, known as Hội An, a trading port in the 16th and 17th centuries, where Chinese, Japanese, Dutch and Indians built commercial districts.

1618_Shogun Nguyễn Phúc Nguyễn married Princess Ngọc Vạn to Chey Chetta II, king of Cambodia, in exchange of Prey Nokor, present day Sài Gòn and Gia Định.

1627_Alexandre de Rhodes, Jesuit missionary, adapted

Vietnamese language to Roman alphabet, had long lasting effects on the spreading of mass literacy in Vietnam.

1641_Gerrit Van Wuysthoff, an envoy of the Dutch East India Company, visited Vientiane and was received by King Suriya Vongsa. The Lan Xang kingdom reached its peak at the time.

1656_Siam was a powerful kingdom under the reign of King Narai with Ayuthaya as its capital.

– Khmer Empire continued to decline due to unending internal conflicts. It turned to Siam and Vietnam for protection with great loss to its territory.

– The area of Đại Việt was expanded during the Southward March: Panduranga was the last of the Cham territories to be annexed by the Vietnamese.

1765_China of the Qing Dynasty launched 4 invasions of Burma between the years 1765-69. All failed. Burma’s successful defense laid the foundation for the present-day boundary between

the 2 countries.

1767_Ayutthaya was the Siamese kingdom that existed from 1350. Burmese armies invaded and reduced Ayutthaya to ruin.

1778_The Siamese invaded and destroyed Vientiane and plundered the Emerald Buddha.

1780-84_Pigneau de Behaine, French missionary helped Nguyễn Ánh, a pretender to the Vietnamese throne, in exchange for commercial privileges.

– Nguyễn Ánh sought help from the Siamese court in 1783 and was given an army to accompany him back to Vietnam. The Tây Sơn defeated the Siamese fleet on the Mekong river.

1788_Emperor Qianlong of China sent a large army to escort Lê Chiêu Thống back to Vietnam. Nguyễn Huệ defeated the Chinese, proclaimed himself Emperor of Vietnam with the name Quang Trung.

– Vietnamese pioneers pressed on with their “Southward March” and gradually penetrated the Mekong

Delta. They then moved on to Cà Mau peninsula, the final stop in their “Southward March/ Nam Tiến”.

NINETEENTH CENTURY

1802_Shogun Nguyễn Ánh unified the country and proclaimed himself Emperor Gia Long, renamed the country Vietnam, officially adopted Phú Xuân Huế as royal capital.

– Emperor Minh Mạng banned Christianity, resulting in French intervention under the pretext of rescuing the missionaries but real intention was to gain trade concessions.

1839-42_ Britain defeated China in the Opium Wars; China forced to open the country to opium trade and cede territories including Hong Kong to foreign countries. The Chinese called this period the “Century of humiliation.”

1850_ Charles E. Bouillevaux, a French missionary based in Battambang claimed that he had visited Angkor at least five

years before Mouhot.

1855_Empress Tự Đức continued the policies of his predecessor Minh Mạng, shutting Vietnam off from the outside world, oppressed the Christian community.

– France responded with a large military expeditionary force. Emperor Tự Đức signed away Cochinchina (South Vietnam) to the French who turned it into a colony.

1860_Henri Mouhot re-discovered Angkor and popularized it in the West. He died one year later near the Nam Khan River, a tributary of the Mekong.

1866-68_French Mekong Expedition (Doudart de Lagré/ Francis Garnier) sailed up the Mekong from Saigon in search for a trade route to China but failed.

1873_Francis Garnier captured the citadel of Hanoi. He was stabbed to death by Black Flag Bandits of Liu Yongfu.

1886_France gained control over Laos; Auguste Pavie appointed

French vice-consul in Luang Prabang.

– The three Anglo-Burmese Wars resulted in the loss of sovereignty of Burma. Burma came under the rule of the British Raj as a province of India.

1887-93_France established French Indochina consisting of its three colonies Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos.

– Franco-Siamese War of 1893, the resulting treaty made the Isan plateau part of Thailand instead of Laos, the Mekong River recognized as natural border between Siam and Laos.

TWENTIETH CENTURY

1900_Sun Yat Sen visited Mekong Delta to persuade the Chinese living in the South to support the Xin Hai Revolution. He reminded them to forever remain Chinese and not be assimilated by the locals.

1924_André Malraux, author of “La Voie Royale”, was convicted of “cultural vandalism” of the

Bantei Srei temple at the Angkor site; went on to become the Minister of Culture for many years in General De Gaulle's government.

1941_France put Prince Norodom Sihanouk on the throne at the age of eighteen and extended its control over Cambodia.

1945_Japanese took over French Indochina. Japan defeated by Allies, French reoccupied Indochina, start of Anti-French Resistance War or the First Indochina War.

1948_Aung San assassinated, Unu selected to succeed Aung San. Burma granted independence on January 4.

1949_Chiang Kai-shek's forces defeated by the Red Army. A division of his army escaped to Burma and later took control of half of the opium supply in the Golden Triangle.

1950_Bhumibol Adulyadej ascended to the throne, at the epicenter of Thailand's stormy political life. Earlier, a coup d'état in 1932 ended the Chakri Dynasty

and created a constitutional monarchy.

1951_Chinese Red Army invaded and occupied Tibet then incorporated this country into mainland China.

1954_France defeated at Điện Biên Phủ. Geneva Accord divided Vietnam into two; one million northerners emigrated South.

1956_Nhân Văn-Giai Phả affair: intellectuals and writers in North Vietnam published articles demanding freedom of speech and human rights. The Communist Party ruthlessly crushed the movement.

1957_Mekong River Committee established in 1957 in the midst of the Cold War. It was composed of 4 countries: Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and South Vietnam.

1959_Faced with the threat of extermination, the Tibetans rose up to be viciously massacred by the Chinese Red Army.

– One hundred thousand Tibetans

followed the 14th Dalai Lama into exile in India. He set up the Government of Tibet in Exile in Dharamshala.

1960_IRRI in the Philippines, founded in 1960, “develops new rice varieties and rice crop management techniques that help rice farmers improve the yield and quality of their rice in an environmentally sustainable way.”

– Cultivation of high yielding varieties (HYV) of rice in late 60s/ early 70s has prompted farmers in the Mekong countries to expand their rice production thanks to the double cropping method that allowed the planting of two crops per year.

1963_The Battle of Ấp Bắc on January 3 in Định Tường (now Tiền Giang) in the Mekong Delta. The Việt Cộng achieved their first military victory.

– President Ngô Đình Diệm overthrown by coup d'état of 11-11-63. President Diệm and his younger brother Ngô Đình Nhu killed by his own generals.

1964_The first multi-purpose dam 749 MW on the Ping River, a tributary of the Chao Phraya, in Thailand was named after King Bhumibol Adulyadej.

1965_The Battle of Đồng Xoài, Phước Long was the first major battle in Vietnam marking the start of the Second Indochina War or Vietnam War.

– In response to the Gulf of Tonkin Incident, President Johnson decided to escalate the Vietnam War.

– On March 8, a contingent of 3,500 U.S. Marines landed near Đà Nẵng, the first U.S. troops to arrive in Vietnam.

1966_HYV “miracle rice”, aka “Lúa Thần Nông” was imported from IRRI, Philippines to the Mekong Delta resulting in doubling or tripling the rice production. Farmers quickly dubbed the new rice seeds IR8 “Honda Rice” because a single good crop could allow them to buy a new Honda motorbike.

1968_VC broke cease-fire

agreement on Tết Mậu Thân, striking more than 100 cities in the South. It marked a turning point of the Vietnam War.

1969_Hồ Chí Minh died on September 2 in Hanoi at the age of 79. His embalmed body is currently on display in a mausoleum in Ba Đình Square.

1970_Norman Borlaug, father of the “Green Revolution”, was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in recognition of his contributions to world peace through development of HYV cereal grains, saving over a billion people from starvation.

– Cambodian coup overthrew Sihanouk. Lon Nol became head of state, turned the kingdom into the Khmer Republic. He was virulently anti-Vietnamese.

– April 30, American and South Vietnamese forces attacked communist sanctuaries in Cambodia.

1971_Nam Ngum (155 MW) was the first hydroelectric dam of Laos built over a major tributary of the Mekong River.

1972_Kissinger negotiated secretly with Hanoi. President Nixon arrived in China February 21 and met Chairman Mao Tse-Tung. Nixon called this visit “the week that changed the world.”

1973_The Paris Peace Accords of January 1973 were signed to restore peace to Vietnam and end direct U.S. military involvement. Last American troops left Vietnam on March 29.

– The 1973 Nobel Peace Prize was controversially awarded to Henry A. Kissinger and Lê Đức Thọ for their works on the Paris Peace Accords: no peace, no cease-fire in Vietnam since.

1974_Communist China overran and occupied Paracel Archipelago violating Vietnam’s sovereignty over these islands.

1975_April 17, Phnom Penh fell to Khmer Rouge. April 30, Saigon fell to communist forces. December 2, Vientiane fell to Pathet Lao: marking the end of the Second Indochina War.

1976_Mao Tse-tung, leader of Red China Revolution, died in Beijing on September 9, at 82.

1975 - 79 _ C o m m u n i s t governments came to power in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos.

– Communist Vietnam set up concentration camps all over the country, Khmer Rouge committed genocide and Pathet Lao abolished monarchy by sending the Lao royal family to die in the caves of Sam Neua.

– Mass exodus of Vietnamese refugees fleeing from the communist regime by sea and land. Quite a few Chăm, Laotians and Cambodians fled their homelands as they crossed the Mekong into Thailand to resettle afterward in third countries.

– On 25 December 1978, Vietnam launched a full-scale invasion of Cambodia. The pro-Chinese Khmer Rouge removed from power.

– Khmer Rouge assigned Sihanouk to be their representative at the United Nations but he defected to Beijing.

– In support of the Khmer Rouge regime, the Chinese invaded Northern Vietnam in a punitive military campaign but failed to end Vietnam's occupation of Cambodia.

– Vietnam installed a communist regime in Cambodia. Hun Sen, a former Khmer Rouge Battalion Commander turned defector, was appointed Foreign Minister of the People's Republic of Kampuchea at the age of 27.

1980_Jacques-Yves Cousteau, a deep-sea explorer and a champion of ecology wanted to sail the Calypso upstream the Mekong but failed to obtain the approval from the Vietnamese Communist Government.

1982_November 4, Vietnam Veterans Memorial unveiled in Washington, D.C. with 58,272 names carved on the marble walls to honor those who died in the Vietnam War.

1988_The Spratly Archipelago dispute raised tension in the East Sea. Chinese gunboats sank Vietnamese ships and killed 64

Vietnamese sailors.

1989_ Ten years and three months after its Cambodia's invasion, Vietnam withdrew its troops resulting in the 1991 Paris Peace Agreement.

– 14th Dalai Lama won the 1989 Nobel Peace Prize for his non-violent policy to fight for the independence of Tibet. Around the world, international institutions faced pressure from Beijing not to recognize him.

1990_ Võ Tòng Xuân, known as Dr. Rice, because for years he taught farmers throughout Mekong Delta techniques for growing HYV “miracle rice”; Vietnam became one of the world's largest rice exporters.

1991_ Aung San Suu Kyi was awarded Nobel Peace Prize. “Freedom from Fear” was the name of her famous acceptance speech for the 1990 Sakharov Prize.

1993_ Manwan Dam (1,500 MW) completed, the “First” of the 14 mainstream dams in the Mekong

Cascades to be built over the Lancang-Mekong.

1994_ Mittaphap, the “First” Thai–Lao Friendship Bridge over the Mekong, connecting Nong Khai, Thailand with Vientiane, Laos was completed on April 8, 1994.

– Thailand completed the controversial Pak Mun Dam on Mun River, a tributary of the Mekong.

1994_ Michel Peissel visited the upper reaches of Zanaqu and established the geographic location at 93 52' 929E, 33 16' 534N as the source of the Mekong.

1995_ Establishment of the Mekong River Commission composed of the four original members of the Mekong River Committee with new by-laws that deprived the member countries of their veto power.

– The new reconstituted MRC did not have China and Myanmar as members even though half

of the Mekong current meanders through China.

– The estimated hydropower potential of the Upper Mekong Basin (China) is put at 28,930 MW, the Lower Mekong Basin 30,000 MW.

1997_Prince Sihanouk issued a royal decree designating the Tonle Sap Lake “Multiple Use Protected Areas” [11/1993]. In October of 1997 UNESCO recognized the Tonle Sap Lake as a Biosphere Reserve of the world.

1998_Theun Hinboun Dam (500 MW) completed on the Theun River, a main tributary of the Mekong in central Laos.

– Hun Sen launched the 1997 Cambodian Coup. He eliminated all legitimate opposition becoming the Prime Minister in 1998. Diplomats in Phnom Penh called him the Strong Man of Cambodia.

– Pol Pot died while under house arrest. His name came to symbolize the death of 2 million people from 1975 to 1979.

1999_ Pailin near border of Thailand, long a stronghold of the Khmer Rouge, was captured by Hun Sen’s troops.

– Jinghong Bridge, the new “made in China” suspension bridge across the Lancang-Mekong was completed; the old “made in Russia” one was built in 1977.

TWENTY FIRST CENTURY

2000_Mỹ Thuận Bridge (1.53 km long) over the Tiền River, completed in May 2000, connecting Cái Bè of Tiền Giang with Vĩnh Long Province in Vietnam.

– Third millennium, China maintained its occupation of Tibet. Other six Mekong countries still struggling to build up democracy while the AIDS epidemic spread.

– China drew the ‘U-shaped line’ on its maps, as next step of “Tibetization of the East Sea”. Southeast Asian countries had reasons to fear that their national sovereignty was being threatened.

2001_Kizuna Bridge, first bridge (1.4 km long) across the Mekong in Kompong Cham, Cambodia completed in December 2001.

2003_Daichaosan (1,350 MW) completed, the “Second” dam on mainstream Lancang-Mekong. All six of its generators went operational.

2004_Cần Thơ Bridge over the Hậu River (2.75 km long). Construction began in September 2004 and scheduled to be completed in late 2008.

2005_PM Hun Sen publicly voiced his unconditional support for China’s exploitation plan of the Mekong River in spite of vehement warnings from expert environmentalists. [Phnom Penh, AFP, 6/29/05]

2006_Companies from Malaysia, Thailand, and China given the green light to carry out feasibility studies for the 11 “run-of-river” dams on the Lower Mekong.

– China moved forward with its plan to build 14 dams on the

Upper Lancang-Mekong. It also had a hand in the building of 4 additional ones in the Lower Mekong.

– Beijing completed (09/12/06) two shipments of 300 tons of oil each via the Mekong from Chiang Rai to Jinghong thus bypassing the Strait of Malacca.

2007_Xayaburi (1,260 MW) the “First” mainstream dam on the Lower Mekong. Laos signed contract with Thai’s Ch. Karnchang company to build this dam.

– The “Second” Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge (1.6 km long) over the Mekong connecting Mukdahan Province in Thailand with Savannakhet in Laos. It was inaugurated on January 9, 2007.

– The partially built Cần Thơ Bridge collapsed on September 26. The death toll: 59, the worst disaster in Vietnam’s construction industry.

2008_Tibetan Government in Exile observed World

Environment Day [June 5] with warning that “large scale damming of rivers and natural exploitation in Tibet would have serious environmental implications in China and other Asian countries, which source their water from Tibet”.

– Rạch Miễu Bridge (2.86 km long) over a branch of Hậu River, connecting Tiền Giang Mỹ Tho with Bến Tre. It was completed in January 2008.

2009_Jinghong Dam (1,500 MW) completed in May, the “Third” dam on Lancang-Mekong, with impressive speed so-called “Jinghong speed”.

– Gongguoqiao Dam (750 MW), the “Fourth” dam in the Mekong Cascades on Lancang-Mekong. Construction began one week earlier in May 2009.

– The Lower Mekong Initiative (LMI) was proclaimed July 23, 2009 in the aftermath of a meeting between Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and the Foreign Ministers of the Lower Mekong countries. Signing of

“The Mekong and Mississippi Sister-River Partnership”.

2010_Xiaowan “Mother Dam” (4,200 MW), the “Fifth” dam on the Lancang-Mekong, completed in August. It is the third largest hydropower station in China also the world’s highest dam.

– Cần Thơ Bridge over Hậu River (2.75 km long), completed in April 2010, linking Vĩnh Long with Cần Thơ, the longest main span cable-stayed bridge in Southeast Asia.

– PM Hun Sen asserted that cycle of floods and droughts of the Mekong was caused by climate change that had nothing to do with the series of dams in China. (Phnom Penh Post, Nov 17, 2010)

– Chinese engineers estimated that the rivers in Tibet have a potential production of some 38,000 MW of hydropower.

– December 17, Dalai Lama stated: “Tibet’s environmental problems cannot wait, but political solution can”. The Tibetan High Plateau, also known as the Third Pole on

earth, is the cradle of the major rivers in Asia.

2011_June, 2011, Laos unilaterally gave the “green light” to Thai’s Ch. Karnchang Company to start the Xayaburi Project.

– MRC Council Members at Siem Reap meeting (8th Dec 2011) decided to temporarily suspend the Xayaburi Project pending further study.

– The Council Members, comprising of Cambodia, Lao PDR, Thailand and Viet Nam agreed to approach Japan to fund the conduct of further study.

– The “Third” Thai-Lao Friendship Bridge (1.4 km long) over the Mekong, connecting Nakhon Phanom Province (Thailand) with Thakhek, Khammouane (Laos), opened for traffic on November 11, 2011.

– China began joint gunboats patrol with Laos in response to the murder of 13 Chinese sailors on the Golden Triangle’s portion of the river.

– U.S. Senate passed Resolution 227 (July 7, 2011) calling for the protection of the Mekong River Basin and increased U.S. support for the postponement of the construction of mainstream dams along the Mekong.

2012_Cambodia and Vietnam jointly urged Laos to suspend the controversial Xayaburi dam project in an attempt to conserve the Mekong’s environment.

– Aung San Suu Kyi landed in Oslo, accepted her Nobel Peace Prize, 21 years late. The first time the two Nobel Prizes laureates Dalai Lama and Suu Kyi met in London.

– July 13, 2012: After the Lower Mekong Initiative or “LMI 2009”, a new program under the banner “LMI 2020” was launched by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to signal the lasting and expanding nature of U.S. commitment in the Lower Mekong region.

– The US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton urged Mekong nations to avoid “US dam

mistakes”. Washington would help fund studies on the impacts of proposed dams on the Mekong River.

– Burma formally joined the Lower Mekong Initiative 2020 in July 2012, another step to foster integrated sub-regional cooperation.

– July 13, the Lao Foreign Minister announced that “the Lao government decided to postpone Xayaburi” project. July 17, the chairman of the Thai company building the dam said that the project would continue on schedule.

– November 7, the Deputy Director of the Xayaburi project, announced that the ground breaking ceremony for the building of the dam had been conducted with the expected completion date of 2019.

– The “Fourth” Thai–Lao Friendship Bridge (0.48 km long) over the Mekong connecting Chiang Khong (Thailand) and Ban Houayxay (Laos) scheduled to be completed in December 2012.

– October 15, King Norodom Sihanouk died of heart attack in Beijing. He was internationally recognized as the national leader who unified Cambodia and was revered by his subjects.

2013_Cambodian generalelection held on July 28. Incumbent Prime Minister Hun Sen sought a fourth term and was re-elected. He is currently the longest serving prime minister of Cambodia and in the world.

– Hun Sen is the rising leader in Southeast Asia. Political opponents accused him of being a Vietnamese puppet, but he kept his distance from Vietnam and began to move closer to China.

– October 3, the Lao government confirmed that the implementation of the second main stream dam in Laos: the Don Sahong Project would begin in November 2013 with the expected completion in February 2018.

2014_Nuozhadu Dam (5,850 MW), the “Sixth” of the 14 dams in the Mekong Cascades, the colossus of them all. Construction began in 2006. Its projected date

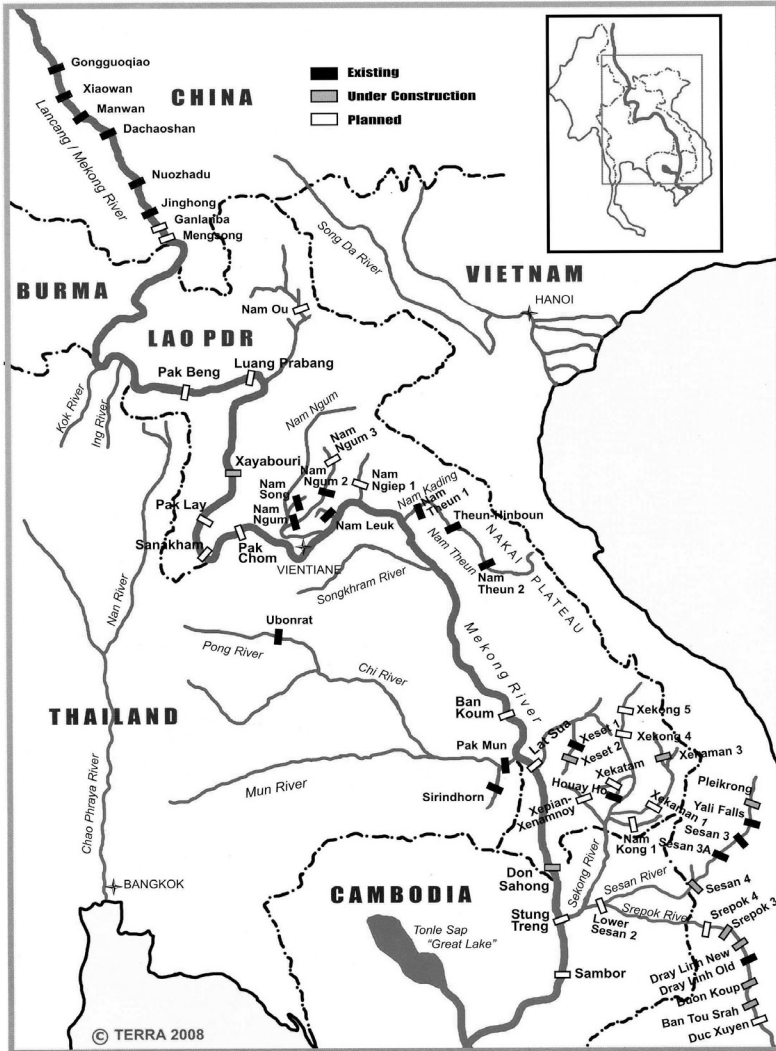
of completion is 2014.

Cascades in Yunnan.

– With the completion of the Nuozhadu Dam, China will reach a total output of 15,150 MW thus achieving more than half of the targeted 28,930 MW it had set for its 14 dams in the Mekong

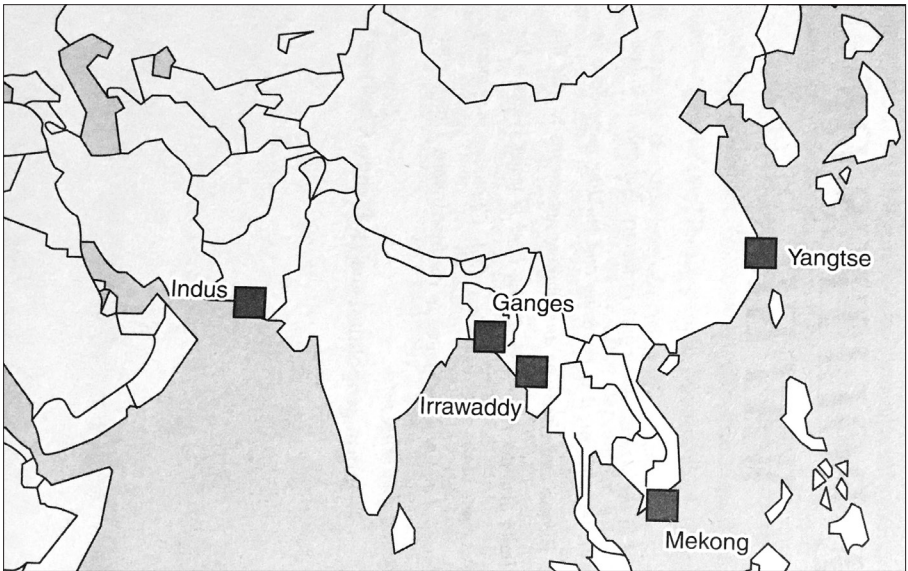
– Projection: China will finish building all of its 14 dams in the Upper Mekong sooner than planned. As for those 11 mainstream dams in the Lower Mekong, they will be built within the first half of the 21st century.

Hydropower dams on the Mekong River and its tributaries

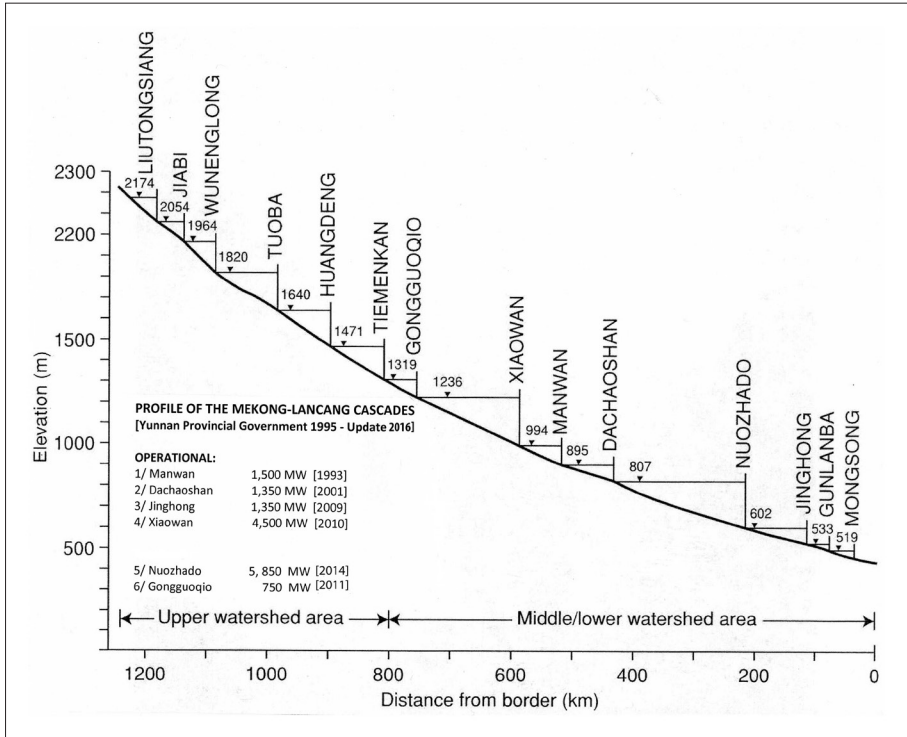


Key existing and proposed large hydropower projects in the Mekong basin (updated November 2008)

*Hydropower dams on the Mekong River and its tributaries:
in the upper Mekong China: 6 mainstream dams completed
in the lower Mekong Laos PDR: 2 mainstream dams Xayabouri
and Don Sahong under construction
[source: TERRA 2008, updated May 2016]*



*The Megadeltas of Asia: at the tail end of the rivers originating on the Tibetan Plateau are the largest deltas in the world
[source: Michael Buckley, Meltdown in Tibet]*



Profile of the Lancang-Mekong River: 14 mainstream dam projects on the Lancang River [source: Yunnan Provincial Government 1995]

LIST OF 11 LONGEST RIVERS OF THE WORLD
 [Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1998]

1/ Nile*, Egypt	6,650 km	(6,853 km)
2/ Amazon*, Brazil	6,400 km	(6,992 km)
3/ Yangtze*, China	6,300 km	(6,418 km)
4/ Mississippi-Missouri, USA	6,275 km	
5/ Yenisei-Angara, Russia	5,539 km	
6/ Yellow River, China	5,464 km	
7/ Ob-Irtysh, Russia	5,410 km	
8/ Parana, South America	4,880 km	
9/ Congo, Zaire	4,700 km	
10/ Lena, Russia	4,400 km	
11/ Mekong*, Asia	4,350 km	(4,800 km)

* *The information from different sources is between parentheses*

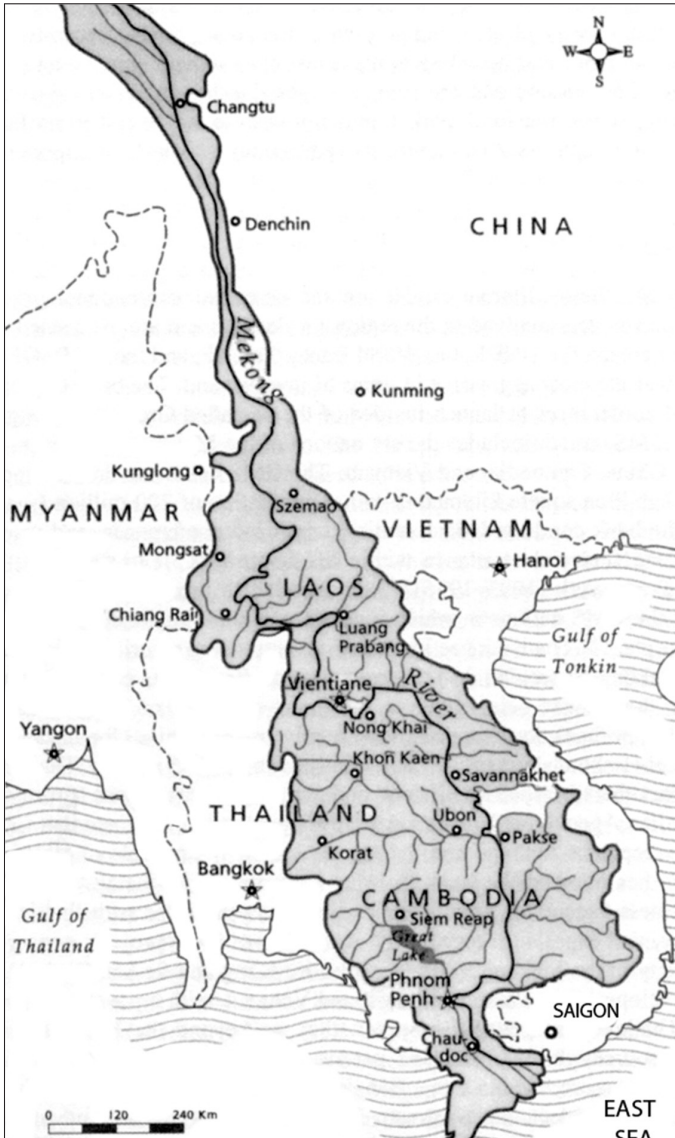


*Mekong River Commission Secretariat
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Vientiane 01000, Lao PDR
Website: <http://www.mrcmekong.org>*



*Vietnam National Mekong Committee, 23 phố Hàng
Trẻ Hà Nội, Vietnam [photo by LN Hà]*

1 NINE DRAGONS DRAINED DRY



GMS _ Greater Mekong Subregion Drainage area: 795,000 km², length of mainstream: 4,400 km, average discharge: 15,000 m³/sec [source: Mekong River Commission 2000]



Mekong Mainstream Dams [source: Stimson]

CHAPTER I

THE ZAJIADUJIAWANGZHA GUSHING OUT FROM A SACRED SOURCE

*Everybody Lives Downstream
World Water Day 03-22-1999*

As far as the Mekong is concerned, there are two things that alarm me the most: the devastating impacts it wreaks on the environment and the changes it brings to the lives of the inhabitants along its bank. Consequently, I decide to set up the “Tibetan File” to learn more about that river.

The articles I wrote lately have deeply impressed Mr. Nhu Phong, an old-timer in the news media. Besides his journalistic interests, Mr. Nhu Phong is also an established writer. He is led to muse that I should indeed be working as a professional journalist instead of an environmental engineer.

Mr. Nhu Phong is the author of a roman-fleuve named “*Khói Sóng*/ Foggy Wave” dealing with subject matters that later prove to be

2 NINE DRAGONS DRAINED DRY

prophetic – a kind of storm-warning weather vane. His foreboding of civil war proves justified years later. He is well known as an expert on the political history of the Vietnamese Communist Party and currently works as a free-lance journalist with Asia Week Magazine, China Quarterly...

About three hundred million years ago, Tibet still lied at the bottoms of the Tethys Sea, an immense body of water covering the entire continents of Asia and India. Today's Mediterranean Sea is what remains of the Tethys Sea. Going back one hundred million years in time, the Indian land mass was still connected to pre-continental Gondwanaland. A massive collision between pre-continental Gondwanaland and Laurasia generated a mighty earthquake with such a force that the land mass that is present day India was pushed northward. An entirely new geological formation emerged from this process: most notably the Himalayan chains and the whole of Central Asia's high plateau.

Tibet, that Snow-country, occupies 1.2 million square kilometers of land at an elevation of 3,500 to 5,000 meters. Hailed as the "roof of the world", it is almost as large as Western Europe and finds itself sandwiched between two Asian giants: India in the south and China in the northeast. However, it remains mostly isolated from the outside world because it is surrounded on three sides by inaccessible mountain ranges: the Himalayas in the south, the Karakoram in the west, and the Kunlun and Tangla in the north. In the east, it is intersected by low-rising mountain ranges and valleys sloping gradually toward the Chinese borders adjoining the Sichuan and Yunnan Provinces.

Most importantly, it is not an overstatement to say that Tibet is the life source of Asia since all the major rivers in this continent flow out from here. To name a few:

To the West, in the vicinity of the Kailash Mountain, the Indus and

Sutleji rivers course in a southwestern direction and merge with three others to form the Punjab lowland nestling between India and Pakistan.

To the south, the Tsangpo River (Source of Purity), famous for its spectacular whirlpools and rapids, meanders across the Himalayas before discharging into the Bay of Bengal.

To the east, we have five big rivers: the Irrawaddy and Salween rivers that run south to Myanmar. The Yangtze, the third one, is the longest river in Asia. It flows in an easterly direction for 6,500 kilometers across the width of China all the way to Shanghai. The fourth one, the Yellow River, courses northward then veers east to the distant city of Tianjin. Those last two rivers discharge into the China Sea. Finally, the fifth river, the Mekong or Dza Chu (Water of Stone) in Tibetan, meanders southward for more than 4,000 kilometers snaking through the deep and wild gorges in Yunnan Province where it takes on the new Chinese name of Lancang Jiang (Turbulent River). Crossing the Thai and Lao borders, it becomes known as Mae Nam Khong (Mother of Waters) while in the land of Angkor, the Khmer referred to it as Tonle Thom (Great Water). Finally, upon entering Vietnam, the river is renamed Cửu Long (Nine Dragons). It splits into two main branches named the Sông Tiền and Sông Hậu (Front River and Back River) whose water is dyed the deep red color of silt. They finally reach the East Sea through nine estuaries.

The northwest region of Tibet is a sparsely populated no-man's-land stretching for over 1,200 kilometers in a west-east direction. Further south, nomads roam the mountains and steppes with their herds of sheep, goats, and Yaks. The Yaks play such a vital role in the life of the Tibetans that the Dalai Lama called those extraordinary animals "gifts coming to the Tibetans from Heaven". Those large and robust beasts of burden clothed with long furs live at the altitude of 3,000 meters. The Tibetans depend on them for their main meat source and on the female of the species called Dri for milk. The Tibetan lifestyle has remained

4 NINE DRAGONS DRAINED DRY

for the most part unchanged over the last two millenniums or so.

Venturing east, one meets the city of Kham and not too far away to the northeast is the city of Amdo, the birthplace of the 14th Dalai Lama. This is the most fertile and populated area in this part of the country. Further south, the climate becomes milder and the land turns lush thanks to the water coming from the Tsangpo River and its many tributaries.

The Tibetan peasants mainly plant wheat and potatoes as secondary crops. Due to irregular weather changes, the local harvests suffer from constant damages caused by hails, frost or drought. As a result, the Tibetans rely on animal husbandry of Yaks, sheep, goats, and chickens for a more reliable food source. If the staple food of the inhabitants in the Mekong Delta is rice, the Tibetans prefer to eat roasted wheat flour called Tsampa.

The 1982 statistics compiled by the Chinese government showed that there were 3.87 million Tibetans living in the “People’s Republic of China”.

In Tibet one can find the perfect image of the steppes, high mountains, deep valleys and a sky that normally looks the clear blue color of jade. Blessed with such beautiful landscapes, those gentle and hospitable Tibetans are nevertheless leading a life marred by suppression and boundless misery at the hands of the Chinese.

Buddhism came to Tibet twelve centuries after Buddha reached Nirvana – circa in the 7th century of our era. After Songtsen Gampo, a talented tribal chief, succeeded in unifying the extremely warlike tribes living at the foot of the Himalayas, he plundered Luo Yang forcing the Tang court to sue for peace and give him the hand of one of its princesses. It was this Han princess who introduced Buddhism to Tibet. From that time on, Buddhism went through a period of rapid

expansion. It later incorporated features of the indigenous polytheist Bon faith to transform itself into a transcendent and mystical form of Buddhism. Originally an amalgamation of warring nomadic tribes, the Tibetans through the centuries gradually became imbued with the compassionate teachings of the Buddha. As a result, they adopted a more peaceful relationship with their neighbors.

Going into the 14th century, a devout monk by the name of Tsongkhapa founded the Gelug(pa), an orthodox school of Tibetan Buddhism. His successor Gendun Drup, also a devout monk, was universally revered by Tibetan Buddhists as the Great Lama (Lama is Tibetan for teacher). He contributed mightily to the expansion of Buddhism and set up an administrative system to work hand in hand with the religious order to govern Tibet. This great and astute monk introduced the belief that the soul of a deceased Great Lama would be reincarnated in an infant who will be the embodiment of the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara or the Goddess of Mercy herself. The duty of all believers is to look for that child and bring him up according to the tenets of the faith so that one day he could lead the Tibetan nation.

This same Great Lama later assumed the title of Panchen Lama that the Chinese called the Dharma King as the reincarnation of the Amitabha Buddha especially in charge of rites and worship.

Opposition from other sects, opened the door for the intervention of the Mongols. Eventually, Altan Khan, the supreme leader of Mongolia became awed by the profound knowledge of the Great Lama and wished to be initiated into the Buddhist monkhood. Meantime, he conferred the title of Dalai Lama to this Great Lama. Dalai in the Tibetan language means the ‘sea’ conjuring up the notion of “immensity”.

The following years witnessed the expansion of Tibetan Buddhism to its zenith as evidenced by the construction of the Winter Palace of the Dalai Lama also known as the one thousand-chambered Potala.

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This building is undoubtedly an architectural marvel of the world. Nevertheless, it is the Jokhang pagoda built under the reign of Songtsen Gampo that can claim to be the oldest surviving religious structure in Tibet. The Buddha statue the Nepalese princess brought with her on her wedding day to this country was kept here. The most famous landmark of this place is a stele erected in front of the pagoda to commemorate Tibet's glorious past and the vicissitudes the Chinese Tang suffered at their hands. On it was engraved in two languages the accord reached between the Great Emperor of Tibet and the Great Emperor of China in the years 821-822 with these stipulations:

... "The Great King of Tibet and the Great King of China... have conferred together for the alliance of their kingdoms. They have made and gratified a great agreement. God and men all know it and bear witness so that it may never be changed; and an account of the agreement has been engraved on this stone pillar to inform future ages and generations..."

Tibet and China shall abide by the frontiers of which they are now in occupation. All in the east is the country of Great China; and all to the west is, without question, the county of Grand Tibet...

This solemn agreement has established a great epoch when Tibetans shall be happy in the land of Tibet, and Chinese in the land of China. So that it may never be changed... An oath has been taken with solemn words and with the sacrifice of animals; and the agreement has been ratified..." [14]

While Tibet was enjoying an era of unrivaled prosperity (618-907), Vietnam formerly known as Annam, on the other hand, had to put up with the ruthlessness of Chinese rule.

However, the law of evolution inexorably grinds on: what goes up must one day come down. The ensuing centuries saw the Chinese

invading and occupying Tibet and its capital city of Lhasa time and again. At the dawn of the 20th century, as the Xin Hai Revolution put an end to the Qing Dynasty, the Tibetans rose up and chased the foreign invaders from their land. They declared their independence but were met with an almost cruel indifference from the world community. The Chinese, on their part, always consider Tibet as an integral part of their territory.

When the 13th Dalai Lama passed away in 1933, it was reported that his face turned to a northeastern direction instead of the traditional south. Combining that sign with other omens, the leaders of the religious council journeyed to the Takster village in the northeastern province of Amdo and came upon a two-year old infant named Lhamo Thondup, the fourth child of a poor peasant family. After the child had successfully passed all the tests they administered to him, he was officially recognized as the 14th Dalai Lama reincarnated with the new religious name Tenzin Gyatso.

Amdo was under Chinese control at the time. It took two years of arduous negotiations for the boy Tenzin Gyatso and his escort to be allowed to leave for the capital city of Lhasa. First he was taken to the Summer Palace at Norbulingka then to the Winter Palace of Potala to live and receive instructions from highly educated monks. During that time, an official was appointed to act as regent to run the country.

The situation worsened when Chiang Kai-shek was defeated by the Chinese Communists and had to flee to Taiwan. The Red Army occupied the whole of the Chinese mainland and invaded Tibet by force with the pretense: *“to liberate the Tibetan people from the oppression of the feudal class.”*

With or without the consent of the Tibetan people, waves upon waves of Chinese communist troops entered Tibet with their families in tow. In naked betrayal of their original promise to respect the freedom

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of religion as well as the habits and customs of the Tibetans, from day one, the Chinese occupiers launched a campaign to suppress Buddhism and carry out a policy of “*gradual take-over*” through the unrelenting resettlement of the Han citizens into Tibet.

In 1950, responding to the urgency of the situation, at the very young age of 16, Tenzin stepped forth and took over the rein of power. Four years later, in 1954, the Chinese took him to Beijing to meet Mao Tse Tung in the hope of convincing him to acquiesce to the integration of Tibet into the national order of China.

Faced with the threat of extermination, the Tibetans once more rose up. Armed men converged on the capital of Lhasa to be ruthlessly quashed and massacred by the Red Army. In his auto-biography “Freedom in Exile”, Tenzin Gyatso wrote:

“For almost a decade I remained a political as well as spiritual leader of my people and tried to re-establish peaceful relations between our two nations. But the task proved impossible. I came to the unhappy conclusion that I could serve my people better from outside.” [14]

More than one hundred thousand of his countrymen followed the 14th Dalai Lama into exile in India. Brushing aside the opposition and intimidations from Beijing, the Indian government pushed ahead with the resettlement of those Tibetan expatriates within the city limits of Dharmasala at the foot of the Himalayas. They established a Kashag cabinet in exile to keep alive their faith and carry on with the fight for the right to live of their compatriots still residing in Tibet.

On their part, turning a blind eye to the aspirations of the Tibetans, the Chinese still incorporated Tibet into “*the great motherland the People’s Republic of China*”.

In September of 1965, China announced the establishment of

the “Tibetan Autonomous Region” making it an integral part of the People’s Republic of China. As the Cultural Revolution raged on in the following decade, Tibet went through a most tragic ordeal. The entire cultural heritage of the Tibetan people was systematically decimated under the bright daylight by the Red Guards. Temples and monasteries were razed to the ground, religious statues and paintings destroyed. Tens of thousands of Tibetans were branded “reactionaries” for the crime of refusing to denounce the Dalai Lama or renounce their faith.

Twenty-six years later (October, 1987), with their patience running thin, the Tibetans again rose up to be once more mercilessly suppressed by the occupying Chinese Communists. Approximately 1.2 million Tibetans lost their life under the forced occupation of the Chinese. A horrific toll when we take into consideration the total Tibetan population of under four million souls.

To support the struggle inside of Tibet, the Dalai Lama has at times left Dharmasala and visited many countries in the world to voice his people’s desire to live in peace and freedom.

The Dalai Lama is not merely the spiritual leader of the Tibetan people. He also personifies the compassionate non-violent fight for human rights and the preservation of the ecology on this planet.

Three years ago, the Australian government caved in to Chinese pressure and only let its Foreign Minister meet the Dalai Lama during a visit it treated as unofficial. On that occasion, a western journalist compared the Mekong that originates from Tibet to “*the Danube of Asia*”. He then asked the Dalai Lama to share his thoughts on the river and China’s development projects. The religious leader tactfully replied that for the well-being of all, the Tibetan people will strive to preserve the purity of their rivers.

Within the relatively short time span of two decades, three

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individuals were awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for their works that are somehow related to the region the Mekong runs through. First, Lê Đức Thọ and Henry Kissinger (1973) were chosen for bringing peace to Vietnam – more precisely to enable the United States to safely withdraw its troops irrespective of the ensuing consequences. Less than two years later, the North Vietnamese brazenly conquered the South. Then in 1989, the Prize went to the Dalai Lama for his indefatigable leadership of a non-violent struggle for the sovereignty of Tibet from Chinese domination. He is leading his people on a journey guided by a flickering and receding light at the end of the tunnel. Two years later, Aung San Suu Kyi won the Prize for her tenacious pursuit of democracy for her people in Myanmar.

Clearly those “*Olive Branches from Stockholm*” only express a yearning for peace without the needed power to persuade neither armed bands to lay down their weapons nor hawks to turn into doves.

Though I have never met him, I have long held the Dalai Lama in high esteem. I intend to contact my hero and invite him to become an honorary member of the Friends of the Mekong Group on account of his concern for the preservation of that river’s ecology.

At the acceptance ceremony for the Georgetown University’s 1998 Human Rights Award the Dalai Lama expressed his wish to visit Vietnam in the year 2000. His wish put the Hanoi Government to the test to show whether it had the courage to consent to it or not. In a nut shell, this is also a yardstick by which we can measure the extent of its independence toward China.

The Dalai Lama also called on Vietnamese scholars to share with their Tibetan counterparts the knowledge and experience the Vietnamese acquired from their interactions with the Chinese over the course of history.

His professional intuition told Mr. Nhu Phong that by that statement the Dalai Lama wanted to tell his people to study the Vietnamese experience and learn how the latter were able to regain their independence after almost a thousand years of Chinese occupation and assimilation. He wishes for his people who are living under abject oppression to mind this example of struggle and hope.

However, at first glance, Mr. Nhu Phong can see what a big difference a millennium could make: in the old time, the Chinese did not have to deal with the problem of overpopulation and scarcity of land. What's more, they were taking the Vietnamese for an uncivilized people and were not implementing a policy of "Sinicization by immigration" as it is the case nowadays with Tibet. The Tibetans are rapidly being turned into a minority in their own land. Mister Nhu Phong comments:

– It is not Confucius but Karl Marx who wrote, "a people who attempt to enslave another are forging chains for themselves." China is doing exactly that to the Tibetan people.

Neglecting to mention the massacre at Tiananmen Square, Mr. Nhu Phong goes on with a tinge of irony in his voice:

– To put it differently, a people who are free cannot enslave others. This tenet of Marxist ideology always withstands the test of time even as humankind is entering the third millennium.

The fact that the Dalai Lama persistently claims to be a simple monk and categorically refuses to be revered as a Living Buddha only endears him to Mr. Nhu Phong.

At any time and place, Tenzin Gyatso always conducts himself to be a thoughtful, intelligent, and unbiased human being who stays aloof of all criticism or praise. He abounds with compassion. More than that, he is a man of freedom. With an active and nonviolent spirit,

he constantly seeks to build a trusting and peaceable relationship with his opponents even though Beijing would go to any length to discredit and demonize him. A case in point: they painted the popular uprising of the Tibetan people to demand independence as a failed anti-Chinese attempt by the CIA.

After the death of the Panchen Lama, Beijing immediately picked a replacement for him and arrested Gendhun Choekyi Nyima, a boy chosen by the Dalai Lama in compliance with the Tibetan faith for that position. At that time, Gendhun Choekyi Nyima was only nine years old. To the world, he is the “*youngest political prisoner*” being held in Chinese jail.

The Chinese are rebuilding a number of temples in Tibet under the pretense of making “redress to the excesses of the Cultural Revolution”. Even a young child could tell that the real motive behind all that was to develop tourism. Meanwhile, the Chinese rulers made it a point to assign undercover agents to all the monasteries. Going a step further, they banned young men from joining the monkhood and forced monks who were over sixty to retire. All this was done under the constant guise that “freedom of religion is written into the constitution”.

Posing as a “tourist” to Tibet, Mr. Nhu Phong visited a small pagoda in the capital Lhasa’s outskirt. He knew full well that had he joined a tour led by a Chinese guide like any other tourists, he would not be able to see the darker side of the coin. This was exactly the case with the “veteran politician” Edward Heath, former Prime Minister of Great Britain, who went to Tibet on a visit organized by Beijing. Upon his return to England, he declared that everything was just fine in Tibet. His apparently sincere opinion was simply based on what he was led to believe or allowed to see. As it is always the case, all those government-arranged trips are grounded on deceit and lies.

Before his visit to Tibet, Mr. Nhu Phong had spent his entire

professional life working as a journalist and was no longer a stranger to many of those “manufactured truths”.

An old monk greeted him in a guesthouse erected on the temple’s ground. Standing respectfully in attendance behind his host was a young novice Mr. Nhu Phong could tell for sure was a “state-controlled religious”. Mr. Nhu Phong was served a kind of bread looking like small round loaves with a hard crust but fluffy inside and a small cup of tea mixed with salt and Dri butter. The drink tasted different but quite delectable. After a while, the 78 year-old monk excused himself and stepped out into the garden leaving Mr. Nhu Phong behind in the room. A short while later, Mr. Nhu Phong joined him there. They had furtively prearranged to meet in this manner but made it look as if everything just happened out of coincidence. When he was reassured that they were not tailed by his attendant, the old monk began to open up:

– As you journalists know, our “religion does not have a retirement age”. I’ll remain in this monastery until the day I breathe my last. This transient body will be cut up into pieces and fed to the vultures in a ‘sky burial’. As long as I still walk on this earth my only desire is to renovate, rebuild the pagodas, teach the young generations about the Tibetan religion and culture, and make them understand who is their Dalai Lama, what he is trying to do and where he is living.

At the approach of the young novice, the old monk immediately turned around and walked inside the house. Up there, the sky was still blue, the sun warm. Even looking from the vantage point of a bird’s eye, one could never capture the entire picture of the Tibetan tragedy that was unfolding below in this Snow-country.

It was then noontime outside the capital city of Lhasa or 8:00 PM in California. Standing on the “rooftop of the world”, Mr. Nhu Phong for no apparent reason thought of the members in the Friends of the

Mekong Group. He knew that they would “assail” him with countless questions about his trip to Tibet upon his return. Well past his seventies, the rarely reached all knowing omniscient age, but Mr. Nhu Phong did not show any sign of slowing down or ready to pass on the torch to the younger generations.

The Dalai Lama is undeniably preoccupied with the survival of his native land. Nevertheless, it doesn't prevent him from getting involved with the universal issues that beset humankind on this planet. His perspective on the ecology proves to be both exhaustive and farsighted:

“... Since we human beings come from Nature, there is no point in our going against Nature, which is why I say the environment is not a matter of religion or ethics or morality. These are luxuries, since we can survive without them. But we will not survive if we continue to go against the Nature. We have to accept this. If we unbalance Nature, human kind will suffer. Furthermore, as people alive today, we must consider future generations: a clean environment is a human right like any other. It is therefore part of our responsibility towards others to ensure that the world we pass on is as healthy, if not healthier than, when we found it.” [14]

Though already in his mid sixties, the Dalai Lama still lives in exile, cut off from his beloved Tibet. The political and social situation in his country is evolving by the day. A new generation has been born and grows up in a land where the people are conditioned by sophisticated propaganda and brainwashing techniques. This situation inevitably leads to an erosion of their religious faith.

Outside the country, things appear equally bleak. Almost four decades have gone by but the Tibetan expatriates have yet to achieve any degree of economic self-sufficiency. At the same time, India's military has grown weary of protecting their guests' autonomous region while its government has to contend with the unrelenting diplomatic pressure

coming from China.

On a brighter note, during those same four decades, a new generation has grown up outside of Tibet. Well educated and well versed in the ways of the West, they perceive Tibet's future from a different perspective. Those educated young men and women have stepped up to the plate and are eager to assume their share of responsibility.

They organize the Dalai Lama's trips to Europe, Australia, and America which were met with spectacular diplomatic success. In the United States, the Dalai Lama was publicly supported by the American Government. Moreover, movie producers in Hollywood also put out excellent motion pictures to champion the Tibetan people's cause. The movie "Kundun" by film director Martin Sorsese about the Dalai Lama's youth had deeply moved the viewers and understandably antagonized the Beijing leaders at the same time. In the 1990's the American Government established the Refugee Welfare Office to help resettle the Tibetans living in exile.

It would be unrealistic to expect the Tibetan Diaspora to achieve a total meeting of the mind in their fight for religious and national restoration. A good example of a dissenting stance comes from the Tibetan Youth Congress. Its supporters adhere to a militant form of struggle for a Tibet totally independent and separate from China. In their view, throughout their thousands of year long history, not until the day the Red Army occupied their land, their country has always known independence and "*nobody has the right to rewrite history*".

Their extremism manifests itself in their words as well as deeds: they broke into the private quarter of the Dalai Lama in the autonomous region of Dhamarsala and killed several of his aides accusing them of being too conciliatory to the Chinese. Bomb explosions were heard in Lhasa during the visit to China by the American president Mr. Clinton.

Radio “Free Tibet” claimed responsibility for the incident and put out announcements that the guerilla war will continue until the day Communist China withdraws all of its troops. It cannot be denied that the insurgents gained attention for their cause each time they committed an act of violence. Nevertheless, the Chinese never failed to use it as a pretext to make the Tibetans pay by imposing harsher suppression or more draconian security measures.

Only the Dalai Lama can act as a catalyst to help the Tibetans overcome their dissension and reach a consensus, a reconciliation in order to offer a united front for their movement. His deep understanding of the dilemma facing his country has led Tenzin Gyatso to forcefully convince his followers to adhere to a moderate non-violent form of struggle. He proves to be a particularly pragmatic leader in holding to the motto that to do anything, “one must survive first”. Therefore, instead of insisting on complete independence for his country he limits himself to advocate for self-rule from China. The Chinese persist in their occupation and incessantly seek to denigrate the Dalai Lama by all means possible.

“...And Peking at this time, began to refer to me as the ‘wolf in monk’s robes’. I became the focus of the Chinese Government’s bile and regularly denounced in Lhasa as someone who merely posed as a religious leader. In reality, the Chinese said, I was a thief, a murderer and a rapist. They also suggested that I performed certain quite surprising sexual services for Mrs. Gandhi!” [14]

The accepted conventional wisdom is: time favors Beijing. How much longer can the Dalai Lama live? That question haunts the mind of each Tibetan every minute of the day. When newsmen inquired about his health, the Dalai Lama replied that it was very good and he could live to be a centenarian. Probably this was his own way of reassuring his people.

As the Chinese would have it: once the Dalai Lama passes away with no known successor, Tibet will quietly slide into China's orbit – Pax Sinica.

While Tibet is standing at the threshold of the 21st century that is characterized by a rush toward globalization, the crucial issue of theocracy is never far away from the Dalai Lama's mind. He wrote:

“The old Tibet was not perfect. Yet, it is true to say that our way of life was something quite remarkable. Certainly there was much that was worth preserving that is now lost forever.” [14]

The thing the Dalai Lama feared the most is the disappearing of the unique racial, religious, language identity of the Tibetans. He believed they were being sacrificed on the altar of liberation and modernization. On the other hand, the imperfection he referred to could be found in Tibet's social structure resting on the foundation of absolute theocracy. In the past, this structure has served well in the preservation of the religious faith. Unfortunately, it also acts as an impediment to the formation of a democratic Tibet. Both the Dalai Lama and the Tibetan young generations living overseas are fully conscious of this issue. They are scrupulously attempting to conceive a political model for an independent Tibet that can preserve its religion and adeptly facilitate its march toward the future.

Very early in the 1960's, as he was setting up his Government-in-Exile, the Dalai Lama embarked on a program to reform and democratize the administrative system. He founded the Assembly of Tibetan People's Deputies, encouraged his people to practice their freedom of expression, and single mindedly pushed for a gradual transition from “theocracy” to “democracy”. Using the convincing argument that democratic principles are closely in tune with Buddhist teachings, he was able to pass a resolution giving The Assembly the right to impeach the Dalai Lama with a 2/3 majority. At first, most

Tibetans were flabbergasted by that daring point of view. Nevertheless, Tenzin Gyatso did not relent and stuck to his gun. In all situations, he always showed “poise and determination” when confronting the challenges he encountered.

During the decades he lived in exile, this great and prescient mind had institutionalized the practice of democratic values within the Tibetan communities living overseas. Those efforts act like bright torches guiding his people on their journey to a revitalized independent Tibet of the future.

Let’s revisit the issue of democracy and the right to vote once more. Twenty years ago, the Dalai Lama had issued a call to hold a referendum for his people to decide on their destiny. In our days, the implementation of the policy of “*gradual take-over*” allows millions of Han Chinese to work and resettle permanently in Tibet. As a result, more than 50% of the inhabitants in the capital city of Lhasa are of Chinese ancestry. If the Tibetans hold a referendum under the present circumstances, it is tantamount to self-immolation.

Being an ecological engineer, I understand that China’s expansionist policy alone is not enough to explain that country’s behavior. At any price China must occupy Tibet not only to implement its plan for economic development but also to look after its strategic environmental interests. The water flowing out from that Snow-country’s high plateau directly affects 40% of the earth’s inhabitants. Moreover, Tibet’s potentials for the production of hydroelectricity are estimated at one quarter of a million MW – almost 40 times the output of the mammoth Hoover Dam in the United States and 10 times that of the world largest dam at Three Gorges in China.

Clearly, Tibet offers the perfect answer to Mainland China’s looming water scarcity and energy needs as it stands at the threshold of the new millennium. Moreover, after the Sinicization of Tibet, the “*Tibetization of the South China Sea*”, as described by B.A. Hamzak of the Malaysian

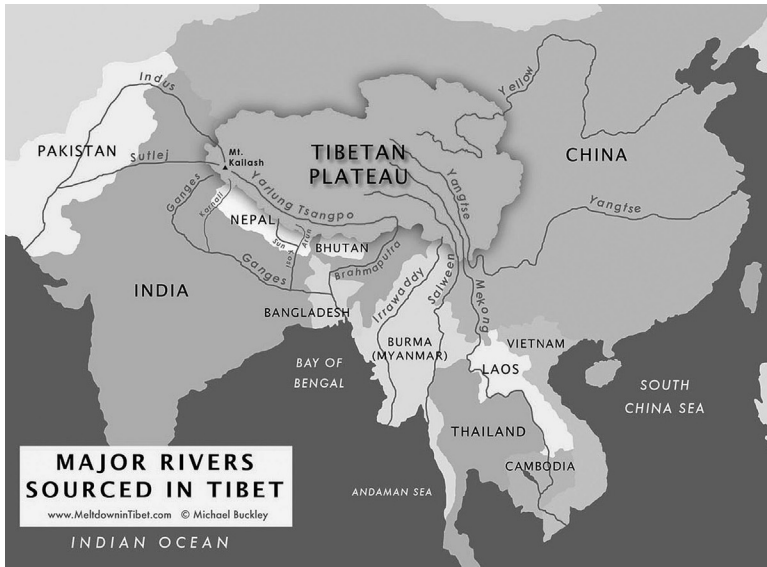
Institute of Maritime Affairs, would be the next logical move waiting in the wings. In full possession of this “ecological weapon”, which is a thousand times more potent than conventional armaments, without much ado, China will command the upper hand. It would be in a position to determine the destiny if not survival of the entire Southeast Asian region within the first decades of the 21st century.

With a China growing increasingly more powerful and belligerent, the prospect of achieving an independent Tibet is not much brighter than a flickering and fading light at the end of the tunnel. The Dalai Lama is fully aware of this fact. However, he still keeps a straight face and optimistically told the reporters that, *“I still see many good things in this world even though the tragedy in Tibet continues to unfold.”* He adds that once Tibet gains its autonomy - not independence - he “will retire and live the life of a hermit monk like a wounded animal.”

Regrettably, his wish may remain forever an impossible dream because the mantra he recites daily says:

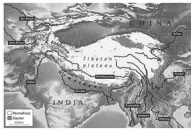
*For as long as space endures
And for as long as living beings remain,
Until then may I, too, abide
To dispel the misery of the world. [14]*

Thus, he will still be caught up in the wheel of reincarnation for an undetermined time. He will join other wandering souls walking the road of life to its finish. As the wheel keeps on turning endlessly, he will come back to life again and again to help alleviate humanity’s suffering.




MAJOR RIVERS OF ASIA SOURCED IN TIBET

East Mt.Kallash: Yellow, Yangtse (China), Mekong (China, Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam), Salween, Irrawaddy (Myanmar); West Mt.Kallash: Indus, Sutlej (India, Pakistan); South Mt.Kallash: Yarlung Tsangpo- Brahmaputra-Ganges (Tibet, India) [source: Michael Buckley]



**Global Warming
in
Tibet**

If TIBET dries, ASIA dies

 Tibetan Women's Association
www.tibetanwomen.org

*If Tibet Dries, Asia Dies
Dalai Lama wants to go green: Dalai Lama says
prioritize climate change
over politics in Tibet:
“political agenda should
be sidelined for 5 to 10*

years and the international community should shift its focus to climate change on the Tibetan plateau. Melting glaciers, deforestation and increasingly polluted water from mining projects were problems that ‘cannot wait.’” The exiled Tibetan spiritual leader told Timothy Roemer, the US ambassador to India during a meeting in Delhi last August, 2009 (source: WikiLeaks Cables, the Guardian 10 August 2009)



When drinking water, Remember its source. In the aftermath of the 1959 insurrection of the Tibetans that was bloodily suppressed by Beijing, the Dalai Lama led almost 100,000 of his countrymen to seek refuge in India. The Republic of Vietnam immediately sent relief in the form of rice grown with the water from the Mekong that originates from the Tibetan High Plateau to the Tibetan refugees. The Tibetan delegation invited its Vietnamese counterpart to Darjeeling to meet the Dalai Lama. From left to right: Prof. Lê Xuân Khoa, general secretary of the Vietnamese Association for Asian Cultural Relations, Reverend Thích Trí Dũng, the Dalai Lama, Cổ Văn Hai, Vice-chairman of the Republic of Vietnam Congress [source: Lê Xuân Khoa]

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It was confirmed Aung San Suu Kyi had a private meeting with the Dalai Lama on 13 September 2013, on the sidelines of a Prague rights conference, risking China's ire. Beijing has opposed foreign dignitaries meeting the Tibet's exiled spiritual leader, who fled his homeland for India in 1959 after a failed uprising against Chinese rule [AFP 16 September 2013]



Save Tibet. Self-immolation protests in Tibet. Since March 2011, more than 125 people are known to have set themselves on fire inside Tibet in protest against the repressive Chinese occupation of Tibet. [source: internet]

CHAPTER II

LANCANG JIANG THE STORM COMING FROM THE NORTH

*Misfortune is where happiness hides its face
Happiness is where misfortune finds its mate*

Lao Tzu

Yunnan lies at the southern tip of the Tibetan High Plateau. It covers an area of 394,000 km² (larger than Vietnam: 340,000 km²) and stands at the average elevation of 1,800 m above sea level. A number of fertile valleys, high mountains, and deep rivers – among them the Mekong - Lancang Jiang - adorn its landscape. Yunnan shares common borders with Laos, Myanmar, Tibet, and Vietnam. Its climate varies markedly depending on the location: snow and frost in the north, semi-tropical in the south, and moderate temperate all-year round in Kunming accounting for this city's given name: the Spring Capital. The local population of 38 million is made up of many ethnic minorities i.e. Bai, Dai, Yi... each of them numbers in the millions. Next come the less numerous thus less well known groups like Nu, Bulang, Dulong...

Then one must also include thousands of “*nạn kiều*” or Chinese Vietnamese turned refugees who resettled there after their properties

were seized by the Vietnamese government during a purge of ethnic Chinese in Vietnam and also in the aftermath of the Sino-Vietnamese 1979 border war when Deng Xiaoping wanted to “teach Vietnam a lesson”.

In the 7th century, the Bai founded a country called Nanzhao. They later grew strong enough to defeat the Tang’s troops in the following century. Going into the 10th century, the country’s name was changed to the “Dali Kingdom”. It was not until the 14th century that Yunnan became totally a part of China under the Mongol Yuan Dynasty. Yunnan Province is located approximately 2,000 km southwest of Beijing and its Muslim separatists represent the root cause of frequent unrests.

To push ahead with the exploitation of their colonies, the French built a railroad line linking the port city of Haiphong, North Vietnam to Kunming via Hanoi during the first decade of the 20th century (1904-1910). That railroad line is still in operation today. Kunming saw a period of rapid urbanization the day electricity was generated by the Manwan Dam, the first hydropower dam on the mainstream of Lancang-Mekong. This city no longer remains the Kunming portrayed as “a remote, sleepy Oriental town” by the legendary American Air Force general Claire Chennault of the “Flying Tigers” who was stationed there during the Second World War.

Rendez-vous at Kunming

After two weeks of lecturing as a visiting professor at the Medical School of the University of Beijing, Duy departed for Kunming to meet Bé Tu who was attending a conference of the International Crane Foundation (ICF) there. By a rare coincidence, the two of them were able to link up with me and Xuân aka Dr. Rice who also came for the Yunnan Conference of Science and Technology on the topic of “*Future Development of the Greater Mekong Subregion.*” We agreed to meet at

the residence of Mr. Bách, Duy's uncle, who lived in a rather cozy but small house. Since there was not enough room to accommodate all of us, I was chosen as the lucky guest of Mr. Bách's family because I had to work with Mr. Bách on a special project. Duy and Bé Tu ended up at the Golden Dragon Hotel, an affiliate of a Hong Kong conglomerate, located on the Beijing-Nanhu route. Their place was only a 15-minute bus ride from the Kunming airport.

Coming to the Stone Forest

After spending the night in Kunming, Duy and Bé Tu bid goodbye to me in the early morning to board a bus for the Stone Forest, 130 km to the east of Kunming, near Lunan Province. This region and the Himalayas share a common geological history that dates back 280 million years. In the beginning, limestone mountains dominated the landscape. With time, water erosion created a spectacular topography covering a 260 km² area dotted with countless rock formations as tall as 30m in all shape and form giving free rein to the imagination of the Yunnanese to come up with creative and romantic names for them: immortal mushroom, pool of swords, small elephant... Fossils of marine life found at the place bear strong indications that this region used to be a sea bed. A local tale has it that, in the old days, male fairies wished to have a secluded private meeting place of their own. So, they had the mountain transformed into a labyrinth. These days, local lovers choose the area as their favorite rendez-vous spot.

Indisputably, tourism in China is permeated with a high degree of commercialization. Right at the entrance of Shinlin or the Stone Forest, women of the Di minority in the welcoming party were eagerly trying to sell souvenirs or pose for the tourists. It was not until the busy day had come to a close that one could sit down quietly at a wide open pavilion to enjoy the charming scenery. As dusk fell, the red sun retired to rest behind the stone mountains. It had been rising and setting interminably like that for millions of years as the wheel

of time turns.

Enchanted, the couple watched the majestic panorama that unfolded before their eyes like a gigantic surrealist painting. Under an ageless sky studded with stars glittering like diamonds, they each reached for a glass of rosé as they looked deep into each other's eyes. They felt like fragile Yin and Yang specks of dust floating in an ageless world without beginning and end.

Bé Tư only knew that Duy was born in Hanoi but spent most of his life in the South. He graduated from Harvard University and was teaching at Stanford. On account of his numerous articles published in prestigious medical journals, he was considered a rising star by his peers. She did not have the slightest idea about Duy's family. From her brother Đạt she learned of Duy's rather original thoughts concerning the Mekong Delta's future. In Duy's "medical term", this Delta with its young and robust "*genes*" will be the cradle of the civilization of river and water replacing the Red River's civilization with its old and enfeebled if not to say defective genes.

Duy's point of view sounds somewhat original partly because it is couched in the lingo of genetics. Probably Duy was not aware that, more than one century ago, "Phật Thầy Tây An" or The Buddha Master of Western Peace, had propounded the same vision for the Mekong Delta that he called the "*The Land of Blossoms*". Then, five decades later another Buddha Master Huỳnh Phú Sổ, Buddhist reformer and founder of Phật Giáo Hòa Hảo, also similarly talked in the same vein about a "*Center to the Southward*". Interestingly, Encyclopedia Britannica listed him as "Vietnamese philosopher".

In Duy's eye, in Bé Tư one can detect the vastness of the Mekong Delta and the pioneering spirit of the old generations who settled the land during the country's "*Nam Tiến*" or the Southward March.

Duy turned to Bé Tu and asked:

– The guys told me that you are quite impulsive aren't you? And at the recent conference in Melbourne you didn't mince your words at all. Is that true?

Bé Tu replied in her crystal clear Southern accent:

– No. Not always. I care a lot about my parents. I never want to cause them any heartache.

Probing deep into Duy's eyes, she paused for a short while then added:

– And I am extremely sensitive about dishonesty, deception too.

The highly educated young girl uttered those words without any ulterior motives yet they left Duy speechless. The innocent reflection of her intelligent eyes seemed to possess the power to penetrate the deepest recesses of the human soul. Duy didn't harbor any dishonorable sentiment toward her. Nevertheless, he couldn't help feeling somehow awkward in the situation he was in.

His very conservative mother had her own ideas about the choice of a good wife for him in accordance with to the customs of the North where she came from. When push comes to shove, Duy would never entertain the thought of contradicting her. However, he had his own opinions about what he would like to look for in a future bride. Duy believed strongly that the health of the children must be taken into consideration when one starts a family. He would not go so far as an OB/GYN friend who, by professional deformation, insisted that the perfect spouse must have a large pelvic bone so that a Caesarean would not be required during delivery. Duy, on the other hand, would prefer strong genes and a healthy look in a mother.

In stark contrast to her brother Đạt who was hot tempered and a straight shooter, Bé Tu impressed people as being a charming, bright, thoughtful, and gentle person. Her intellectual demeanor actually concealed a delicate femininity. For Duy, Bé Tu possessed the type of beauty that all men look for in a wife. Under the star studded sky of Yunnan, in a nano of a second, Duy made a silent vow that from now on he would always be upfront with Bé Tu. In the deep recesses of his heart, he wished that she would one day become his better half.

When in Kunming, our group spent a full day to visit the World Horti-Expo Garden and view the wonders on display there. The botanical garden played host to the 1999 International Horticulture Exposition. It later became a major landmark of eco-tourism in Yunnan, a symbol of perfect harmony and return to nature.

Duy expected that being an ornithologist Bé Tu was well conversant about birds however she also impressed him with her extensive familiarity with the flowers grown in Yunnan. Through her, Duy learned that when Westerners came to Yunnan they were captivated by the large variety of flowers found in the region. Camellia ranks among the most beautiful of flowers. The Rhododendron that boasts of 200 varieties comes in second place. It was the camellia that the British East India Company introduced into Europe during the 17th century. From that day on, in Duy's mind, Bé Tu's image will be inseparably associated with the Camellia – a flower that left a meaningful stamp on his trip to Yunnan.

At this rare moment, Xuân was transported back to his years as a graduate student in Cần Thơ University and he felt extremely sad thinking of his highly respected mentor, Professor Phạm Hoàng Hộ. This internationally known botanist spent years going on field trips from the South to the North of the country to collect plants, gathering materials as well as rare varieties (up to 12,000 species) to complete his unique and huge collection named "*Cây Cỏ Việt Nam* /Illustrated Flora

of Vietnam”. He considered this work as his lifetime accomplishment. Highly idealistic and patriotic, Professor Hộ decided to remain in the country in 1975 with the wishful thinking that he could contribute to build a better future for war-ravaged Vietnam. It was only a matter of time before he had to leave his beloved motherland with a sorrowful heart to live in exile. Since then, there is a continuous and massive drain of “gray matter” from Vietnam to various foreign countries.

The giant footprints of Marco Polo

In the company of his father, Marco Polo left Europe in 1271. Traveling along the Silk Route the pair arrived at the Summer Palace of Kublai Khan 4 years later. He served at the Khan’s court for the next 17 years and traveled widely in China. Marco Polo then set sail for Europe to return to Venice in 1295. Three years later, while fighting under the banner of the Most Serene Republic of Venice against Genoa, he was taken prisoner. By a stroke of luck he shared a cell with the well-known writer Rustichello of Pisa and from that chance encounter future generations are able to read “*The Travels of Marco Polo*”. In that travelogue, the Great Wall of China was surprisingly left out of the text leading to the humorous explanation that the Wall was omitted because it was not a thing that the enterprising Marco Polo could sell.

The city of Kunming in the 13th century looked like this under his eyes:

“... you arrive at the capital city, which is named Yachi, and is very great and noble. The land is fertile in rice and wheat... For money they employ the white porcelain shell, found in the sea, and which they also wear as ornaments about their neck. In this country also there are salt springs... the duty levied on this salt produces large revenues to the emperor. The natives do not consider it an injury done to them when others have connections with their wives, provided the act is voluntary on the women’s part. Here there is a lake almost a hundred miles in circuit, in which great quantity of fish are caught. The people

are accustomed to eat raw flesh of fowls, sheep, oxen and buffalo... the poorer sorts only dip it in a sauce of garlic... they eat it as well as we do the cooked."

The great illness of Prof Wang and The Three Big Steps Forward

Since the 1950's with the introduction of the economic development plan Great Leap Forward, the tempo of Chinese dam building increased at a dizzying pace: on the average 600 big dams were constructed each year irrespective of their impacts on the ecology or the lives of the people.

A typical example is the San-men Three Gates Gorge Dam on the Yellow River called "the cradle of Chinese civilization". This dam project had drawn oppositions from renowned hydrologists like engineer Li. Very early on, he foresaw the danger that the dam would be quickly filled up with sediments and mud. Consequently, he was accused of being a "rightist" and ostracized. Only after the first three years of operation, 50 billion tons of sediments and mud had accumulated in the reservoir causing the water level to rise and flood the nearby residential areas even threatening the ancient capital of Xi'an of the Zhou Dynasty (10th century BC).

When being advised of the degradation of the dam and the threat it posed to the ancient city of Xi'an, Mao Tse Tung in anger simply ordered: "*if nothing works, then just blow up the dam*". In the end, to save the ancient city of Xi'an, the capacity of the dam had to be revised from the originally planned output of 1,200 MW to only 250 MW. This costly miscalculation led to the inundation of 66,000 acres of the most arable land and the relocation of almost half a million local farmers.

We cannot fail to mention the catastrophes caused by the collapse in 1975 of the Banqiao and Shimantan Dams on the Ru River, a tributary of the Yangtze, in Henan province. More than 230,000 people lost their

life in this incident and the world only learned of it two decades later.

Recently, Clinton was the first American President to set foot in Xi'an. He was fêted with a royal welcoming ceremony complete with warriors and dancers dressed in the traditional costumes of the Tang Dynasty considered to be the embodiment of the glorious and ancient civilization of the Han people.

The “Water Wars” of the Future.

After attending the conference organized by the International Rice Research Institute in Los Banos, south of the capital of Manila, Xuân boarded a plane to return to Bangkok with a heavy but not overly downtrodden heart. As usual, he was as tenacious at his task as a good farmer who kept on tilling his fields no matter how bad the weather might look. One should not forget that he was the first person who introduced the Miracle Rice into the Mekong Delta in the 1960's. Local farmers affectionately called him “Teacher Xuân, the Dr. Rice Honda” because thanks to this High Yield Variety Rice they became prosperous and could afford to own generators and motorcycles made by Honda.

As the golden age of the Miracle Rice was drawing to a close, the conference reached this rather gloomy conclusion: nearly 6 billion people on earth would be facing a worsening water shortage to the point that they may not even have clean water to drink. Population growth is forging ahead at a fast speed forcing people to allocate more land to develop residential areas and earmark more water for personal use. On the other hand, they had to reduce the areas of agricultural land and the supply of farming water in spite of a soaring demand for rice.

We are living in a world that is drying up fast due to global warming, a direct end result of the greenhouse effects, named “an inconvenient truth” by the Nobel Peace Prize laureate Al Gore. The globe's water supply has halved compared to 20 years ago while its water demand

doubled every two decades. To produce 1 kilogram of beef would require 15,000 liters of water, 1 kilogram of cereals 1,500 liters of water and 1 kilogram of fruit or vegetable only 1,000 liters or 15 times less. The granaries in Asia including the Mekong Delta are facing a serious threat of water shortage. It is widely acknowledged that 2/3 of the world population depend on rice for their existence. The Green Revolution ushered in by the Miracle Rice during the 1960's saw a twofold increase in rice production. It saved humanity from starvation and introduced economic prosperity to the deltas.

Unfortunately, the rice variety known for its short stalk and high yield can no longer meet the requirements of the 21st century. To avoid hunger and “water wars”, the only hope for humanity lies in the discovery of a “Super Miracle Rice” whose stalk will only bear grains instead of leaves. In addition, it must require less water and fertilizers to grow but at the same time produce high yield. It should also be highly resistant to insects and pests. Its stalk should be sturdy enough to bear the weight of 2,000 instead of the normal 800 grains thus pointing to almost a three-fold increase in yield or from 4 to 12 tons of rice per acre in order to feed a population that is growing at an exponential rate on this planet.

In search of the “Super Miracle Rice”

In order to produce a strain known as Super Miracle Rice NERICA or “New Rice of Africa”, scientists are tirelessly crossbreeding rice varieties that can grow in the extreme dryness of West Africa. Ken Fisher of the International Rice Research Institute estimated that it would take at least two more decades to produce enough seeds of this “Super High-Yield-Variety” for the more than half billion farmers in the world. Whether that goal could be attained or not is of vital importance to human survival on this planet. In the next millennium, how many more mouths will a rice stalk have to feed?

The narrow doorway into China

An urgent meeting of the Secretariat of the Mekong River Commission, prevented Xuân from keeping me company at the conference organized by the Yunnan's Commission for Science and Technology. Xuân's recent contacts with the Vietnamese Embassy in Bangkok also failed to help me obtain any new information about the dams in Yunnan. He received only lukewarm responses from its staff. Those civil servants appeared to be mainly interested in making money from the Vietnamese expatriates or carrying on with their personal business dealings on the side.

The fact that I was not staying in China as a tourist reminded me that I should be more cautious this time around. I promised myself to speak with moderation and not to venture into areas I could not feel comfortable with. The presentation I planned to give would offer an overall view of the situation facing the seven nations in the Mekong Basin including China and Myanmar.

Having a good understanding of Chinese history, I preferred to steer clear of topics considered "taboo" or offensive to the Chinese leaders. I realized that the issue of "face" is of the utmost importance to Asians especially to the "Sons of Heaven". Extreme nationalism expressed in dogmatic slogans is a telltale sign of an inferiority complex that could only end in confrontations or deadlocks. Dealing with a big county in the process of opening up, my priority was to build useful contacts with western educated Chinese experts and establish a stable foundation for open dialogue and cooperation in the future.

I was aware that in 1989, Yunnan People's Press had published a voluminous 600-page thick book titled "*Lancang Jiang: Xiao Taiyang*" (*Lancang Jiang: The Little Sun*). Since it was published in Chinese, I had to rely on the kindness of Mr. Bách, Duy's uncle, to read it and give me a summary of its principal themes. Mr. Bách was a journalist and a veteran member of the Việt Quốc or the Vietnamese Kuomintang

party. It was this interesting background that led him to a life in exile in Kunming.

During the extremely busy week I stayed at Mr. Bách's home, I felt as if being transported into a spiritually inspiring world. The host couple who were diehard vegetarians introduced me to a strictly non-meat diet. Nevertheless, I truly enjoyed the food thanks to Mrs. Bách's culinary skills. Mr. Bách treated me like a nephew although we were not blood relatives. To this day, I was fond of saying in jest that my friend Duy would certainly be jealous had he known about the special treatment Mr. Bách reserved for me. I attributed my good fortune to the fact that both I and Mr. Bách were good friends of Mr. Nhu Phong. I loved to liken Mr. Nhu Phong who was at the time living in the United States to a magical key that helped me open many doors.

At the young age of 22, Mr. Bách often accompanied his party leader, Nguyễn Tường Tam, to China. Tam was also known by his pen name Nhất Linh. Besides being editor of the two newspapers Phong Hóa and Ngày Nay he was also the founder of the Tự Lực Văn Đoàn or Self-Reliance Literary Movement that left an indelible mark in the cultural life of Vietnam.

Mr. Bách traveled to many cities like Guangzhou, Nanking, Shanghai, and Yunnan to persuade the Chong Qing Government and the Kuomintang (KMT) led by Chiang Kai-shek to provide the Việt Quốc party with military aid to fight the French. When the entire Việt KMT received the order to return to Vietnam and carry on with its activities only Mr. Bách was chosen to stay behind in Kunming to run the local branch of the Party. Nowadays, at an advanced age, his face still showed the scars of the difficult years he lived through. However, he managed to stay fit and healthy. His eyes sparkled with the youthful alertness of a clear and determined mind.

A brother of Mr. Bách who also joined the Việt KMT was captured

by the Việt Minh in Bắc Giang to be never heard from again. He was probably killed by his captors like so many of his comrades. Mr. Bách married a Chinese lady, an active member of the Kuomintang. He served as an inspiration and model for the antagonist named Dũng in the novel “*Đôi Bạn*” that fascinated Vietnam’s young generations during the second half of the last century. The bright, stern, and confident look in Mr. Bách’s eyes never ceased to captivate me. Each time we talked about Vietnam, Mr. Bách always spoke in a thunderous voice revealing an undying childlike vigor and patriotism.

To help him stay awake through the night and finish reading the more than 600 pages of the book, his wife prepared for him a strong pot of tea. In his youth, while working with the elders of his party, Mr. Bách was no stranger to sleepless nights like that.

I learned from Mr. Bách that the entire book consists of 45 articles dealing with different topics but its common and unifying theme is: the benefits to be derived from the water and hydroelectricity generated by the series of 8 dams in the Mekong Cascades of Yunnan. With a combined capacity of 15,400 MW and a total price tag of US\$ 7.7 billion, that expected power output can adequately satisfy the needs for the electrification of all the southern provinces in China. Any surplus would be earmarked for export to Thailand.

In Mr. Bách’s view, only a few pages in the book mentioned the problems of fluvial navigation at the sections of the Mekong which run through Yunnan. Regrettably, no discussion could be found concerning the impacts that the series of dams in the Cascades might bring to bear on the five countries of the Lower Mekong: Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam.

The Turbulent River

From Tibet the Mekong flows south to Yunnan. The river runs

wild in the northern third of its length shaping breath-taking sceneries and causing the Yunnanese to name it Lancang Jiang or “the turbulent river”. Rapids and whirlpools, some found at an elevation of 600 meters, invigorate its current. At that height, the swift current flow and sparse population render it ideal for the building of hydroelectric dams. Since the 1970’s, China had contemplated a program to construct in the near future a series of 8 dams of the 14 in the Mekong Cascades at the upper section of the Mekong.

Due to a lack of fund it was not until 1980 that the ground-breaking ceremony of the first dam named Manwan could take place. This dam known for its 99 meter dammed water head and 35-story high wall stands astride the river sandwiched between two mountain ranges. Thirteen years later the project came to fruition and electricity was fed to the provincial capital of Kunming, the Chuxiong industrial zone, and several other provinces in the south. With the advent of electricity from Manwan, the city of Kunming was no longer plunged in darkness.

Professor Wang, the chairman of the Yunnan Electric Power Group Co., Ltd, is the brain and the Communist Party’s eye and ear of the big dam projects. Trained as a hydroelectricity engineer in the Soviet, he remained a doctrinaire party member for a long time. In brief, he possesses both a professionally and politically correct background. With such “impeccable” credentials, his views were well received and heard by the comrades occupying the seats of power.

Standing erect with the Manwan in the background, professor Wang’s voice rang with pride:

– With its enormous water discharge, the Lancang Jiang can be compared to a boundless source of “white coal”. This is the catalyst that will provide impetus to the development of the entire Yunnan Province.

Then pointing to the locations of the eight dams drawn on a simple

map, the comrade added:

– Construction was started on Dachaosan, the second dam, in 1996. Next in line will be Jinghong, the third one. Its output will be mainly earmarked for export to Thailand. The fourth dam, the 248 meter tall Xiaowan, will come afterward. It is the “mother dam” of the series of eight dams in the Mekong Cascades that are scheduled to be built during the first decade of the 21st century. The tall walls and “seasonal reservoirs” of the first three dams are designed to contain the maximum quantity of rain water needed to run the turbines during the dry season lasting from November through April. This is also the time when the demand for electricity peaks. The evident benefits this system offers include: an efficient ability to control flood and a diminished threat of flooding in the countries downstream.

One could not fail to notice that professor Wang omitted to mention any detrimental impacts those dams might cause to the area’s ecological system. Whether he intentionally did it or not no one could tell.

I understandably held a very different view on the topic but preferred to keep it to myself. Take the case of the Tonle Sap Lake: to point out that the lake has been converted into an International Biosphere Reserve is only a half truth because it is universally acknowledged that there exists a tight organic interdependency between that lake and the Mekong River. With the prospect of a diminished water inflow brought about by the dams in Yunnan, the Tonle Sap will eventually turn into a “Dead Lake” in a not too distant future. That will occur when there would not be enough water for the Mekong to reverse its current and flow into the lake during the Rainy Season. No reversed current means no floating rice strand, no rich alluvia to fertilize the fields. Not to mention the detrimental effects on the fish species and fluvial catch once abundant along this mighty river.

In 1993, it was reported that the water in the Mekong suddenly

dropped to an abnormal level during the Rainy Season. Only then did people realize that this phenomenon was caused by the Mekong's water being diverted into the just completed Manwan Dam's reservoir. From that time on, people began to show more concern and keep a closer look at the series of 14 dams being planned in the Mekong Cascades in Yunnan. This watchfulness was not unfounded considering the reluctance on the part of China to provide pertinent information to the outside world. The situation did not get any better when accusations - if not disinformation - were traded back and forth between the interested parties.

A good example of this was a report that appeared in the July 29, 1996 issue of the Bangkok Post concerning the flood in the city of Chiang Khong in Northeastern Thailand where the well-known Pla Beuk annual festival is usually held. The paper stated that: "...Local authorities believed the flooding was due to the release by Chinese authorities of water from large hydropower dams on the Upper Mekong in Yunnan." It should be noted that at the time only the Manwan was operational while all the other dams still remained in the planning stage.

I am fully aware that the decision to build or not to build the dams constitutes in itself a deeply divisive issue for China. The situation would certainly become much more muddled when neighboring countries jump into the fray. Proponents and opponents of the projects obstinately keep to their grounds giving a deaf ear to the other side's arguments. Worse, they distort or misrepresent their opponents' views thus confusing the issues and rendering them baffling to outsiders.

In the last half century, the world had gained much experience in regional development through the works of multinational organizations like ASEAN, APEC... Could the political leaders of the region ever reach a common understanding and enter into multilateral cooperation on the issue of the Mekong Basin? Since the 1990's, especially in 1993, the World Bank (WB), Asian Development Bank (ADB), and

United Nations Development Bank (UNDB) have made brave attempts to improve the collaboration among the six countries of the Mekong River Basin. Unfortunately, nothing much has come out of it!

Taking an encompassing and strategic outlook, I definitely believe that for the countries in the Basin to cooperate and arrive at a harmonious exploitation and development of the Mekong's resources, the first step is to clear the air then build mutual trust through honest discussions and exchanges of information. In that way, all parties will come to a collective understanding that no developments as well as regional peace are possible if each country is only looking for its short-sighted interests without giving due consideration to the wellbeing of its neighbors. If one holds that politics and ecology are but two sides of the same coin then I, at all times, believe that there does exist a "right policy" to inaugurate the "The Mekong Spirit" era and help beat a path to "compromises" and eventual "mutual benefits" for all.

Whether one agrees with me or not, it is undeniable that I have come to my Vietnamese as well as overseas colleagues with an honest and constructive frame of mind.

Realizing that by simply extolling the benefits derived from the Yunnan Dams would not be sufficient to address the legitimate need of the outside world for more information, in 1966, the Yunnan's Provincial Commission for Science and Technology and the National Institute of Natural Science of China approved the funding of two five-year research programs. The first one was to study the development and use of the water sources in the Upper Mekong while the second would attempt to assess the impacts the series of dams in the Mekong Cascades in Yunnan would bring to bear on the hydrology and ecology downstream i.e. the quality of water, fish and shrimp population in the Mekong and Tonle Sap Lake. The second research group would work in cooperation with researchers and scientists coming from the nations of the Lower Mekong.

To this date, people only mention the “likely effects” of the dams in Yunnan on the current’s flow rate. Under normal conditions, prior to the construction of the Manwan Dam, the average flow rate of the Mekong near the border between Yunnan and Laos during the Dry Season was recorded at 689 m³ /second. In recent months, the authorities in Yunnan reported a rise in the flow rate following the construction of that dam during the Dry Season. However, according to the Secretariat of the Mekong River Commission that increase in the flow rate during the Dry Season would still prove negligible even after the construction of the Manwan, Dachaoshan, and Jinghong Dams.

The experts working in the construction of the Yunnan dams argued that after the Xiaowan’s reservoir is built in 2010 there should be a 50% increase in the flow rate during the Dry Season. Another increase could be expected after the completion of the Nuozhadu Dam. Nevertheless, the data used in those calculations are still preliminary and the positive effects thus mentioned could be considered “circumstantial” at best. On the other hand, the dams’ disastrous impacts on the ecological system and plant life still remain unresolved.

Comrade professor Wang challenged his audience with this question: “The issue here before us is quite clear - in black and white: between the preservation of the ecology in all its diversities and the improvement in the standard of living for the people inhabiting along the riverbanks, what would be your preferred choice?”

Unlike the conference in Australia I attended previously, I came to this place more to listen and gather information than engage in bitter arguments.

The Old and Lonely Engineer

Unlike professor Wang who appeared to be suffering from a

grandiose complex, his alter ego, engineer Li, proved to be an open minded and courageous individual who had opposed the big dam projects over the past decades. The noteworthy thing about engineer Li was his extensive and interesting background. The son of a member of the Chinese Communist Party's Central Committee and professor and dean of the Department of Hydrology at Beijing University, this engineer in his sixties was well learned and possessed an impressive body of professional experiences. He was a graduate of the University of Nanking and by trade a structural civil engineer. Having witnessed a number of dam collapses and ensuing floods on the Yellow River, engineer Li decided to study Geological Hydrology and Meteorology to broaden his professional knowledge.

His foreign training included a Master's degree from Cornell University in geology and a Ph.D. in hydrology from the University of Illinois. During his stay in the United States, he visited all the major hydro projects in the country like Grand Coulee, Hoover... and completed a six-month internship with the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) before returning to China.

Being a true scientist endowed with a vast and deep technical knowledge, he never flinched from publicly expressing his views against the big dam projects specifically the Three Gate Gorge Dam on the Yellow River and the Three Gorges Dam on the Yangtze. The disasters that did happen to the Three Gate Gorge Dam had proven him right.

He still stuck to his profession as an educator but stayed clear of any political activities. Consequently, he was not appointed to any positions of importance. Many of his writings were published in prestigious technical and scientific English journals giving him an authoritative voice in the field of dam construction. A thought occurred to me that if the "democracy movement" manifested itself through the Tiananmen Square event in 1989, its seeds must have been sown by people like

professor Li several decades back. Having read professor Li's works before meeting him in Yunnan, I held him in high esteem. I looked at the professor as a bridgehead to establish stable contacts with the scientific and technical Chinese communities in the future.

That the three downstream countries of Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam did not receive a fair deal under the circumstances was apparent to all the attendants at the conference. China was well known for having the most polluted rivers in the world. Now the Mekong is added to this group as she is suffering from the impacts caused by the construction of the eight Chinese hydroelectric dams and the industrial or domestic waste being dumped into her current. Sooner or later the river will lose its pristine and natural wild conditions. The prospect of a Lower Mekong being drained dry and its entire ecological system degraded no longer belongs to the realm of science fiction but may become reality as early as the year 2100 or thereafter.

A Look from the Outside

In his book "Silenced Rivers", Patrick McCully addressed the issue of "The Ecology and Politics of Large Dams". It is not without reason that this author comes to the observation that the World Bank prefers to enter into contracts with countries run by authoritarian governments it conveniently refers to as "nations with stable political systems". In the event of popular protests against a dam project, they would be quickly suppressed by the government in charge. It is not surprising to learn then that this institution continues to be the leading lender for the construction of big dams in China.

From my experience dealing with mainstream organizations, I acquire the habit of not trusting "politically correct" conventions. For that reason, I wanted to find out what the well respected and trained experts of the World Bank knew about a developing country's conditions and how they evaluated them before they decided to fund its development

projects. I began to read the reports released by those international bodies. One of those reports dealt with Vietnam. This document was intimidating just by its thickness and artful presentation. Regrettably, it did not give the full picture of that country's realities that a more responsible and scientific approach would undoubtedly showcase. For example, it failed to make any reference to the authoritarian government, rampant corruption, and lack of human rights in the country. Those factors are clearly impediments to that nation's development.

To argue that the report should stay clear of political involvements is tantamount to a cover-up. Silence in such case is nothing more than being an accomplice in crime. The natural outcome of such a policy leads to the enrichment of a privileged minority, the World Bank, and the multinational mega contractors. Though on the surface these big projects bring about some semblance of development, in reality they help institute a bi-polar type of social justice: a minority group in power that continues to enrich itself at the expense of the majority of the population that becomes increasingly "impoverished".

The Old Citadel of Dali

At an altitude of 1,900 meters, Dali is compared to a small Katmandu of Nepal. It is guarded in the west by high mountain ranges and in the east by the Erhai Lake endowed with beautiful landscapes and historical vestiges of the Bai people. In the vicinity are found the most ancient monuments like the 9th century San Ta Pagoda or the sturdy stone houses and tile covered rustic alleys. This city continues to be considered the Mecca for tourists arriving in Yunnan. The total population of the Bai ethnic group is reported at 1.5 million and its culture dates back to more than three thousand years ago.

Disregarding the appealing advertisements they read, Duy and Bé Tu decided to pass over the extremely luxurious five-star hotel recently inaugurated by a Taiwanese and Chinese conglomerate. They chose

instead the intimate atmosphere of the Yuan Garden Hotel located at the very end of Huguo Lu Street - also called Foreigner's Street by the locals. The amenities of the place included coffee shops, cold beers... in short, a popular spot frequented by foreign tourists. From Huguo Lu walking down to the foot of the hill one would arrive at Erhai Lake, another sweet water great lake of the Upper Mekong.

Every year, the Pla Beuks migrate to that lake from downstream to spawn. For generations, people believe that around April, the Pla Beuks would gather at the deep pools in Luang Prabang to the north of Vientiane. They then compete to select those that could swim all the way to Erhai Lake to lay their eggs. Those that are left behind would fall prey to the fishermen of the Chiang Khong village during the Pla Beuk festival. The Thai and Lao fishermen living along the Mekong's banks to this day still believe that the Pla Beuks are sacred fish that bring them luck during the fishing season.

On his journey from Beijing to Bengal, Marco Polo traveled along the Southern Silk Route and visited Erhai Lake. He noted that the fish there ranked as "the best in the word". In that same year (1278) he crossed the Mekong in the west of Yunnan to depart from China.

Six hundred years after Marco Polo, the French exploration team led by Doudart de Lagrée and Francis Garnier bid farewell to Saigon to sail upstream the Mekong on a perilous two-year expedition. They traveled by water and at times by land to eventually set foot in Dali Citadel in 1868. They then continued on to the magnificent Erhai Lake to the east of the city where Doudart de Lagrée, the group leader, breathed his last.

More than 130 years later, we went to the same spot, in search of the last beautiful ecological landscapes of a river that is inexorably coursing towards its final days. The early dawn dews still lingered on. The Bai people had already rowed their small boats to the bamboo nets

they laid out the previous night to retrieve their catch. By noontime, the red sun had reached its zenith as the sunrays shone on the sparkling surface of the lake.

On that calm day the cormorants were set free to catch the fish. The same scenery could be found in Gui Lin but the one on Erhai Lake was by far more enchanting and majestic. Well trained by their master, the birds wore around their necks rings small enough to prevent them from swallowing the fish they caught. It was quite a strange scene to watch the whole flock dove deep under the water at the splashing of an oar to reemerge one after another holding wiggling silver fish in their beaks. All that was left for their owner to do was to approach the birds and collect their catch.

Ruili, the Border City

In the distant frontier land between China and Myanmar, in the extreme southwest of Yunnan, a city named Ruili sprang up from the ground in the 1990's. The city is one of the thirteen Chinese border cities running from Tibet to Vietnam. Its inhabitants came from the four corners of the world with the Burmese making up one third of the population.

The two neighboring countries of China and Myanmar conducted a flourishing trade in Ruili. Goods bearing the stamp "made in China" flooded the place but the principal and typical business in Ruili was the trade in pearls, precious stones coming from Myanmar, opium from the Golden Triangle, and houses of prostitution disguised as steam baths or massage parlors staffed by girls coming from all parts of China or Myanmar. The AIDS infection spread at an alarming rate as a byproduct of the use of needles by drug addicts and the influx of the ladies of the night. Ruili was known as the wildest city in China. It also appealed to Westerners who were adventurous and mindless of its dangers.

Bé Tu had her own reason to come to this place. An active member of the World Wildlife Conservation, she wanted to see with her own eyes the Bear Factory of Asia. More than 300 bears trapped in Myanmar were brought here and kept in iron cages. Each week, by turn, their bile was drawn to make costly and sought after oriental medicine for export to Hong Kong, Taiwan, or South Korea.

For Bé Tu, her trip to Ruili proved to be a mind expanding experience. She was stunned by the realization that like the bears she saw, the local people and her fellow countrymen in the Mekong Delta were not being protected and cared for adequately. This new insight made her feel that her efforts to conserve the cranes appear somewhat too limited and inconsequential. Bé Tu saw the need to embrace a larger cause and fight for the conservation of birds, the ecology, the bears and other social issues.

Jinghong Bathed in Sunlight

The four of us, Xuân, Duy, Bé Tu and I met again on the last leg of our trip before leaving China. From Dali, we traveled south on the Mekong to reach Xishuangbanna. This place is known as the “Dai Autonomous Prefecture”, a miniature Thailand within the borders of China. The villages here are inhabited by Thai or Dai young girls wearing costumes in bright colors. Tropical fruit trees like coconut, papaya, pineapple, and orange are grown in lush orchards. Temples and pagodas dotted the countryside while the rainforests were being cut down and their area shrinking at a fast pace.

According to the science of ethno-linguistic this Thai minority belongs to the Thai-Lao group. They practice the Theravada branch of Buddhism and live in stilt houses. In mid-April, they celebrate the same Water-Splashing Festival like the Thai and organize dragon boat races on the Mekong like it is done in the Mekong Delta of Vietnam. On that day, they splash water on each other to wash away dust, chase off the

evil spirits of the old year to welcome the new benevolent ones.

Considering the fact that blood relation goes back to time immemorial, geographical or political demarcations drawn on today's maps do not really exist in the eye of these minorities. During the 10 year Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), they easily escaped from the pursuing Red Guards to find refuge with their families and friends living across the border in Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam.

From the newly built bridge, we watched the Thai minority go on with their daily lives and their interactions with the Mekong. A group of women sat and washed clothes on the riverbanks while others bathed fully clothed in the current. Young kids dove from up high into the warm and brown water. They thrashed about amidst clumps of blooming purple hyacinths or decaying logs.

We followed with our eye the Mekong curling and flowing across the border into Laos. Up high in the warm blue sky, the beautiful clouds of Yunnan floated in the same direction as the current in a southward direction. We stood there speechless but the same thought haunted our mind. We understood that to the inhabitants of the Mekong Delta in South Vietnam, those clouds were bearers of ominous omens warning them that imminent disasters were approaching from the North.

CHAPTER III

BANGKOK SMILES AND BUDDHA IN TEARS

*“To write history without putting any water in it
is to leave out a large part of the story.
Human experience has not been so dry as that.”*

Donald Worster, *Rivers of Empire*

At the close of the conference in Yunnan, I boarded a plane to fly back to Thailand, the land of smiles. This country covers an area of half a million square kilometers – almost the size of France. It has a fast-growing population of 60 million – 95% of which are adherents of the Theravada branch of Buddhism while the remaining 5% are followers of other faiths.

Thailand shares common borders with Cambodia, Laos, Malaysia, and Myanmar. The central part of the country serves as its “granary”. Two main rivers course through the land: to the west flow the Chao Phraya River and its tributaries. Chao Phraya makes a detour to Bangkok before discharging into the Gulf of Siam. To the east run the wild Mekong or Mea Nam Khong and her tributaries. This river forms

the natural demarcation between Thailand, Laos then flows through Vietnam to end up in the East Sea. “*Nainaam mii plaa, nai naa mii khao - In the water the fish swim, on the fields rice grows*” is a saying Thai children know by heart at school.

Thailand’s tropical climate is characterized by a dry and a rainy season. This is most pronounced in the northeast of the country where the rainy season lasts from April through October each year. The planting, fishing and festival activities succeed each other to compose a harmonious rhythm here. Whether it’s dry or rainy, the weather stays warm all year round.

The French diplomat La Loubère on a visit to Thailand in the 17th century, came to the discomfiting conclusion that the hot climate “*effiminated the courage*” and added that “*the mere sight of a sword would put one hundred Thai to flight*”.

Mao Tse Tung once compared Thailand to China’s Sichuan Province. Comparatively, the two are of the same size but Sichuan’s population is almost twice as big as Thailand’s prompting Mao Tse Tung to suggest that the Chinese should relocate to live in Thailand. [sic]

The Thai are very proud of the founding of their nation. Following the defeat of the Dali Kingdom – formerly called the country of Nanzhao of the powerful Bai ethnic group – and the full conquest of China at the hands of Kublai Khan, the Thai fled south from the high plateaus of Yunnan to resettle in Sukhothai with Ayuthaya as their capital. The local Khmers looked down on them and contemptuously called them Syamas, a term reserved for primitive people. To find enough workers to build the increasingly magnificent and colossal Angkor monuments, the Khmer rulers drafted them into their labor force. Cambodia at the time was a land of misery not only for the Thai slaves but also for the Khmer mass as well.

During the 14th century, as the Angkor-Khmer court was being undermined by internal dissensions and unpopular policies, successive Siamese kings frequently raided the Khmer kingdom. The conflict dragged on for almost a century ending in the total victory of Siam. The Siamese sacked the ancient Capital of Angkor then took the Khmers as slaves back to their country. In the following century, the Cambodians lost more than half of their land in the west to their enemy.

After the reign of 33 kings extending over 400 years of history, the Siamese capital Ayuthaya was invaded and plundered by the Burmese during the second half of the 18th century. The Siamese were forced to disperse further south along the Chao Phraya River and build their new capital at Thon Buri, part of today's Bangkok. Fifteen years later, a Thai general by the name of Chakri launched an attack against the Chenla kingdom forcing the Vietnamese Nguyễn monarch to order commanders Thoại Ngọc Hầu and Hồ Văn Lân to lead 3,000 troops to the rescue. Chakri was able to rally the Thai to fight a successful war of independence against the Burmese. At the end of the hostilities, the Chakri Dynasty was born.

The present Thai king Bhumibol Adubjadej is the 9th monarch of that dynasty. His name means the 'Strength of the Land'. He saw life in 1927 in the American city of Cambridge, Massachusetts. His father practiced medicine in Boston. Bhumibol attended Lausanne University in Switzerland majoring in engineering and speaks fluent English and French. Besides being an accomplished boat racer who won the gold medal for sailing in the Fourth Southeast Asian Peninsular (SEAP) Games in 1967, he also excels as a saxophonist. After completing his study abroad, Bhumibol returned to his homeland and ascended to the throne in 1950. Like Prince Sihanouk, king Bhumibol had his head shaven and joined monastic life for a while as expected of young men in the Theravada Buddhist tradition.

The Military Events of 1932 brought an end to absolute monarchy

in Thailand leaving the stage for a system of government called constitutional monarchy in the British mold. The king and royal family were stripped of their power and relegated to a purely ceremonial role. However, things change drastically under king Bhumibol's reign. He no longer is regarded as a figurehead but becomes his country's well respected supreme arbitrator.

Amidst an ever-changing Thai society, the king succeeds to keep his throne for 48 consecutive years (in 2014: 64 years now). Throughout that time, not once did he lose his independence and constantly stayed above all partisan bickering. However, whenever his intervention becomes indispensable, his voice is well received and listened to. For instance, during the violent riots at Thammasat University in October, 1973, the king advised the then Prime minister Thanom and his entourage to leave the country and spare it further turmoil. They acted accordingly.

Similarly, following the bloody events in May 1992, king Bhumibol convoked general and prime minister Suchinda to the palace. In full view of the TV cameras, Suchinda prostrated before the monarch to accept royal admonishments for the ruthless way the armed forces dealt with the demonstrators. This public rebuke led to the resignation of the all-powerful general.

It is not without reason that the Thai king is so well loved by his subjects. In all the years he sits on the throne, the king and queen Sirikit never tire of visiting the remotest places of the country. They keep a watchful eye on the progress of the social programs and care for the well-being and interests of the people. For almost half a century the king has been acting as a guarantor of the nation's solidarity and stability. The obvious question then arises: who will be the qualified person to succeed him considering that the crown prince is a reputed "prodigal son" and a poor copy of his father? Understandably, this issue is of grave concern to

every Thai.

The plane started to lose altitude in preparation for landing at the Don Muang International Airport located in the northeastern outskirts of Bangkok. Were it not for the presence of the stupas, pagodas, and toxic clouds drifting overhead, Bangkok would be mistaken for any city in the West.

Bangkok, the Thai capital, is located at the far southwestern part of the Mekong but serves as the seat of the Mekong River Committee since 1957. This is the place where important decisions affecting the lives of millions of inhabitants in the river basin are taken. Ironically, these people do not have any say in the process. The Institute of Tropical Medicine of the Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization (SEAMEO) Regional Centre for Tropical Medicine - well known throughout Southeast Asia - is located in this city too. It is working in conjunction with the U.S. Walter Reed Army Medical Center to come up with an anti-malaria drug. This deadly disease caused by the drug-resistant *Plasmodium Falciparum* species still remains a scourge to the inhabitants of the Mekong Basin.

The Chakri Dynasty chose Bangkok as their capital. In this city are found The Golden Pagoda Wat Phra Kaeo, the repository of the Buddha's relics along with royal palaces where refined, sensual yet uplifting ancient court dances are performed.

The capital city of Bangkok has a population of 10 million. This jungle of reinforced cement resounds to a cacophony of sounds and noise. It is also the home of the worst traffic jams in the world. That's how one can characterize the city. The traffic convolution here is so bad that city dwellers are fond of telling the story of a monk who, instead of taking the bus, opted to walk to his temple from downtown and still arrived 20 minutes before the bus.

Bangkok is also infamous for its polluted air. Smoke laden with carbon monoxide billows out from millions of automobile exhaust pipes. Competing with it are clouds of chemicals – including phosphorous white ones drifting out from Bangkok’s Khlong Toey big port. It is a wonder how people could still breathe under a sky deprived of oxygen and filled with dust and smoke that bring tears to their eyes. Nevertheless the working people, though worn out, still find the energy to labor on.

In another part of town, in a completely different world, live rich Thai businessmen. A significant number of them are of Chinese descent. Working in tandem with the authoritarian military leaders, they form a privileged class that holds a firm control over the country’s economic activities.

With their cellular phones they tirelessly conduct business dealings with international firms from air-conditioned offices or luxurious Mercedes Benzes. They spend their days at their secluded villas perched in Bangkok’s high grounds or select resorts surrounded by pristine landscapes, lush green golf courses, white sand beaches, or crystal clear blue sea. There, they can relax and forget about the asphyxiating air of the capital city that, at least for a short while, seems such an alien and far-off place to them.

The author would be amiss if he omits to mention that Bangkok is also the active hub where overseas Vietnamese guerilla commanders and anti-Hanoi political activists prefer to meet.

While waiting for Xuân, internationally known as Dr. Rice, to arrive from Singapore, I took the time to pay a visit to Dr. Chamsak at Thammasat University on Na Phrathat road. While Chulalongkorn University is known as a conservative institution, Thammasat earns the reputation for being a hotbed of progressive, discontented, and antigovernment elements. The street demonstrations that started from

this place in 1973, 1992 and the succeeding years were mercilessly crushed by the military.

Dr. Chamsak's name was intimately associated with the struggle movements making him a hero in the eyes of the young students. The military leaders, on the other hand, branded him a "leftist" intellectual, an anarchist and, worst of all, a communist. His political persuasion, however, did not prevent this left leaning professor from being a close friend of the king and royal family.

Those frequent and at times bloody street protests came to naught. They did not result in any changes but only made things worse. Just like in the case of Hue, Vietnam in the 1960's, out of desperation, a number of Thai intellectuals and student activists joined the guerilla force of the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT). This 14,000 strong guerrilla group held sway over large areas in the Isan high plateau to the northeast of the country. Fortunately for Thailand, the leadership of the CPT at the time was hopelessly split into two factions: those who supported China and the Khmer Rouge versus those who sided with Communist Vietnam and the Soviet Union. That infighting seriously weakened their movement and led to its eventual demise.

A mere reading of statistics, would lead one to conclude that Thailand's economy is growing at a very fast pace. But to the informed, those "great leaps forward" could be compared to a "*la dance sur le volcan*" or dance on a volcano as depicted by a French journalist. The faster the growth rate, the wider the divide between rich and poor. Peasants dispossessed of their fields became unemployed and flocked to the city slums to live along rivers turned into sewers. In their new habitat, each bowl of soup they ate was mixed with toxics in the water and air. If industrial pollution did not prevent them from being formed, the fetuses in the mothers' wombs would turn into monsters when delivered!

In 1991, the World Bank (WB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) organized the Bangkok Conference to sing the praise of the “*Economic Miracle of Thailand*”. At that exact same time, in Bangkok, doctor Chamsak and the organizations working for the preservation of the ecology held a parallel conference to draw public attention to the “human and ecological costs” of Thailand’s modernization. A modernization professor Chamsak sarcastically labeled “mal-development” as compared to “good development”.

Dr. Chamsak is an authority on the subject of the impacts of modernization and development on the ecological system. It makes him fully qualified to write the celebrated book “*Counting the Costs: Economic Growth and Environmental Disaster in Thailand*”. The mere title of the book says it all. In my opinion, one simply needs to substitute the Vietnamese geographical names for the Thai ones in the book to have a fairly accurate picture of the price Vietnam is paying as it embarks on its “*Đổi Mới*” Renovation policy.

In my meeting with Dr. Chamsak, I expressed the wish to visit the dams in Thailand. To comply with my request, Dr. Chamsak took me to the Bhumibol Dam, the first multipurpose dam that serves as anchor to an intricate system of dams in Thailand several decades later.

Heading north from Bangkok, we arrived at the Tak Village after a seven-hour bus ride. In the distance, along the east bank of the Ping River we could see the Bhumibol Dam. Formerly a thriving commercial center, in the last several years, the village became known for its black market trade in heroin, precious stones, and teak wood illegally imported from Myanmar to be exchanged for weapons, gold, and consumer goods. A familiar sight on the Prahonyotin national route was convoys of trucks transporting precious logs with Thai military escorts. That illicit trade was being conducted in plain daylight with the tacit support of the Thai

generals.

The first bus we took from the Tak village rolled northward on Route Number 1 for 40 kilometers before it came to a stop. We then switched to another bus for a short ride to reach the Bhumibol Dam.

At the foot of the dam, we disembarked at a well laid out area planted with ornamental trees, souvenirs stalls, and visiting centers for tourists. Before our eyes stood a huge dam straddling the Ping River, a tributary of the Chaom Praya. It towered 150 meters above the ground and had a 100 kilometer long reservoir – longer than the distance between Saigon and Vũng Tàu, Vietnam. That reservoir can contain up to 12,200 million cubic meters of water. Ships ferried the tourists across the reservoir to the top of the dam and made occasional stops for them to buy small bags of dried fish or local delicacies.

Three decades and 40 dams later, “resettlement” of the displaced still continues to be the most intractable dilemma for Thailand. The simple reason being: rarely do construction projects allocate adequate funding for the huge and long-term costs of the “resettlement” efforts. The tragedy of hundreds of thousands of displaced people who lost their lands and dwellings because of the dams continues to be an ongoing and untreated headache. Each dam exacts its own price. The suffering of the people keeps on growing but fails to nudge the indifference or should we say insensitivity of Thailand’s government, industrialists, and businessmen.

“They told us to give up our lands and fields for the sake of Thailand’s development. But only the rich “big cats” get richer. They promise us the world: new houses and lands, even highways, water, and electricity. But, in fact, they dump us on parched land lacking even drinkable water. We toil and sweat but barely eke out a living so most of us left the place to face an uncertain future elsewhere. They treated us

like trash and trash doesn't have a tomorrow!" Thanom spoke to us in a bitter voice while his sad eyes gazed upstream where his entire beloved village was submerged more than 30 years ago. Pain was etched clearly on his aged face as he spoke.

Encounter with the Parched High Plateau

It is a vast and arid plateau encircled by the Mekong in the northeast of Thailand. This seemingly "natural" border actually was drawn by the British and French colonialists who mutually consented to take a large region of Laos and handed it over to Thailand in 1941. Therefore, the majority of the local inhabitants are Laotians who called the region *Thay I-xan*. It covers 170,000 km² and makes up 1/3 of Thailand's total area. The local people speak a dialect of Thai-Lao and are mainly farmers whose life tempo is regulated by the pace of the water buffaloes and the ploughs. Some earn a living as silversmiths. A good number of Vietnamese also settled there a long time ago.

Isan used to be an isolated and poor region until the 1960's when the Vietnam War intensified and spread to the three countries of Indochina. To stop communist infiltrations into Thailand, the Americans poured money into the development of the Isan high plateau. They constructed modern highway systems, built four strategic military airstrips for their jet planes to take off and bomb North Vietnam or go on missions to rescue shot down American pilots. The United States also actively supported the Thai in the construction of hydroelectric dams on the Mekong's tributaries (i.e. the Nam Pong and Nam Pung Dams) in their efforts to bring electricity to the rural areas and improve irrigation resulting in a significant increase of agricultural outputs.

Not only was Thailand the sole country in Southeast Asia to be spared the yoke of French or British colonial rule during the 19th century, it was also left untouched by half a century of warfare in the region. On top of that, this nation benefited greatly from the Vietnam

War. This economic windfall outlasted the end of the war as Thailand became the main supplier of rice and food to the two million overseas Vietnamese.

It must be said that the 1980's was the golden age of Thailand's economic development. During that time Thailand ranked first in the export of rice thanks to a 600% rise in production compared to only a 68% increase in the area of farmlands. One must add to that a much more substantial amount of foreign exchange collected from tourism, electronic manufacturing, cotton, natural rubber, and precious stones.

Unfortunately, Thailand also leads in the dramatic spread of AIDS. In Ban Wanalang, a small village in the north of the country, 95% of the inhabitants were reported to be HIV infected without any recourse to medication. Very soon, it will turn into a no man's land. I sadly wondered whether this is nature's way to regulate population growth in the Mekong Basin?

Sex Industry

Sex Tour, a "twisted" form of tourism, is forging ahead unchecked in Thailand and being enthusiastically embraced by its neighbors. The reported 2 million of female and child prostitutes in the country do not even make a dent in the demand of the 7 million foreign tourists of which 70% are male. Called "farangs" by the locals, they flock to this country like "pilgrims" on their way to the "true sex Mecca" forcing Thailand to "import" female "sex workers"! A total of 30,000 female prostitutes from Myanmar are known to practice the oldest trade in the world here and their number does not show any sign of abating. Then, we must not forget those who come from Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam including Yunnan of China and hopefully not Tibet.

As for the Vietnamese, they are either "sold" to pseudo employment agencies and leave with official papers to work abroad for higher wages

or illegally smuggled across the border to work for Cambodian or Thai prostitution rings. Most of them come from poor families living in the countryside of the Mekong Delta. Being uneducated, they are also uninformed about the AIDS disease. Those lucky enough to return home to normal life are turned into ticking time bombs ready to spread the AIDS epidemic in their homeland.

And one must not forget the female “*boat people*” who were raped by the Thai pirates in the East Sea and the Gulf of Siam. If they survived the ordeal and were not killed they would be sold to the houses of prostitution as sex slaves. Their tears and blood reflect not only the grief of the Vietnamese people but also the shame of the Thai nation. In October, 1985, a fire burned down a famous hotel in Bangkok and shocked the whole world. Among the ashes were found the charred bodies of more than 50 women with their arms and legs tied or chained. It was assumed that a number of Vietnamese women, previous victims of the Thai pirates, were among the dead.

The Mittaphap or Friendship Bridge built on the Mekong in 1994 connects the capital Vientiane and Nong Khai. It marks the opening of Laos to the outside world. Thailand was conducting a vigorous marketing campaign to advertise boat trips to Laos offering young and attractive Laotian companions with the guarantee of being “*AIDS-free women*”. The Vientiane Times reported that there were only 55 cases of carriers of the HIV virus in Laos of which 10 were afflicted with the AIDS disease. However, a 1993 study showed that 0.8% of blood donors were HIV-infected. Actually, those were statistics that belonged to an already long gone day.

In addition, Thailand is reputed in the world as a supermarket for wild animals including those under the threat of extinction. Among live creatures we can count: tigers, leopards, bears, baby crocodiles, and all kinds of rare and precious birds and beasts. Products made from dead animals include: game meat, tiger skins, elephant tusks, rhinoceros’ horns... imported from Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam.

In 1988, 200 Burmese bears were smuggled from Thailand to Seoul prior to the Summer Olympics in order to supply the athletes with energy boosting food. In spite of the contentions from the Association for Conservation of Wildlife of Thailand that the country is observing the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species, restaurants serving meat of all kinds of wild beasts to cater to the exotic taste buds of foreign tourists still flourish in the center of Bangkok.

An Arid Future

Hand in hand with leapfrogging economic progresses, Thailand has to contend with countless dilemmas and the most intractable of them is water scarcity. Starting in 1993, at times the waters in the dam reservoirs dipped to 1/3 of their normal level. In the estimate of experts at the Royal Irrigation Department (RID), 7 billion cubic meters of water are required by the farmers to till their fields during the Dry Season while the dams could only supply half of that number over the same period. The Mekong still runs relatively strong but the flow rate of the second major river, Chao Phraya, is slackening. Consequently, salt water from the Gulf of Siam is intruding inland destroying en masse the agricultural crops and fruit trees in the orchards.

This water penury gives birth to heated debates on the ecology: accusing fingers are pointed at urbanization, population growth, expansion of the farming area, increase in the number of crops in the dry season, wasteful water use by the farming and industrial sectors, not to mention climate change caused by suicidal deforestation and the El Nino Southern Oscillation (ENSO) phenomenon. Furthermore, the dams are put under the direct management of the Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand (EGAT) whose primary objective is to generate enough electricity to run the factories. With such policy in mind, this agency repeatedly discharges water irresponsibly in order to keep the turbines running thus wasting a large amount of water collected during

the Rainy Season...

To solve this predicament, several solutions have been proposed: rationing of home and industrial use, charging the farmers for their water usage to force them to conserve, encouraging the planting of crops that require less water... Actually, those measures only look good in theory. In the end, the building of new dams always appears to be the easiest alternative. However, the sections of the rivers that are suitable for dam construction have all been used. If new ones have to be found, it would only mean more disasters are in store for the ecology.

The construction of the existing dams does not constitute in itself a wise decision to start with. However, idle dam construction companies are eagerly looking for opportunities to push for the building of new dams. Whether there is enough water to fill the new reservoirs or not is none of their concern. Low rainfall combined with higher than projected seepage through the limestone beds resulted in big dams like the Bhumibol and Queen Sirikit to be constantly in need of water to fill their reservoirs. Things do not look any better with Shrinakanin, the biggest dam built in the Isan high plateau in 1977. The World Bank funded the majority of the dam projects in Thailand. The leaders of that institution were informed about the danger when Mason and Asher offered this forewarning: “the potentials of the Ping River – a tributary of the Chao Phraya, where the Bhumibol Dam will be constructed have been overestimated...”

The only alternative left to the Thai government is to turn to the abundant water resources of the mighty Mekong. Very early in the 1990's, Thailand considered two bold plans to divert the water of the Mekong.

Project [1]: Kong-Chi-Mun. Since 1992, the Thai government had revealed the existence of an extensive plan requiring a total investment

cost of US\$ 4 billion to construct a 200 kilometer long network of giant aqueducts to redirect the Mekong's water near Nong Khai to a series of dams sitting astride the Chi and Mun Rivers. This water will then be used to irrigate the parched rice fields in those rivers' basins. The KCM Irrigation Project evidently posed imminent and serious threats to the Mekong River flow and would entail a drop in the water level of the Mekong creating grave navigation problems. Cambodia's Minister of Ecology, Dr. Mak Moreth, also joined in to sound the alarm that Thailand's water diversion project may bring about a slower flow rate for the Mekong that would largely eliminate the Tonle Sap River's annual flood pulse, one of the natural wonders of the world, and all its accompanying effects.

Project [2]: Kok-Ing-Nan. Two years later, in 1994, the Thai government announced a second big project named Kok-Ing-Nan to divert the water from the Mekong's two major tributaries named Kok and Ing Rivers in northern Thailand. This US\$ 1.5 billion project called for the building of 100 kilometers of gigantic tunnels to channel water into the Nan River, an affluent of the Chao Phraya River. This mass of water was then fed into the reservoir of a huge dam named after queen Sirikit that was in constant need of water to generate electricity and for two other purposes: to irrigate the Chao Phraya Delta that was suffering from prolonged drought; and last but not least to satisfy the demand for water of the expanding industrial zones and the 10 million residents of the capital city of Bangkok.

These two megaprojects evidently posed imminent and serious threats to the Mekong River flow. The three neighboring countries Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia can object as much as they wish. Slowly but surely, Thailand will go ahead with the implementation of her plans.

The Thai Minister of Commerce Mr. Narongchai Akrasanee openly voiced that view at the May, 1997 ASEAN Chambers of Commerce

and Industry (ASEAN – CCI) Conference: “*Thailand wants ‘Anchor Role’ in Mekong Development*”. In making such declaration, he did not hide the ambition of his country to act as a “minor powerhouse” of the region. The only thing that could hold the Thai back is possible retaliations from China. This is a moot point, however, since China is located upstream from Thailand and consequently it does not have much ground to object to anything whatsoever. As far as the three nations downstream are concerned, Thailand only needed to consult with them before it presses ahead with the diversion of the Mekong’s water. Any protestation on their part would fall on deaf ears considering that none of them hold the “veto power”.

News from “Asia Pulse” Hanoi July 98

The Mekong River Commission approved in 1999 a plan to exploit the Mekong’s water. Its investment cost projected at US\$ 110 million will come from the World Bank and a number of other nations. This is a major plan providing for a rational and equitable use of the Mekong’s water by the countries in the basin.

Along with the Friends of the Mekong Group, I greeted the news with a dose of skepticism. What mechanism would be used to measure and predict the changes in the river’s flow rate? What formulas would be adopted to allocate the water usage of each member country? How could reliable enforcement be carried out? Those are some of the questions that are of concern to us.

In recent days, this international river has taken on a greater significance in the political, geographical, economic, social arenas. One can add to that list the issues of exploitation of natural resources and conservation of the ecology. It would not be farfetched to assert that the water crisis that Thailand and the other six countries in the region are facing is at the root cause of our present day’s crisis. Take the case of the Mekong Delta. This region covers 2.4 million acres of land used in

the production of rice and marine products that contribute 50% of the food supply of Vietnam. Should a water shortage take place during the Dry Season, 2 million acres of farmland would be submerged in salt water. It would wreak havoc to farming and the entire ecology of the Delta and decide whether the Vietnamese would have a full bowl of rice at mealtime or not.

From the Lower Mekong to its Delta

During the time China enforced its “closed door policy” and remained shut off from the outside world, the only talk in town was about the development of the Lower Mekong Basin that includes Thailand and the three countries of Indochina. In the 1990’s, people began to discuss a new vision of economic developments named “*Growth Triangle Concept*” that also encompassed Myanmar and China, the two nations in the Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS).

The dissimilarities in the member countries’ social institutions notwithstanding, this new approach attempts to reconcile the disparate conditions of their various stages of economic development. The expected end result is a maximization of their trade competitiveness and a minimization of political frictions. This macro-economic model of development for the entire Mekong Basin looks extremely attractive.

In transportation: build a highway connecting Bangkok, Phnom Penh, Saigon all the way to Vũng Tàu; open a west-east corridor linking Mukdahan-Savanakhet along Route number 9 to Đông Hà, Đà Nẵng; construct a highway linking Kunming, Chiang Rai, and Laos.

In waterways: the Chinese are considering a daring project to destroy and level the stone formations in the sections flowing from their country to Laos to facilitate navigation on the Mekong.

In energy: not counting the series of 14 dams in the Mekong Cascades

in Yunnan and the high-voltage distribution grid of the Jinghong Dam to export electricity to Thailand, there are at least 8 more hydroelectric projects downstream on the tributaries of the Mekong named Se Kong and Se San Rivers.

In the management of resources and the ecology: set up an Information System as well as train personnel in the field of ecology.

In Human Resources: train a group of well-qualified workers who can do their job anywhere in the six countries of the basin.

In Trade: set up investment groups in the basin with the funding coming chiefly from the private sectors.

China and Thailand are the two countries that appear to be particularly eager in their attempts to benefit from this innovative new policy. Capitalizing on its strategic location and relatively developed economy, Thailand tries to position herself as the doorway to a two-way exchange between Yunnan to the north and the three nations of Indochina in the south. It tries to advertise itself as a reliable hub for the transportation, information, and logistics needs of the basin. This is also the opportunity for Thailand to open new markets, submit bids to build the infrastructures and public works connecting those six countries.

In Beijing's eyes, this is also a heaven sent chance to develop its southern provinces. More importantly, it is the right time to open the Southern Gateway as directed by Mao Tse Tung during the 1965 meeting of the Politburo of the Chinese Communist Party. Probably, in that same spirit, China has issued a new map showing its territory extending to the East Sea, the Paracel and the Spratly Archipelagoes, and to many countries in Southeast Asia. Naturally, Vietnam is included as an autonomous region in the new Pax Sinica.

Reuters News from Vientiane 05/15/1998

An unexplained plane accident ended in the death of 14 Vietnamese generals in a delegation on an official visit to Laos. Except for a brief statement to the effect that their remains were all cremated at the scene in a simple ceremony, no other information even the number of recovered bodies were given.

I learned of the news from an email sent by Mr. Nhu Phong from Vientiane before it even appeared in the newspapers. Mr. Nhu Phong worked as a free-lance journalist with Asia Week Magazine. Therefore, he arrived at the scene very early on and was able to collect first-hand information instead of learning about them from secondary sources.

Though he was well past his seventies, the “all knowing omniscient age”, Mr. Nhu Phong did not show any sign of slowing down in his work habits. The more astonishing thing is: in spite of his age, his mind manages to stay extremely alert. Generally speaking, as people grow older they tend to have a “remote memory” remembering old things more readily than new ones. With Mr. Nhu Phong, it’s different. His “photographic memory” enables him to recollect old and new events equally well. His young colleagues like to tell him that he has “an electronic memory”.

Throughout his professional life as a journalist, he is closely connected to Southeast Asia, the land of destiny for him. His extensive knowledge of the history of the Orient, especially of China, helps him land a job as a free-lance reporter and a well-regarded consultant with Western newsmen on issues pertaining to Vietnam and Indochina.

He is exceptionally sharp in matters of politics that he refers to as a mixed bag of “the good, the bad, and the ugly”. In no way a cynic like Oscar Wilde, Mr. Nhu Phong fully realizes that everything has its price and nothing is worth its price in this world. In his view, politicians

always try to create for themselves a respectable and likeable “public persona” very different from their true self. The statesmen he gets to know may be acclaimed as men of history in the public eyes. However, in his view, they are merely marionettes performing on the political stage as dictated by the circumstances.

The plane accident probably only ranks as minor news among others. But to Mr. Nhu Phong, it may be a link in a chain of events that belongs to a larger order of things.

In a short analytical newspaper article, Mr. Nhu Phong was the first to raise an issue that shook the world press. According to him, the airplane involved in the accident is of a new model reserved for the use of the Lao Communist Party’s Politburo members. The plane carrying the high-level Vietnamese military delegation from Vientiane to Xieng Khouang Plateau, exploded into pieces two minutes prior to landing.

The official assertion that bad weather was the major factor in the accident could not stand on its feet because it happened on a beautiful day at 10:20 AM when the fog had completely lifted. To blame it on technical errors was even more implausible. Phum Na, the pilot, was expressly assigned to fly the plane because he was experienced and had flown this route for many years.

To assume that this is a sabotage resulting from internal infightings in the Communist Party of Vietnam could not be more farfetched considering the delegation was made up of only career military commanders.

In the end, the only plausible explanation left is a competition for influence between China and Vietnam. Mr. Nhu Phong contends that there are many interesting details concerning the background of the Vietnamese lieutenant general who headed the delegation. His

name is closely linked to the rivalry for influence between Vietnam and China in Laos. During the Vietnam War, he acted as Commander of the Battleground at the Plain of Jars in Laos until 1973. He was then appointed Division Commander at Lai Châu Province in direct command for the defense of the northern border against the Chinese armed forces. The suggestion that there exists a Chinese connection in the plane tragedy at Xieng Khouang could not be so disparagingly dismissed as a figment of one's imagination after all.

Seeing that his young friends were not totally persuaded, Mr. Nhu Phong continued:

– In its long-term plan for expansion, it is absolutely unacceptable for Beijing to watch Cambodia and Laos drift into Vietnam's orbit. Even though China was the largest supplier of armaments to Vietnam during the Vietnam War, it still left no stones unturned to try to eliminate communist North Vietnam's influence over Laos by building a wide highway running from Yunnan all the way to central Laos. In the meantime, it also wants to use the Mekong as a waterway to Laos including a plan to relocate Chinese to Laos on the pretext that "the land of Laos is vast but its population sparse". In the case of Cambodia, Beijing does not harbor any qualms in its support of all anti-Vietnam groups including the Khmer Rouge to isolate and weaken Vietnam.

After a moment of silence, the troubled look in Mr. Nhu Phong's face makes him look considerably aged. His voice deepened as he went on:

– Look at Vietnam. Next to a historically hostile Cambodia, and an unfriendly Laos under China's influence, Vietnam could be compared to a man being assaulted with a thrust to the chest from Laos and a stab to the abdomen from Cambodia. On top of that, its back is exposed to the East Sea and its head hammered by blows coming down from the north. Internally, our country is continually troubled by demands for

self-rule coming from its more than fifty minority groups. Furthermore, it has to deal with economic pressures emanating from its loss of control of the Mekong's water flow to irrigate the delta, its rice bowl. Facing that multifaceted threat, sadly enough, the Vietnamese government can only depend on an alienated populace lacking a sense of solidarity or sharing a unity of purpose.

The fear of a Vietnam fragmenting into pieces is shared by all but voiced by nobody. I thought that clearly history is repeating itself. Stepping into the third millennium, the Vietnamese are relearning the lesson of self-preservation. They'll have to learn again the lesson of "united we stand, divided we fall" that has served them so well throughout their long history.

After a brief business trip to Singapore, Xuân took a flight on The Silk Airlines to return to Bangkok to meet me. We used the Internet to keep each other up to date about our activities. Xuân emailed me the good news concerning his trip to Singapore: "By 1999, Air Mekong will introduce an air route connecting the Mekong Delta with a number of important destinations in Asia like Hong Kong, Bangkok, and Singapore. This is a joint venture between General Industry Co. in Singapore and Military Corps 9 and a couple of other provinces in Vietnam to efficiently move goods between those places."

I immediately replied: "Rice, fish, shrimps, fruits and vegetable are the main produces of the Mekong Delta. It would be too costly to transport them by planes. We already have a port at Cần Thơ. Do you mean to say - like you have so often referred to before - that Air Mekong is a step in preparation for "Green Tour - Eco Tour 2000".

Xuân responded: "Perhaps both. The transport of goods and tourists. The extraordinary landscapes of the Mekong by themselves are not sufficient to fuel the expansion of tourism. The important thing is to make sure we have the minimum infrastructures already in place before

we can start the airline services to bring in the foreign tourists. Without the essential structures well established, the promising projects to earn foreign exchange from tourism in the delta will surely turn into “white elephants”. We just can’t put the cart before the ox. Remember?”

With the threat of an HIV epidemic in my mind, I wrote back: “Let’s hope that GreenTour on the Mekong will not turn into Sex Tour and introduce the HIV epidemic into the Mekong Delta. The Thai experience must not remain a ‘lesson unlearned’ for Vietnam.”

On our last day before flying back to the United States, I took Mr. Như Phong, Xuân and Dr. Chamsak to dinner at the select Dalat Restaurant on Sukhumvit Soi. I wished to bring some flavor of Vietnam to my friends in the capital city of Bangkok. This joint is advertised as one of the best Vietnamese restaurants in the city with specialties like “chả giò” or crisp spring rolls, shrimp cakes, and grilled pork. Personally, I chose this place because the name “Dalat” revives in me many sweet memories.

CHAPTER IV

MIDWAY TO THE GOLDEN TRIANGLE

*Midway, we meet - Each other we greet
Then, we proceed - Spring beckons ahead
The long slumber recedes - To our back instead!*
Bùi Giáng

Were the Mekong used as a waterway as envisioned by the French exploration team in the 19th century, the Golden Triangle would have served as the “midway” station between the Tibetan High Plateau and the East Sea. Once it leaves Jinghong, the southernmost city in Yunnan Province, behind, the Lancang Jiang meanders for another 150 miles before reaching the borders shared by the three countries of Laos, Myanmar, and Thailand. This region covers an area of 195,000 km² and has a long history steeped in bloody conflicts emanating from the production and trade of narcotics. The millions of US dollars generated by illicit drugs give that vast and lawless frontier region the befitting name “Golden Triangle”. It is abuzz with stories of armed convoys of opium drawn by mules crisscrossing its steep mountains and dense jungles where the warlords rule supreme through the barrels of their guns.

Though the situation has supposedly changed, the Golden Triangle still keeps its unsavory reputation as the largest center for the cultivation of opium. The lion's share of the annual production of 160 tons of this substance is processed into a white powder known as heroin destined for worldwide consumption.

I chose to reach the Golden Triangle via Thailand. To do so, I boarded a domestic flight from Don Muang International Airport in the outskirt of Bangkok for Chiang Rai. In 1995, the four countries of the Lower Mekong met in this town to sign an agreement changing the name of the Mekong River Committee (1957) to the Mekong River Commission. To be able to reach a common understanding, they regrettably had to forfeit their "*veto power*" in the process.

Tales about the Golden Triangle only help attract foreign tourists who flock to the place in greater numbers especially during the Dry Season that runs from November through May. They arrive from the four corners of the world. Guest houses as well as five-star luxury hotels have to shift to high gear to accommodate them. Thailand is trying its utmost to cash on the area's tourism in order to make up for the huge losses it incurs from the eradication of its opium fields.

I boarded a sparkling clean air-conditioned bus in the company of tourists from the West and Asia (mainly Japanese) to head north toward Sob Ruak, a Thai village located at an elbow of the Mekong. They disembarked to register at the two luxury hotels perching high on the hillside. A third hotel was scheduled to be built on the Mekong's riverbank - this time on the Burmese side of the border. All those modern amenities did not succeed in dampening the thirst for adventure that was burning in each and every one of my companions as they got off the bus.

Originally, I planned to stay at the Baan Boran Hotel managed by an elegantly dressed French gentleman whose thin moustache "*à la Clark*

Gable” made him look quite suave. Since it was fully booked at the time, I moved instead to the next-door hotel with the unusual French name “*Le Petit Canard*” or The Tiny Duck. It boasted a reputable restaurant with a well-stocked wine cellar, a live band, dance floor and Karaoke lounge catering to the guests’ every whim.

At the bar, liquor was flowing freely and cheerful patrons socializing amiably. It was at this place that I met Kenji Aoyagi, a photographer and journalist working for the Japanese daily *Asahi Shimbun*. Kenji was just one-year old when the Mekong River Committee was established in 1957. A true native of Japan, he somehow feels a deep and peculiar attachment to the Mekong as well as the ethnic groups that inhabit its banks. For ten years, he sailed down the river starting from its head in the Tibetan High Plateau to the Chinese Province of Yunnan down to the Golden Triangle, also known as the Tri Border Area of Laos, Myanmar, and Thailand. He continued on to Cambodia and Vietnam before reaching the East Sea, his final destination.

Kenji was a live witness to the transformations the Mekong River went through. In October of 1990, he was there when four Chinese cargo ships navigated down the Mekong on their maiden voyage from Yunnan to Vientiane, the capital of Laos.

Two years later, when Myanmar lifted its travel restrictions and opened its borders Kenji seized the occasion to journey down the section of the Mekong that flows through that country. With the eye of an artist, he was able to capture through his camera’s lens the wild and pristine beauty of the natural landscapes. He also succeeded in taking pictures of the daily life of the ethnic minorities living along the riverbanks. Though these people managed to preserve so far their traditional customs and folklore, Kenji had the sad inkling that those pictures would probably rank among the last ones of their type. Before long, the Mekong would suffer irretrievable changes brought about by a combination of factors: rapid post war economic development,

construction of a series of hydroelectric dams, industrialization, urbanization, pollution, and total destruction of the eco-system.

At this same place, I got to know a young French high-school teacher turned reporter named Cartier. As the academic profession no longer appealed to him, Cartier decided to work as a freelance reporter seeking his fortune in the Golden Triangle. Through him, I had an interesting experience: the encounter with a Vietnamese young man or more precisely a Vietnamese American.

Sonny, Vietnamese name Son, was studying at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) under the guidance of the world-renowned professor Noam Chomsky, the author of “Syntactic Structures” and acknowledged father of *transformational-generative grammar*. At the tender age of four, when he could barely speak Vietnamese, Sonny fled with his parents from Vietnam on a boat and resettled in the United States. Like all other immigrant boys, he grew up in the cultural mainstream of his adoptive country and, at seventeen, graduated from high school.

Still undecided on a career, he dreamt of serving as a missionary in the Soviet Union or an East European country. As fate would have it, he enrolled at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem for a one year study program. In Israel he visited the Kibbutzim and during a field trip met Noam Chomsky. That chance encounter helped him decide on his mission in life.

Back in the United States, Sonny turned down offers from Harvard, Stanford, and Yale to enroll at MIT and quickly became an outstanding student of Noam Chomsky. I only knew Chomsky by reputation during the 1960’s as a left-leaning intellectual opposed to the Vietnam War from the very start.

When we met, Sonny was a 23 year-old graduate student working

on his doctoral thesis. Over half a century, Noam Chomsky has continuously made important “breakthroughs” in the field of linguistics. This renowned professor appreciated the high esteem his outstanding student held him in. He secretly wished that his devoted young protégé would one day carry on with his unfinished works. On his part, Sonny was fully conscious of the expectations Mr. Chomsky reserved for him. Consequently, he did not have any intention of relenting on his mentor’s research on the ethno-linguistics of Southeast Asia’s minority groups.

Right after he finished a two-month research with the Bru or Vân Kiều ethnic group in Quảng Trị province, Sonny moved on to his next study group, the minorities living in the Golden Triangle. He was tirelessly searching for linguistic principles that would allow him to draw a “roadmap” from which he could deduce a “Universal Grammar” instrumental in the development of all languages. Sonny did not limit his mentor’s great dream to the MIT campus but planned to extend his work to The Linguistics Institute of Vietnam in order to work out a “Periodic Table of Linguistic Atoms” like the “Periodic Table of the Elements” Mendeleyev drew up in 1869 for chemistry.

Young and self-confident, Sonny trusted that the eagle wings of his famous professor will give him the precious lift he needed to soar high to the stars. Being the scion of a very wealthy family, Sonny nevertheless chose a simple lifestyle. While working in the Golden Triangle, he did not stay in luxury hotels but preferred the companionship of the *‘Western backpackers’* at the guesthouses. He came to the Petit Canard Hotel to look for Cartier, an acclaimed old hand of the region. Sonny relied on the Frenchman to provide him with useful insights before venturing into the remote hamlets.

In Sonny, I saw something quite simple yet very inspiring. I realized that this new friend did not give much thought to the idea of “going back to his root” or “internalizing” the Vietnamese culture. Nevertheless, the research he was pursuing, in a larger sense, indicated in itself an effort

to “go back to the root” of the human race.

A New Face Of The Opium War

From the airplane looking down, it would be difficult to pick out acres upon acres of lush green opium fields nestled amongst the mountain ranges and dense jungles. The harmless sight of convoys of mule or horse driven carts moving busily on the beaten paths in the jungles or mountains belies the fact that they are laden with raw opium on their way to the processing “labs” or with heroin bags destined for worldwide distribution. Oftentimes, those convoys worth in the millions of US Dollars move under the protection of fighters armed to the teeth. Deadly clashes are daily occurrences as local drug lords ruthlessly compete for predominance or influence.

Watching the Mekong leisurely snaking its way through the Golden Triangle, it’s difficult to say whether this deadly business is a boon or a bane to the region. This river is a source of life to both the land and its inhabitants but at the same time its water is dyed red with the blood of corpses floating down its current.

In March, 1992, the ministers from Laos, Myanmar, and Thailand met in Bangkok to sign an agreement to eradicate the cultivation and distribution of narcotics in the Golden Triangle. As a matter of fact, this agreement is not worth the paper it is printed on. During the 1980’s, it was estimated that 80% of the heroin consumed in the United States came from Southeast Asia. However, during that same period cocaine was more popular with the American users. The situation changed drastically in the following decade as heroin became the drug of choice. Consequently, countries in Latin and South America saw a rapid expansion in the areas used for the growing of opium plants.

In spite of the promise by the three countries in the Golden Triangle to coordinate their drug-fighting efforts, the U.S. Drug Enforcement

Agency still has its doubts. Especially in the case of Myanmar that is ruled by an authoritarian government. Drugs are used as a commodity to bring in the needed foreign exchange to revive a totally collapsed economy as well as to line the pockets of greedy generals. Periodically there would be public events showcasing piles of heroin bags being burnt or announcements of drug “labs” being destroyed in the Golden Triangle. But all this is mere “window dressing” for the benefits of foreign TV cameras.

In the particular case of Thailand, it is common knowledge that high government officials and military officers one way or another are involved in the drug traffic. This explains why Khun Sa, the el capo of the drug lords, is still at large because he is a living witness who can implicate the top Thai generals.

The ranks of drug addicts in the border towns and cities such as Ruili on the China-Myanmar border are soaring at a frightening rate. One does not need to look far for an explanation when a “bag” of heroin costs less than a bottle of beer and can be bought openly from Honda-for-hire drivers. Prostitution and the sharing of HIV infected needles have brought the number of HIV infected victims in this country on a par with that of Thailand.

From border towns, heroin is moved to many places including Hong Kong, a distribution hub for America, Europe, and Australia. A considerable quantity of heroin from the Golden Triangle is also transported to Bangkok via Chiang Mai before being smuggled into Southern Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore and all other points of the globe. The severe penalty of death by hanging Singapore imposes on drug smugglers does not deter them from using that island nation as a transit port for drug smuggling.

Finally, we cannot leave Vietnam out of the picture. A significant quantity of drugs transiting from the Golden Triangle to other

destinations via this country is also being used by the local population leaving in its trail a growing number of young addicts. The sharing of dirty epidermal needles causes widespread HIV, and hepatitis type B or C infections in Hanoi, Saigon and other parts of the country. High officials in the government and security apparatus are assuredly connected to this illicit business. As viewed by our Thai guide Samsenthai, the Mekong Civilization along with drugs and narcotics have extended their dreadful tentacles over the entire Red River Delta.

In the past, the American government extended almost US\$ 20 million of aid per year to Myanmar to fund that country's opium eradication efforts. However, starting in 1988, owing to the Burmese military junta's suppression of the democratic movements this money was no longer forthcoming. Since then, the production of opium registered a rapid surge upward.

Over the years, by all counts, the most notorious drug lord in the Golden Triangle is Chang Chi Fu also known as Khun Sa. This extremely rich and powerful capo likes to call himself the "narcotics king" or perhaps with a touch of black humor "freedom fighter". He commanded a 15,000 strong private militia and controlled the entire Northeast of Myanmar.

In January of 1996, probably jaded and tired of running from the law, this "worn out warrior" decided to surrender to the authorities and took the new Burmese name "U Htet Aung". The country's military leaders moved him to Rangoon where he was allowed to lead an opulent and uneventful life in the different villas he owned along a lake in Rangoon's suburb under their tight protection.

His headquarter in the town of Ho Mong in Shan state came under the control of the Burmese army. This formerly prosperous border town is now only a shadow of itself. Its old population of 20,000 dwindled to one fifth of its former size. Khun Sa's militia disbanded and rejoined

the jungle to offer their service to the other drug lords. Deprived of customers, the local prostitutes moved to Thailand where they were much in demand to carry on with their trade. There were plans to turn Khun Sa's "White House" into a museum of the Golden Triangle to attract tourists. It is only a 40-minute train ride from the Thai border.

To fill the void, reputed drug lords like Chao Nyi Lai, a former communist rebel leader with 20,000 armed men under his command, were recruited by the Rangoon government to follow in Khun Sa's footsteps.

After a bout of drinking sake with Kenji the previous night I woke up late the next morning. Outside everything was still wrapped in a thick blanket of fog peculiar to the Golden Triangle. The Mekong whose water was colored with the dark red color of alluvia flowed quietly through this place.

In the 1980's, the Thai monarch Adubjadej Bhumibol frequently visited the farmers and, for a short while, was able to encourage them to plant substitute crops like corn, cassava, tea or coffee instead of opium. Unfortunately, the situation did not last very long considering the price opium commanded could be as high as that of gold while the revenues derived from agricultural crops were in no way comparable. In addition, crop cultivation is quite labor intensive and the thin layer of soil covering the hillsides at the elevation of over 1,000 meters has a high level of alkali lacking in nutrients. Only opium plants can grow naturally in this type of environment.

Thailand may claim much credit for its efforts to interdict the drug traffic emanating from the Golden Triangle but my new friend, the French reporter, did not have any difficulties locating a lush field of opium plants laden with poppies in the northernmost part of Thailand. After processing, the latex collected from those pretty and harmless looking poppies will be turned into a white powder known as heroin. This substance possesses

euphoric and addictive properties that remain the root cause of so many tragedies as well as deaths in the streets of America.

Our Thai guide named Samsenthai is a native of the Isan High Plateau. He still has family ties in Laos and for him home is on either side of the Mekong. This well read and cultured gentleman can speak Vietnamese, English and a sprinkling of French. He never tires of talking about the Mekong, the “long khong” or love songs, and the numerous folk tales pertaining to the inhabitants on both banks of that brown river so alive with love and joy.

He observed matter-of-factly:

– Opium is a part of the culture of not only Thailand but also of the entire Greater Mekong Subregion, Messieurs the reporters.

In Samsenthai’ eyes, I am also a reporter. In all sincerity he went on:

– If you have never smoked it before, you will never be able to understand us!

No matter how innocuous Samsethai’s idea might appear it caught me totally off guards. I am very eager to learn about the culture of the Mekong, however, the prospect of trying out opium is not something I relish. On the other hand, I had my own take about this. I believe a doctor needs not come down with all the illnesses imaginable before he becomes qualified to treat his patients. By the same token, the taking of heroin is not *a sine qua non* requirement for him to understand how horrific are the grips drugs hold over its victims. Thanks to my own research and the materials Dr. Duy gave me, I felt I am somewhat informed about the drug issue before I set foot in the Golden Triangle.

The presence of the acetyl groups in opiates like heroin allows its molecules to penetrate the blood and brain membranes at a much faster

rate than morphine. There are different ways to administer heroin: intravenous injection, skin-popping, snorting, or smoking. Intravenous injection has the advantage of producing the fastest and most intense rush followed by many hours of euphoric sensations characterized by constricted pupils and a sense of omnipotence allowing the user to feel he is in full possession of the pleasures of life.

Cartier, the French reporter, did not feel abashed about his vast knowledge of the various aspects of the Mekong's culture. The enthusiasm he displayed while talking about them helped me understand why Cartier had relinquished the austere lifestyle of a teacher and chose to live at this place... What Samsenthai just said is not far from the truth. The cultivation of opium poppies, scientific name: *Papaver Somniferum*, is not limited to the Golden Triangle. On the contrary, it extends to the highlands of Monsoon Continental Asia.

Morphine, codeine, and papaverine are extracted from the opium plant for pharmaceutical use. In turn, morphine is processed to produce heroin or diacetylmorphine for sale to drug addicts. Botanist and Professor Phạm Hoàng Hộ omitted to mention that the opium plants are grown in many regions for decorative purposes because its flower is quite attractive looking and comes in many colors like white, pink or purple.

It is such an irony and injustice that the ethnic minorities of the Golden Triangle are being blamed for the use of the drug that is so closely associated with social ills in our recent past. Actually, such an unjustified condemnation is the product of our short memory and ignorance of history. The fact remains that throughout the era of colonialism it was the Europeans who cultivated opium and profited the most from it.

With the British

It began early on during queen Victoria's reign when her government resorted to gunboat diplomacy to force the Chinese to open their door for

the opium trade. This policy culminated in the Opium War (1839-1842) pitching the Chinese against the Eight-Nation Alliance ending with the Treaty of Nanking signed between the parties on a British battleship. In this treaty the Qing court was forced to cede the island of Hong Kong to the British, recognize the “most favored nation” status of England and grant the Western countries access to its market for uncontrolled trade including the right to export opium to China. To the present day, this episode was considered a “national humiliation” by the Chinese.

With the French

When Indochina was under their rule, the French established the Opium Monopoly in 1899 to control all opium trade in their colony. Thousands of opium dens were opened for business causing widespread addiction among the local population. Subsequently, internal consumption in Indochina, particularly in Vietnam, required tons of opium to be imported from the Middle East like Turkey and Iran. Opium accounted for a significant source of revenue the French derived from their colony. In addition, it was also an effective weapon the French Colonialists intentionally used to dampen down the fighting spirit of the Vietnamese youth and neutralize the fervor for independence of the Vietnamese population as a whole. In Post-Indochina War, the Golden Triangle became the main supply source of opium not only for Indochina but for the whole world with Vietnam being a major transit point.

With the Americans

When Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek fled to the island of Taiwan in 1949, remnants of the 93rd Division of the Fifth Army of the Chinese nationalist Kuomintang [KMT] under the command of General Tuan Shi-wen withdrew to the South and occupied a large region of northern Myanmar. Those soldiers turned renegades and went on a rampage pillaging and pilfering from the Burmese. Else, they used war bonds with the printed inscription “To be paid by the United States of

America” to make purchases. It did not take long before they went into the cultivation and production of drugs. Considered as the “bulwark against communism” and “freedom fighters” by the Americans, they operated under the protection of the CIA and the Thai police chiefs.

In 1952, more than 10,000 soldiers under General Tuan Shi-wen still occupied a large stretch of Northern Myanmar that included the states of Shan, Kayah, Kachin and all the way to Salween. They also entertained plans to enter into alliance with the Karen separatists to fight the Rangoon government. Consequently, the Burmese Armed Forces had their hands full fighting several fronts at the same time: eliminating the Karen movement, defeating the Communist insurgency, and carrying out large scale operations to suppress Tuan Shi-wen’s forces.

At the end, the Burmese leaders had to bring the issue before the United Nations Security Council in 1953. After long and arduous negotiations, only about 6,000 Kuomintang troops were withdrawn to Taiwan while the rest, now a stateless army, still illegally occupied a region of Northern Myanmar. They went on with their cultivation of and traffic in drugs especially in the Golden Triangle. This state of affairs caused much headache and distress to the Burmese government that found itself powerless to find a way out of its predicament.

During the Vietnam War, the situation grew even more complicated. In order to finance its clandestine war in Laos, with the collaboration of general Vang Pao’s 30,000 Hmong fighters, the CIA resorted to the fleet of airplanes owned by Air America to transport the illegal drugs.

The Golden Triangle is a boundless region adorned with majestic mountains and mysterious jungles. The chilly days here are marked by winds howling in the treetops and dark clouds drifting up from deep valleys. Living amidst such an uninviting environment, perhaps the only warmth one can find is from the heat of a burning stove and the

sole enjoyment is to lie by the flickering light of an oil lamp with an opium pipe ready to be smoked. A long draw is enough to transport the smoker to a dreamlike state of bliss and comfort delivering him from the ordinary vicissitudes of human existence.

In their austere and bleak life, those highland folks are able to derive some pleasure from smoking opium rolled from the latex of a plant they grow in their backyards without causing any harms to anybody. Would it then be justified for us, those who live in the totally different environment of the low lands, to use our own moral standards to condemn their habit? Samsenthai was fully within his right to defend the cultural aspects of opium smoking prevalent among the minorities in the highlands.

Do we really render ethnic minorities happier by eradicating their culture, regardless whether that culture is “good” or “bad”? Are we justified in doing so not under the pretext of “assimilation” but with the more acceptable banner of “acculturation”? Or do we, by our senseless deeds, push the minorities to form additional militant FULRO movements (a French acronym meaning the United Front for the Struggle of the Oppressed Races) as had happened in South Vietnam during the 1960’s.

Looking at the culture of a particular ethnic group, how much of it could be considered proper to the group and how much of it common to the human race?

The preservation of cultural heritage has become a hot topic for discussion that is often poisoned by belligerent pronouncements and the callousness of the interested parties that do not show any hesitation to throw stones at the cultural glass houses they profess to care for.

Y2K Culture of Peace Not War

The United Nations chose 2000 as “The Year of the Culture of Peace”

for our planet. Did it do so to prepare humankind to leave behind its “Culture of War” and enter the threshold of a new millennium permeated with a “Culture of Peace”? This process demands a fundamental change in the way of thinking and behavior of every one of us vis-a-vis the world. This would imply that:

- Active nonviolence will replace violence as a force for social change
- Creative competition and cooperation will replace zero sum rivalry
- Culture and creativity must be looked upon as the source of peace, mutual respect and understanding
- Finally, transparency and openness will replace cover-ups and secrecy. Likewise, communication and unity of purpose will take the place of repression within and without all social structures.

The gap separating dreams from reality in the first decade of the 21st century is still being measured in units of light years.

Chiang Sean, the ancient capital of Thailand in the 14th century, is now an extremely attractive center for tourists who come in search of adventures in the Golden Triangle. Shocking commercialization can be seen in young girls who flock to the place from the lowlands. Colorfully attired in the traditional costumes of tribal peoples, they stood cheerfully next to signboards advertising: “Take a picture with hill tribe girls: one person 10 bahts” (less than 40 cents in US dollar). In fierce competition with the American company Kodak, Fuji operates onsite stores to develop films for its customers.

To the ethnic minorities of Southeast Asia, political frontiers as demarcated on maps do not mean a thing. On their sturdy bare feet, they thread on jungle trails and freely interact with each other across international borders. As the Cultural Revolution in China (1966-1976) was on full swing, they easily escaped from the Red Guards by crossing

China's southern borders into the neighboring countries.

Differences in speech and costumes do not preclude the fact that, as a group, they all live in abject poverty and in a semi-primitive state. Their dilapidated villages have not changed much through the ages. Like the 30 ethnic minorities in the highlands of Central Vietnam, they are being exploited and discriminated against by the people living in the lowlands who called them with the disparaging name "Mọi" or primitive.

The few tribes that are still living in this quasi pristine wilderness have been the subjects of numerous doctoral theses or voluminous books on anthropology, linguistics, and ecology. The place also offers a remarkably friendly refuge for those who feel estranged or disillusioned with Western Culture. They come here to leave behind the materialism of an acquisitive society in search of a spiritual conversion and live in isolation with the magnificent mountains, untouched nature, and in communion with the universe...

Unfortunately, disenchantment awaits them at the end of the road as they gradually realize that the peace of mind they are after is not real: the exoticism they yearn for is deceptive, the haven they cherish elusive. The only thing they find is a hot and humid climate plagued with the lethal dangers of acute malaria. Meanwhile, the rainforests keep on shrinking with the passing days as a result of constant logging and the cherished stillness of the air is sporadically broken by gunfights between hired guns escorting the opium caravans.

Cartier, the French reporter, who accompanied me ventured a rather interesting observation:

– Have you noticed this thing? No matter how poor the local hill peoples are, they all share a common trait: they pay a whole lot of attention to adorn their upper bodies with jewelry and flowers while

showing a seemingly complete disregard to the lower part walking around shoeless with their feet covered with dirt and mud.

He also showed a profound knowledge of the customs and traditions of the inhabitants living along the Mekong's current. For example, he noted that the independent status of the women in the basin manifests itself most profoundly in their sexual habits. In his view, sex as traditionally practiced in Africa, is exclusively geared for the gratification of the male of the species. For that reason, the clitoris of the female's sexual organ is removed to eliminate any sensation of pleasure on the part of the women. The situation is completely the opposite in Southeast Asia.

In his book "Southeast Asia in the Age of Commerce 1450-1680" Anthony Reid wrote that the women of Southeast Asia i.e. Thailand, Myanmar... have shown a very assertive role in demanding sexual satisfaction from their male partners. That is why, the men had to undergo painful operations to implant their penises with ivory pieces; balls made of either gold for the wealthy or lead for the poor or even small bells emitting melodic sounds. All this for the pleasure of their "fair sex" partners!

This prominent role displayed by the women is also pronounced with the ethnic minorities of the highlands in Central Vietnam. It is them who choose the men they will marry. Some see in those customs the surviving vestiges of a long gone matriarchal society.

Though he did not expressly say so, Cartier, the French newsman, is no stranger to the aggravations and gratifications of men living in the Mekong Basin.

Tourists converge on this place. Before they arrive, depending on their personal backgrounds, they nourish different ideas about the Golden Triangle. Their daily schedule is quite laid-back: playing golf

in the morning and trying their luck at the casinos as evening falls. If they so desire, they can go on tours on the backs of domesticated elephants.

Again, it was Cartier who took me on a visit to an island located in the middle of the Mekong's current - on the Burmese side. This site was set aside for the development of a "Mini-Las Vegas" in a project that included the construction of a top-notch 300-room luxury hotel. This complex was fittingly given the name: "Golden Triangle Paradise Resort". With a touch of disdain and irony in his voice Cartier commented:

– Of course, the revenue from its operation will be enormous. Not all of it will end up in the pockets of the Burmese generals. Parts of the money will go to the defense budget for the purchase of airplanes and tanks from China. Some of it will be used to pay for prisons to detain a growing number of Mrs. Aung San Suu Kyi's followers. In their jail cells, they can shout democratic slogans until their throats go coarse!

The name "Aung San Suu Kyi" is synonymous to the future of democracy in Myanmar. This laureate of the 1991 Nobel Peace Prize was chosen with this cited reason: "Suu Kyi's struggle is one of the most extraordinary examples of civil courage in Asia in recent decades. She has become an important symbol in the struggle against oppression." One of her most famous speeches was named "Freedom From Fear" that was first released for publication on the occasion of her being awarded the 1990 Sakharov Prize for Freedom of Thought by the European Parliament. The award ceremony took place in her absence in Strasbourg on July 10, 1991. Two years later, she also won the Jawaharlal Nehru Award for International Understanding. In addition, the Government of Canada made her an honorary citizen of that country in 2007.

She was born to Mr. Aung San, the architect of Burma's independence from the British in 1945. He was also reputed for championing a

political vision that extended far beyond Myanmar's national borders. While leading the fight for his country's independence, Aung San also entertained the idea of uniting the Southeast Asian nations into a common entity to deal with the Western powers and the three other Asian giants: China, Japan, and India. His dream remained unfulfilled when he was assassinated in 1947. In fact, Mrs. Suu Kyi has scant memory of her father since she was only two years old at the time of his death.

Aung San Suu Kyi led the struggle in the mold of Mahatma Gandhi. She moved to India in 1960 when her mother was appointed ambassador to that country. In the ensuing years she studied philosophy, politics, and economics at Oxford before moving to work with the United Nations in New York.

In 1972, she tied the knot with an English national, Mr. Michael Aris, an expert on Tibet. They married with the understanding that whenever the propitious time comes she will be free to return to Myanmar. She accompanied her husband to Bhutan to do research on Tibet then moved to Great Britain to continue graduate works at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS).

In 1988, she bid farewell to her husband and two children to care for her mother who fell seriously ill in Myanmar. The country, at the time, was plunged in countless street demonstrations and widespread popular unrest. Aung San Suu Kyi decided to take part in her homeland's political life and became one of the founders of the National League for Democracy (NLD). On the steps of Shwedagon temple, the country's most ancient temple dating back to the birth of Myanmar, she read her first political speech in front of more than half a million men audience. That single act made her the most well-known personality in the nation. She declared: "being my father's daughter, I cannot remain indifferent to what is unfolding before my eyes."

That frail lady commands the public appeal of a movie star. She exhibited extraordinary courage in the face of brutal force and in the process was transformed into an idol of her people. Her prestigious name and popularity helped the NLD opposition party gained 59% of the votes, guaranteeing it 80% of the seats in the national parliament in the 1990 general election.

In complete disregard of the election results, the military government of the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) refused to hand over the rein of power to the newly elected candidates. They threw all of them in jail instead. Suu Kyi was put under house arrest for six years. Her piano, her only remaining weapon, was also taken away. She was thus deprived of the last means to entertain and communicate with her enthusiastic supporters who camped in front of her residence. It was not until July 1995 that she was released to carry on with her non-violent struggle and hunger strikes.

[CNN, Wed May 2, 2012]: As a pro-democracy campaigner who spent years under house arrest, she traveled to the parliament in the capital, Naypyidaw, to take up the seat she won in elections last month. Myanmar opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi was sworn in Wednesday as a lawmaker for the first time, a key step in the country's recent shift toward democracy after decades of repressive military rule.

Etymologically, the word "Burma" means the first humans to walk the earth. They belong to the Hmong group and laid the first stone for the building of the Shwedagon temple in 558 BC. This site was later considered sacred Buddhist ground not only to the Burmese but to all the Buddhists in the world.

At one time Burma was known as Shwe Pyidaw, the Land of Gold. This is a rich land with abundant natural resources: rare logs, precious stones, oil, the most fertile land in Asia i.e. the Irrawaddy Delta, and an extremely bountiful fishing ground located in the Andaman Gulf.

Such a beautiful land with thousands of glittering golden pagodas is regrettably now a place of poverty where three quarter of the population suffers from illiteracy and food shortage. This situation is worse than when the Burmese lived under British rule.

The country covers an area of 676,552 km² – twice the size of Vietnam or equal to that of France and Great Britain combined. To the north and northwest lie India and Bangladesh, north and northeast China and Laos, east and southeast Thailand. Two main rivers course through the land along a north to south axis as they carve out fertile valleys and plains. The Irrawaddy River originates from the Tibetan High Plateau and snakes its way through mountainous Kachin State in the northeast of Myanmar. After a 2,000 kilometer journey, it divides up into several branches before emptying into the sea. This river served as the main transportation waterway during British rule and was immortalized by Rudyard Kipling in his famous poem “The Road to Mandalay”:

*“Come you back to Mandalay
Where the Flyin’-fishes play.
An’ the dawn comes up like thunder
Outer China’ crost the bay”*

The first English writer to be awarded the Nobel Prize for literature, Kipling was known as a writer of the colonial era. The verse “East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet” from his “The Ballad of East and West” (1892) is still being quoted to the present day.

As told by Burmese legends, Mandalay is the land of the Buddha. It has been said that on his visit to Mandalay Hill, the Buddha and his disciple Ananda had foretold that in the year 2400 of the Buddhist calendar, Mandalay would become a center for Buddhist teachings. For that reason, in 1857, the Burmese king Mindon moved his palaces to

the vicinity of Mandalay Hill on an elbow of the Irrawaddy River.

From that time on, many magnificent Buddhist centers of learning had been built. Those architectural works of art were adorned with precious and intricately carved wood. Mandalay was transformed overnight into a cultural center for Buddhism. It later fell into the hand of the British and was totally destroyed during the Second World War. Nowadays, Mandalay lie in ruins, a poor shadow of its glorious past.

Myanmar, at one time, ranked as one of the most profitable colonies of the British Empire. Kyaw Nyein, deputy prime minister in the late 1950s, described Burma under British colonial rule in these words: “The country presented a picture of a social pyramid which had the millions of the poor, ignorant, exploited Burmese at its base, and a few outsiders British, Indians and Chinese, at its apex.”

Nothing changed for the next fifty years. The same social pyramid persists with tens of millions of destitute, illiterate, and exploited Burmese at the base. The only change takes place at the top. The people are now being exploited more thoroughly by their own fellow countrymen: the small clique of Burmese generals.

In 1989, the military authorities changed the country’s name from Burma to Myanmar with a system of government described as “Socialist, Republic of the Union of Burma”. Any mail sent from overseas bearing the old name “Burma” was returned to the sender with the inscription “Burma, country unknown” stamped on it.

In the past, at the mention of the word “Vietnam” one would immediately think of “war”. When one hears the word “Cambodia”, at once, the specter of the “killing fields” comes to mind. Nowadays, whenever the name “Myanmar” is uttered, instead of that country’s extremely rich culture and art, one is instantly reminded of the faction

named SLOC (State Law and Order Council) that rules by terrorizing the opposition and suppressing the ethnic minorities.

In my opinion, we may soon be crossing into the 21st Century, yet Myanmar is not the only country in the Mekong culture that is caught up in that deplorable situation. Though the nations along that river's current may be going through different forms and stages of economic development, the same social pyramid is ever-present in all of them.

Chiang Khong located about 65 kilometers east of the Golden Triangle, on the right side of the Mekong in Thai territory, is accessible through a badly maintained road. This place is renowned for its annual Pla Beuk Festival. The Pla Beuk is a giant species of catfish native to the Mekong that may grow to 3 meters in length and weigh over 300 kilograms.

Looking across the river, we can see the city of Houei Sai on the Laotian side of the border. Prior to 1954, during colonial time, the French maintained a well-fortified outpost here. They named it Carrot. Only a few rusted mortars are left to attest to its existence in the humid climate of Monsoon Asia.

The city of Houei Sai has two hills. On the first was built a Buddhist pagoda.

On the second, one can find a 50-bed hospital run by Medico, an organization that was founded by the famous Dr. Tom Dooley and headquartered in San Francisco.

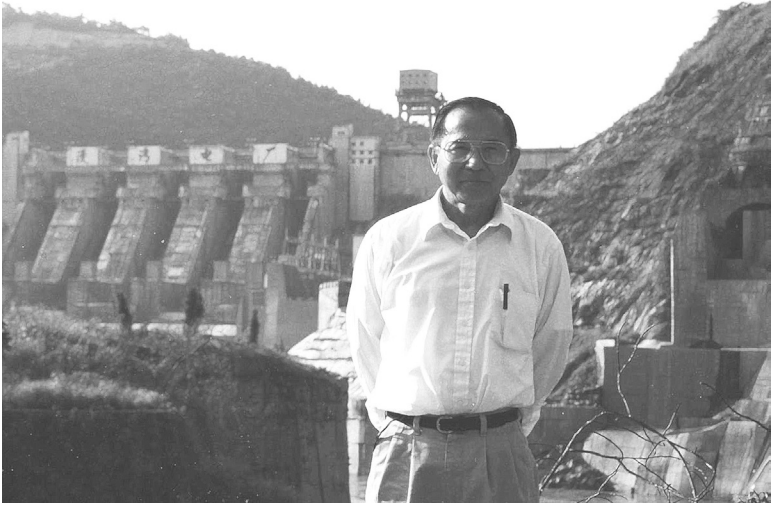
The adventurous at heart can board a motorboat for a ride along the turbulent current of the Mekong flanked on both sides by a dense jungle and, with a bit of luck, will arrive at Chiang Khong.

Either by land or river route, no one can say for sure what would

happen during the trip. At any moment, one could find oneself caught in the middle of an often bloody crossfire between the henchmen of the local drug lords or traffickers.

Coming out of the Golden Triangle, the brown Mekong regains its wild self and rushes full speed east toward the dense jungle of the Laotian High Plateau.

I intended to return to Thailand by taking a detour through Laos that would give me the chance to visit the Nam Ngum Dam and set foot in Luang Prabang, the ancient home of the Laotian royal family, famous for its countless golden pagodas and the benevolent smiles on the Buddha statues. I would also be able to get reacquainted with Vientiane, the capital of the market economy era, before crossing the Mittaphap Friendship Bridge to reach the Thai city of Nong Khai on the right bank of the Mekong.



Manwan Dam 1,500 MW: the first and historic dam in the Mekong Cascades, started in 1984 and completed in 1993



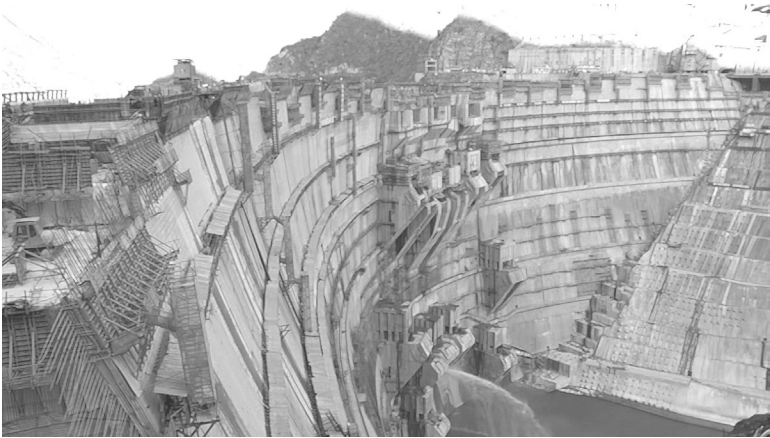
Manwan Gate: construction site of the Manwan hydroelectric Dam, Yunxian District Manwan City.



Dachaosan 1,350 MW: the second mainstream dam in the Mekong Cascades, started in 1996 and completed in 2003 [source: Tom Fawthrop]



Jinghong 1,500 MW: the third mainstream dam in the Mekong Cascades, started in 2003 and completed in 2009 [source: Tom Fawthrop]



Xiaowan Dam 4,200 MW: the fifth and the tallest mainstream dam in the Mekong Cascades, started in 2001 and completed in 2010 [source: Tom Fawthrop]



Nuozhadu 5,850 MW, the sixth and the largest hydroelectric dam on the Mekong River, started in 2006 and completed in 2014. The white letters on the right: “Power comes from water – Ability to contain generates great things” [source: Ying Qiu, International Rivers]

CHAPTER V

FROM THE MAE NAM KHONG THE RUMBLING OF WAVES HOVERS OVER THE PLAIN OF JARS

*“Laos at the time was neither a geographical nor an ethnic
or social entity, but merely a political convenience”*

Bernard Fall

Following our trip to the Golden Triangle with Cartier, the French newsman; and Sonny, my young road companion; I decided to change my itinerary on account of those new friends.

We headed for Xieng Khouang and visited the Plains of Jars that in my view represents another facet of the Mekong’s culture. From there, Sonny parted company with our group to venture into the Hmong and Khmu hamlets and resume his linguistic research. For me, it’s always a new experience every time I come to the Mekong. On each trip, I have the opportunity to discover new flavors, new sceneries and new acquaintances I once lightheartedly called “The odd characters of the Mekong”.

I often wonder how many more trips, how much more time would

be required of me before I can rest reassured I have come to know my river well. Will it take my entire life to do so? Even though the Mekong is slowly coursing toward her demise, she still brings life-giving water to the Southeast Asian region without revealing any of her secrets. How much longer can she carry on like that? One would need to have a strong dose of optimism and certain audacity to come up with an answer to that question. Could it be that it had been written in the stars that my destiny is irresistibly intertwined with that river of time, that river of history, or possibly that last river?

During the trip, I came to know Sonny better. This young Vietnamese American's life has all the right elements to make a good novel.

A straight A student, Sonny excelled in the sciences and intended to pursue his studies in mathematics. Out of curiosity, he signed up for a class in Hebrew and discovered to his surprise that he had a gift for that language. So, he ended up graduating with a double major in both disciplines.

A call for adventure led Sonny to submit an essay to apply for a Raoul Wallenberg scholarship that is awarded each year by the Knesset, the Israeli Parliament, to ten foreign students who are fluent in Hebrew and well versed in Jewish history and culture. The essay he wrote in Hebrew related the story of 102 Vietnamese Boat People who were rescued by an Israeli ship and taken to Israel for resettlement. His paper came in first place and earned him a scholarship to study for one year at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. It was here that he met Noam Chomsky marking a defining moment of his life. In addition, this turn of event would eventually lead to the introduction of a new direction for the teaching of linguistics in Vietnam.

An earlier event in his life also produced a "shock" that started Sonny on a search for his "roots". In his freshman year, he worked as a student reporter for his college newspaper and was assigned to take

pictures of the African American students who were demonstrating on the campus against the injustice and discrimination they were facing in a predominantly white society. He was assaulted by a demonstrator who also smashed his camera. That incident helped him realize he is, in fact, an Asian living in America who neither belongs to the white group nor is accepted by the African Americans he sympathizes with. As a result, he embarked on the study of the Vietnamese culture and language he has neglected since the day his parents brought him to America at the young age of four.

While pursuing his graduate studies at MIT, Sonny was greatly astounded by the realization that even though most of the world's languages including Lao, Thai, and Khmer have been studied rather thoroughly, Vietnamese still remained a quasi "unexplored territory".

During a visit to Vietnam, much to his consternation, he was taken aback by the outdated, pre-Chomsky text books and method of teaching used by the local educators who were completely unfamiliar with the theories advanced by the great linguist. In Sonny's estimate, in this field, Vietnam lagged three decades behind the Asian Pacific nations of Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia... not to mention the more advanced European or American countries.

The professors in Hanoi knew of Chomsky more as a left-leaning, anti-war American intellectual than a giant in linguistics. The latter paid a visit to the Vietnamese capital while the Vietnam War was in full swing and gave a lecture about linguistics in English.

It was rumored that only Mr. Tạ Quang Bửu, the then Minister of Higher and Secondary Professional Education, was qualified to translate for him. A native of Nghệ An Province, Tạ Quang Bửu was a bigwig in the Vietnamese scouts organization. At the Vinh High School he had a classmate named Phạm Biểu Tâm who later served as Dean of the Medical School in Saigon. Mr. Bửu was best remembered

as the Minister of Defense in the Viet Minh government. In 1954 he and Colonel Hà Văn Lôu, North Vietnam's liaison to the International Control Commission (ICC), attended the Geneva Conference and sought the support of the French ambassador Delteil "to partition Vietnam in two" with this famous pronouncement: "We need a capital Hanoi and a port Haiphong". His wish became reality when the 17th parallel was chosen as the demarcation between North and South Vietnam. Tạ Quốc Bửu passed away in 1986 of dementia!

Being of a nonjudgmental and open minded nature, Sonny was nevertheless stricken with amazement during his first trip to Vietnam. In his eyes, the Vietnamese language could be compared to a hidden treasure waiting to be discovered. This fact motivated him to apply the most up-to-date knowledge and methodology he learned at MIT in his study of the Vietnamese language. He found in the Vietnamese students whose "brain power" only needed the right opportunity to blossom his most valuable collaborators. Hopefully, their work would eventually validate Chomsky's "transformational/generative theories".

Recently, in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, Sonny made a well-received presentation on an innovative approach to the study of Vietnamese at the International Conference on Linguistics in Southeast Asia. It was hailed by the linguists of the region as an important step in the discovery of the universal traits in the Vietnamese language.

Auberge de la Plaine des Jarres

The day was already drawing to a close by the time we arrived in Phonsavan, or "hills of paradise". It is the new capital of Xieng Khouang Province. We rented a car and drove to the inn with the French name "Auberge de la Plaine des Jarres". Thanks to the prior recommendations from Cartier we were assigned a charming wood bungalow at a discounted rate.

Our bungalow was one of the 16 built on the hillside overlooking the city. A burning fireplace graced the living room. The window of the immaculately clean bathroom, with hot running water, offered a view of a garden planted with red roses, purple petunias, and scarlet geraniums.

After having finalized the arrangements with Sodetour Agency for a visit to the Plains of Jars the next day, it was time for us to venture on a culinary expedition. The hospitable French manager treated us to a feast of traditional Lao dishes instead of the French specialties listed on the restaurant menu. Son took a special liking to the papaya salad named “*Tẳm Xum*”. We also enjoyed the “*Khậu Lám*” or compressed sticky rice mixed with coconut milk and grilled inside a bamboo stick. Last but not least the rice noodle soup, Khao Poun, was something we were not about to forget any time soon. To my taste buds, Lao food shared some similarities with Thai cuisine.

To come to Xieng Khouang is to revisit a past drenched in tragedies and vicissitudes. It is the historical vestiges found in the Plains of Jars that give this region its notoriety. On the other hand, visitors to the place were also reminded of the appalling devastations wrought by the Vietnam War so much so that Western newsmen had christened the place “the Armageddon of the Orient”. Conversant with the Christian Bible, Sonny was immediately reminded of the verses in the Book of Revelation that say: “*And he gathered them together into a place called in Hebrew tongue Armageddon*” (Revelation: 16:16).

The Laotian name for the Plain of Jars is “Thong Hai Hin”. However, the place is better known by its French name “Plaine des Jarres” (PDJ). Located 10 km southeast of the new city of Phonsavan, this high plateau covers an area of 1,000 km² and stands at an average altitude of 1,000 meters. The name “Plain of Jars” is an accurate depiction of a vast field littered with hundreds of empty ancient stone jars. About 40 km south of there, past Muong Khoune, there are two more fields with 70 to 80

stone jars scattered around on each. The jars measure from 1 to 2.5 m in height and about 1 m in diameter and are unusually heavy. To this day, their origin and use still pose a “challenging” enigma to archeologists who found themselves at a loss to proffer a definitive answer to that puzzle.

A folktale of the Xieng Khouang people has it that the soldiers of King Khoon Chuong in the south of China made those jars to produce a variety of rice wine named Lao-lao to celebrate their victory over the forces of Chao Angka.

Another equally intriguing theory claims that those are stone burial vessels that date back to 2,000 years prior to the creation of modern Laos. From their sizes, one can tell the social standings of the occupants based on the assumption that the larger jars were reserved for the noble class while the smaller ones for the common people. The proponents of that theory point to a nearby quarry they claim provided the stone used in the making of the jars and a cave with smoke holes at the top that supposedly served as a crematory. But on further examination, this hypothesis cannot stand on its feet since the type of stone used to make the jars does not match with that found at the quarry.

The above conclusion gives birth to another hypothesis purporting that the jars were made at a different location then transported to the Plain of Jars. That in turn leads to another perplexing question: considering that each of those jars weighs as much as three small trucks then how could hundreds of them be moved to the location using the primitive means of transportation of the time? When they were found, some of the jars still had their lids intact and their outer wall’s carvings showed groups of dancers with their faces looking at a nearby cave. The interesting thing is that the bronze and porcelain objects found inside those jars indicated that they came from a rather advanced civilization that was in no way related to the ancient civilization of Southeast Asia.

Nowadays, the Plains of Jars has gone through many transformations. The number of jars left there is steadily dwindling due to theft. Some of them were airlifted by helicopters to the Revolutionary Museum in the capital of Vientiane for display.

Nevertheless, the most horrendous change the Plain went through was the moon-like landscape dotted with countless craters left behind by the B52s carpet bombings that lasted for five consecutive years at the height of the Vietnam War. No wonder this place is known as the per capita most heavily bombed area in the world. Throughout that time, Laos was treated as a “*collateral damage*” in an undeclared war.

The amazing thing is that in spite of the incessant downpour of bombs, the stone jars still lie at their place as unperturbed and impassible witnesses to the countless civilizations that came and went along the banks of the Mekong over the last two millenniums. Peering into the inside of the moss covered jars that weathered the passing of time, one can only see “*black holes*” swaying back and forth to the explosions of bombs and shells and to the accompaniment of roaring waves and howling winds emanating from the Mekong.

Looking at a map, if Luang Prabang and Vientiane formed the base of a triangle then Xieng Khouang would be its summit pointing eastward to the nearby border with Vietnam at the same latitude where the province of Nghệ An can be found. The Plains of Jars, that tiny piece of land, once served as a bloody battlefield where fighters from the two opposing sides were pitched against each other. On one side the forces of the Royal Lao Army and the CIA supported Hmong irregulars led by general Vang Pao and on the other the Pathet Lao but mostly the North Vietnamese communists bent on protecting the Western front of Vietnam and the Ho Chi Minh trail to the south.

The Plains of Jars was an important strategic location that became a bone of contention among the feuding parties who took turn in

controlling it: During the Dry Season it fell into the hands of the Royal Lao Army or more precisely the Hmong guerilla fighters. At the onset of the Rainy Season it reverted to the control of the Pathet Lao or actually the North Vietnamese communists.

While news of the fighting in Vietnam were shown nightly on the TV screens in the living rooms of American families, the hostilities that were tearing Laos, the next door neighbor, apart were totally kept under wraps and went unnoticed by the general public.

Not far from the Plains of Jars, is located the town of Long Tieng where the CIA chose to build a base named “*20-Alternate*” to serve as its command post. The word “Alternate” conveys the notion of something secondary or unimportant and was deliberately picked to deflect the curiosity of the news media. The airstrip at 20-Alternate was nowhere to be found on the maps. Yet, planes of all types busily landed at or took off from it at all times of the day prompting newsman James Parker to remark that this airstrip could be busier than the O’Hare International Airport in Chicago.

Meantime, to the north of the Plains of Jars, in the reinforced caves of Sam Neua, comrade Kaysone Phomvihane, the leader of the Pathet Lao, shared his headquarter with the North Vietnamese communists. This Lao leader born to a Vietnamese father and Laotian mother was rumored to speak better Vietnamese than Lao.

Over the fence

The code name Ravens refers to a group of American anti-guerilla specialists operating in Laos. They were trained by the CIA-SGU (Special Guerilla Unit) to interdict the North Vietnamese infiltration into the Plains of Jars and their movements along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Under the cover of a civilian airline company named Air America, American pilots flew STOL (Short Take Off and Landing) aircrafts that

can operate on extremely rudimentary and short airstrips (a little over 30 m long) or even tortuous ones peculiar to the topography of Laos' mountainous region.

During a period of about 10 years (1966-1975), the Ravens took part in particularly ferocious firefights which exacted a very high toll in human lives. In return, they were accorded the special privileges of mercenaries. They were allowed to dress casually in polo shirts and blue jeans or don cowboy hats if they so wished while on duty. As long as they felt up to it, they could fly anytime, day or night. Some even racked up 200 flight hours a month and commanded generous basic pays ranging from US\$ 50,000 to US\$ 100,000 plus overtime. Regardless of their backgrounds, they were required to carry identifications showing they were civilian employees of USAID. The brain that directed this secret war was located at a compound within an airbase in Udon Thani, northeastern Thailand. The moment the airmen entered Laos' airspace they would radio back to their base that they had gone "over the fence". The country name of Laos was taboo – never to be mentioned.

The brutality of the war was not only limited to the ground but was extended to the air: each time the Royal Lao Army or Vang Pao's fighters faced imminent defeat at the hand of their opponents, the US Air Force was called in to ruthlessly "blow them all to hell" thus robbing their enemies of any chance of victory.

In mid-February of 1970, for the first time, the American President Richard Nixon ordered B52 bombers of the American Strategic Air Command to carpet bomb the Plains of Jars. Each of those air fortresses could release hundreds of 50lb bombs from an altitude of 10,000 meters. They flew noiselessly and the only "footprints" of their passage were the terrifying "earthquakes" caused by the explosions of the bombs they dropped. At the end of the war, more than half a million tons of bombs rained down on the Plains of Jars alone. The unused bombs the

pilots had to unload over the “free fire zones” on their return trips from bombing missions over North Vietnam to ensure safe landing were not included in that figure.

It would be remiss to omit the tens of thousands of Cluster Bomb Units (CBU) dropped on Xieng Khouang in the 1960’s and 1970’s. Each of those “mother bombs” contained 150 bomblets known to the Laotians and Vietnamese as “bom bi” that had the destructive power of an anti-personnel mine. After the cessation of hostilities, those “angels of death” still lied undetected in bushes or among the grasses waiting for the unlucky poor souls to step on them to do their nefarious work. To this day, death and maiming are still claiming their victims among the innocent children and civilians of Laos.

It soon became evident to their foes that when the Keo Đèng, the name the Laotians gave to the Vietcong, were willing to accept any price to move seven divisions of North Vietnamese troops and war materials along the Ho Chi Minh Trail into South Vietnam then no number of “earthquakes” resulting from “carpet bombings” could prevent them from doing so.

The war created about 600,000 refugees equivalent to one quarter of Laos’ entire population. And the inhabitants of Xieng Khuoang only represented a small portion of that number. It is the ethnic minorities Hmong, Lisu, Khmu, Akha, and Yao that made up the lion’s share of this refugee group. They were forced to flee from their hamlets to seek safe haven in more secure areas. Their lot was not much better than that of their brethren, the Montagnards, in the central highlands of Vietnam. Should they decide to stay in communist-controlled territory they would be treated as enemies and be indiscriminately bombed by the Royal Lao pilots or more precisely the U.S. Air Force. Survivors were used as forced labor to carry food and weapons along the Ho Chi Minh Trail for the North Vietnamese. Their harvests, if any, would be confiscated.

Those tribesmen who were accustomed to live in mountainous regions were temporarily relocated to the more secured lowlands along the banks of the Mae Nam Khong, the Lao-Thai name for the Mekong, or its tributaries. The only practical way to supply their inaccessible resettlements with food was by airdrops. The Hmong kids used to call rice bags dropped from the airplanes “*rice that falls from heaven*”.

Looking at the aerial photographs of the war years, the cratered landscape of the Plains of Jars reminded us of the no man’s lands or more accurately the moonscape. The desolate place looked like a patchwork of stone jars lying next to huge bomb craters measuring 15 m wide and 7 m deep on the average. Nowadays, the Plains is covered by a lush green canopy and the Lao did not waste any time transforming it into a tourism spot to draw money from the tourists.

As we travelled along, I related to Sonny my emotional return visit to Vietnam after an absence of two decades. I was then passing through Đồng Xoài on Route Nationale 14. Years back, the first and bloody battle of the Vietnam War unfolded at that village. However, at the time I was there, the area had regained its verdant vegetation.

In a rundown elementary school named Đồng Xoài I saw a young teacher conducting her class in front of a blackboard holding her infant child in one hand and a chalk in the other. This picture of the country’s abject poverty overwhelmed me profoundly and helped me realize the futility of the last civil war. I resorted to a saying from Goethe to summarize my feelings: “*All theory is grey, but the golden tree of actual life springs ever green.*”

The war had run its course but it left lasting scars on Laos’ land and people. Nouhasone, that 19 year old girl, could have grown into a lovely Lao teenager had she not stepped on a “*bom bi*” that robbed her of a foot, a left eye as well as two of her friends at the tender age of eight. Those huge and ever present bomb craters left by the B52s could

be turned into ponds to raise fish. If left unattended, they would become breeding grounds for mosquitoes, carriers of fatal diseases like acute Dengue hemorrhagic fever or *Falciparum malaria*.

From time immemorial, the Lao are reputed to be a gentle, peace loving people who are greatly influenced by their national religion, the Theravada branch of Buddhism. They placidly accept any calamities that come their way including death inflicted by their fellowmen. They believe in determinism and look at life's ordeals with a serene and merciful mind. Faced with adversities, they console themselves with this wise saying: *"That's alright, happiness is found within your heart"*.

It was not until the mid-1980's that a group of British - not American - mine experts came to help clear a land littered with unexploded bombs and explosives. Priority was assigned to areas surrounding schools, hospitals, and rice fields. Since this conflict was classified as a "secret war", the big challenge facing this team was the absence of any records showing the types of bombs used and the locations they were dropped. Once the American Government disengaged itself from Vietnam, it simply walked away from the secret war in Laos absolving itself of any responsibilities for the disaster it visited and is still visiting on the Lao people.

Fortunately, there are several private groups like the Quakers from Philadelphia and Protestant Mennonites from Pennsylvania that followed the dictates of their conscience. They volunteered to come to Laos to rebuild the dilapidated hamlets, detected and destroyed a number of "bomb bi", and donated simple tools for the Lao farmers to start working on their fields.

Being the wealthiest country and the number one nuclear superpower on the planet, the United States, the self-proclaimed leader of the free world, acted in an arrogant, arbitrary and totally irresponsible manner. While more than 100 countries had joined an agreement to ban the

production of anti-personnel mines whose victims are predominantly innocent and helpless civilians, the American Government decided to abstain from signing and stay out of it. It preferred to tell the other nations what to do while reserving for itself complete freedom of action including the right to rain down long-range missiles on others to “teach them a lesson” – especially those that had no ability to retaliate. Clearly, this is an illustration of “the law of the strongest” in total contradiction to the “culture of peace” that is supposed to guide mankind as it enters the approaching third millennium.

Twenty years after the war, hundreds of thousands of lethal “bomb bi” still lie buried in Xieng Khouang’s region. They still accidentally kill and cripple innocent Lao. Sadly enough, on a visit to the Plains of Jars, an American journalist arrogantly made this caustic and cruel remark: *“More people die from malaria, from childbirth, and malnutrition than they do from Unexploded Ordnance”*. Does it mean the value one puts on the life of an individual depends on his place of birth?

At an elevation of 1,000 meters above sea level, winters that last from December to March are biting cold. During the French colonial time, this area was covered with tea and coffee plantations run by their French owners. In the higher surrounding hills, the Hmong cultivated opium poppies for recreational purposes. They also carried on the side a profitable trade in this product with the people of the lowlands. All efforts to persuade the minority tribesmen to abandon nomadic farming in favor of permanent settlements were met with failure because no viable alternatives could be found to guarantee them a stable means of subsistence.

The old city of Xieng Khuoang known for its graceful pagodas was completely razed to the ground by the war. At its place, sprang up a sparsely populated city renamed “Muong Khoune” and Phonsavan was chosen as the new capital of Xieng Khuoang Province. Muong Khoune was hastily constructed during the mid-1970’s and claimed a

population of 25,000 souls. Airline companies and tourism agencies still preferred to refer to it by its old name Xieng Khuoang to attract visitors. Nowadays, the population of Xieng Khuoang Province came to 200,000 consisting mainly of ethnic minorities like the Hmong, Lao and a small number of Khmu. Xieng Khuoang ranked as the poorest province in a country classified as one of the ten poorest in the world.

The only attraction in Phonsavan was a constantly crowded market. Besides a few local products it was overstocked with cheap goods smuggled in from China. This place was also endowed with a Friendship Hospital whose staff of nurses and doctors did not come from the United States but from the Mongolian People's Republic in Central Asia, a developing country poor in resources but rich in good will. To the tourists, Phonsavan was a staging point for visits to the Plains of Jars in the south and the Hmong or Khmu hamlets in the northeast near the borders with Vietnam.

Prior to the arrival of the Westerners, there was an ongoing rivalry for influence between Siam – present time Thailand, and Vietnam in Laos. According to the Vietnamese historian Trần Trọng Kim, in the 8th year of the reign of Minh Mạng (1827), Siamese troops went on the offensive and occupied Vientiane forcing the Lao monarch, Anuvong, to appeal to the Vietnamese court at Huế for help. The Vietnamese emperor Minh Mạng ordered Marshal Phan Văn Thúy to lead a column of elephants and foot soldiers to the rescue. Having lost his land, Anuvong was forced to withdraw to the Vietnamese city of Nghệ An to wait for better days.

One year later, Anuvong requested that the Vietnamese help him return to his country. Emperor Minh Mạng again chose Phan Văn Thúy to head a force of 3,000 soldiers and 24 elephants to take him to Trấn Ninh. From there Anuvong led his men back to Vientiane and suffered a crushing defeat at the hand of the Siamese leaving him with no alternatives but to retreat to Trấn Ninh and ask for reinforcement.

Sensing that he was holding a losing hand in Anuvong, Emperor Minh Mạng ordered his troops to stay put and concentrate on the defense of the borders instead. Anuvong was afterward seized by Chiêu Nội then handed over to the Siamese. Chiêu Nội was the person who previously offered the land of Xieng Khuang to the Vietnamese who renamed it Trấn Ninh. For that act of treason, Chiêu Nội was put under arrest, decapitated and his head shown in public in Trấn Ninh.

Capitalizing on their victory, the Siamese attacked the Vietnamese districts around Quảng Trị. On order from Emperor Minh Mạng, Marshal Phạm Văn Điển commanded three army groups to confront the invaders. Meanwhile, the emperor also sent a letter to the Siamese king accusing him of aggression. Following that, the Siamese commanding general responded in a conciliatory tone and agreed to withdraw his troops. Nevertheless, he continued to harass the Lao city of Vientiane in the north and support the kingdom of Chenla in the south in its opposition to the Huế court.

At the close of the Year of the Snake (Quý Ty - 1883), a Vietnamese official named Lê Văn Khôi rebelled against the imperial court and sought help from Siam. Seizing on this opportunity, the Siamese king sent five powerful columns of sailors and foot soldiers to invade Vietnam. Upon hearing the news, Emperor Minh Mạng put his entire military on alert. The Vietnamese commander Trương Minh Giảng soundly defeated the enemy at the battle on the Cổ Cống River, retook the cities of Hà Tiên and Châu Đốc, then advanced all the way to Phnom Penh.

This Vietnamese offensive forced the Siamese military general Chakri, a member of the present day royal dynasty, to withdraw his force home. Nevertheless, the Vietnamese pressed on, captured the city of Pursat and let the Chenla soldiers garrison it. In retaliation, several Siamese columns attacked the cities of Quảng Trị, Nghệ An, Trấn Ninh aka Xieng Khuang but were repulsed by the Vietnamese. In the subsequent short span of five months, the Siamese invaders were

routed and the Vietnamese succeeded in safeguarding the sovereignty of their land.

The Mandalas Circles

These days, when referring to the countries in Southeast Asia, people - particularly Westerners - tend to think of nations being separated by clear cut demarcation lines.

Only 130 years ago, when Doudart de Lagrée and Francis Garnier led a French expedition team sailing upstream the Mekong they did not have any inkling of what would lie ahead of them or where would they find the source of that river. They visited many kingdoms and autonomous tribes ruled by powerful leaders. In the two short years (1866-1868) of their heroic and tragic journey, Francis Garnier managed to draw the maps of land that remained until then unknown to the outside world. This fact showed that national borders in this part of the world only became clearly outlined in the last part of the 19th or more to the point in the early part of the 20th century. It was at that time that the British and French powers began to define the national boundaries of their colonies in order to mark out their areas of influence and divide up the natural resources.

Rightly or wrongly, certain people purport that there never was such a country as Laos until the French colonialists willed it into existence. In O.W. Wolters' view, the term "*mandalas*" best describes the shapes of the kingdoms in Southeast Asia. Etymologically, "mandala" is an art form used to represent the Hindu cosmos. They consist of painted concentric circles with saints and divinities depicted in the bands that run in between the circles. The psychiatrist Carl Jung resorted to the mandalas as a working tool to help his patients regain the wholeness of their personality.

The same applies when we talk about to the birth of kingdoms.

It began with a predominant tribe that acted as a center of influence overshadowing the lesser ones before it absorbed them totally. Depending on the fortune of this newly formed “kingdom”, its sphere of influence and geographical borders, in other words its “madala of influence”, would expand or contract in a concertina-like fashion.

Understandably, the political borders were never fixed. They changed with the political realities of the time. Instability appeared to be the order of the day as the vanquished tribes constantly were on the lookout for an opportunity to shake off their conquerors and establish kingdoms of their own. Consequently, there was not one Laos but several ones, not one Chenla but several Chenlas with their separate domains.

A case in point is the Khmu tribe. They were the first people who migrated to and resettled in Laos. They were then subdued by the late comers Lao Lu who like them came from south China. In the following centuries, the Lao kings kept them in a state of slavery so wretched that their ancestors left behind this mournful poem:

*“The most stunted trees in the jungle
No doubt, are healthier than the Khmu slaves
The most bitter bamboo shoot in the jungle
For sure, are less bitter than the Khmu slaves”*

The 14th century saw the nascent signs of a mighty kingdom called Lan Xang meaning the land of one million elephants. During this period, King Fa Ngoum annexed Xieng Khouang into his expanding realm. Lan Xang’s population consisted of 69 ethnic minorities coming from three main groups: first were the Lao Lums, the most numerous, who inhabited the valleys. There was also a five time larger number of Lao Lums who lived across the Mekong in the northeast region of Thailand that was arbitrarily handed over to the Thai in 1907 by the French. Second come the Lao Theungs who settled in the highlands.

Finally we have the Lao Soungs who lived in scattered hamlets in the mountains. This kingdom of Lan Xang prospered for about three centuries.

History books frequently mentioned arranged marriages between members of the Lao royal families and Vietnamese princesses. During the reign of the Vietnamese king Lê Thần Tông (1649-1662) a Vietnamese princess was given in marriage to the Laotian king named Souliga Vongsa, the Sun King.

This monarch was reputed to be a gentle and able leader and it was during the more than six decades of his reign that Lan Xang lived through its golden age.

The “*mandala of influence*” of his realm “extended to the Chinese Yunnan Province in the north, the Isan High Plateau of Thailand and the Shan State of Burma in the west, and regions of Vietnam and Cambodia in the southeast. This same monarch has signed a pact with his Vietnamese counterpart to delineate the borders of their two domains and peoples in these amicable terms: “*the land where the people live in stilt houses, eat glutinous rice with their hands belong to Laos. The land where people live in storied houses, eat ordinary rice with chopsticks belong to Vietnam.*”

When this remarkable monarch passed away without a successor, the kingdom fell into decline due to unending upheavals and infightings for land and people. It eventually disintegrated into three parts: Luang Prabang, Vientiane, and Champassak. From that time on, Laos’ more powerful neighbors like Burma, China, Thailand, Vietnam...began to infringe on her territorial integrity and turned her into a buffer zone for their own convenience.

As predicted in the “*mandala model*”, at one time or another, Laos fell into the orbit of either the Siamese or Vietnamese “mandala of

influence”.

Finally, in order to avoid an invasion from Siam and fall victim to each other’s aggression, the kings of Laos and Chenla simultaneously sought the protection of the Vietnamese court at Huế. As a result, the Vietnamese kingdom under Emperor Minh Mạng went through its largest expansion: the city of Trấn Thành of Chenla and the Xam Neua, Trấn Ninh, Cam Môn, and Savanakheth areas in Laos were all annexed to Đại Nam – present day Vietnam.

The 1954 Geneva Accords called for a neutral Laos. The North Vietnamese communists consistently maintained they were in strict compliance with that treaty and disavowed the presence of their soldiers and use of the Hồ Chí Minh Trails in Laos. In reality, they never stopped widening and lengthening that strategic roadway to move troops and war materials to sustain their war efforts in South Vietnam.

Faced with that intractable dilemma, the American President John F. Kennedy sent in teams of Green Berets and CIA operatives to wage a secret war in Laos in order to interdict the North Vietnamese infiltrations and protect the American Lima bases. Those clandestine radar stations in the mountainous regions of Laos were assigned the crucial mission to direct the bombing missions over North Vietnam and make sure that American airplanes do not violate China’s airspace.

With the tacit consent of the neutral Prince Souvana Phouma, the CIA used the commercial airline Air America to fly men and weapons from Thailand into Laos and supposedly opium on the return flights. Like warlords, the CIA officers were given carte blanche to act as they saw fit.

In his box office film “*Apocalypse Now*”, the renowned movie director Francis Coppola succeeded in depicting in a brilliant fashion the senseless violence and chaotic nature of war. The seasoned actor,

Marlon Brando, played the role of a real life colonel named Kurtz alias Tony Poe who doubled as a CIA agent. At first he worked as an aide to general Vang Pao but later went out on his own to recruit tribesmen and fight his own personal war in the northern part of Laos. He was reputed to offer a reward of \$US1.00 for each pair of ear lobe of a dead Vietcong / “trợ thưởng một đôla cho bất cứ ai đem về nộp cặp tai sỏ từ một tên lính cộng sản”.

In his book “The Ravens” (1987), Christopher Robbins noted: “Apparently, there was another war even nastier than the one in Vietnam, and so secret that the location of the country in which it was being fought was classified. The cognoscenti simply referred to it as ‘the Other Theater’. The men who chose to fight in it were hand-picked volunteers, and anyone accepted for a tour seemed to disappear as if from the face of the earth.”

In addition to their mission to train and equip the 9,000 soldiers of the Royal Lao Army, the main focus for the Americans were the Mike Forces (Mobile Strike Force) made up of 30,000 guerilla fighters commanded by general Vang Pao who is celebrated as a legendary figure in the secret war in Laos. The Hmong totally revered and obeyed him. Americans who had a good grasp of the situation claimed that Vang Pao was “*one of the few good generals we have in the entire of Southeast Asia*”. He had the unusual knack of reading the mind of the enemy and maneuvered them to walk right into the traps he had set up for them. Armed with rudimentary weapons, his men only had the ability to carry out “hit-and run” operations that proved to be a thorn on the side of the North Vietnamese soldiers. When the war entered its conventional phase, Vang Pao’s army suffered heavy losses. One after another, the Lima bases fell into the hands of the North Vietnamese forces.

Strangely enough, the war in Laos lacked the active participation of the Royal Lao Army whose gentle, peace loving soldiers showed no eagerness to pick a fight with the enemy. So, it was left for the

Hmong to man the front line and suffer most of the casualties. Midway into the war, almost 100,000 Hmong died from fighting, famine and diseases. This horrendous toll brought about a penury of young recruits forcing the Americans to enlist 12 to 13 year-old boys barely taller than the carbines they were issued. Those “boy soldiers” were oblivious to fear and ferociously rushed into a fight like moths attracted to light earning them the admiration of the US advisers who applauded them as “brave”. Consequently, the Hmong women were left in a tight spot: they found it hard to find a husband. Many of those who were fortunate enough to land one would lose their men to the war soon afterwards.

Matching Hanoi in deviousness, Washington doggedly denied the presence of a single American soldier in Laos. As the fighting raged on the press looked the other way prompting the Lao prince Phouma to call the conflict “*the forgotten war*”.

The US Secretary of State Dean Rusk even ventured this distasteful comparison: “Laos is like a wart on the hog of Vietnam”. Neutral Laos was used by the warring parties as a pawn on the chessboard they were playing. Bernard Fall, the author of “Street Without Joy” ventured this observation: “*Laos at the time was neither a geographical nor an ethnic or social entity, but merely a political convenience.*”

As the leaders in Washington D.C. were losing faith in the “Domino Theory” Nixon flew to Beijing to shake hands with Mao Tze Tung in 1972 and was feted to a 80 course dinner befitting a king. On that occasion, a deal was sealed requiring the Americans to recognize the Chinese communists as China sole representatives. In return, the Chinese washed their hands of the Vietnam War allowing the Americans to walk away from their South Vietnamese allies. Till then, the Republic of Vietnam was hailed as the “Bastion of the Free World” in Southeast Asia. Ironically, only three years later the “Domino Theory” began to take effect, this time arranged “American style” with the successive falls of South Vietnam, Cambodia then Laos.

The Americans also let go of their staunchest allies, the Hmong, and watched them fend for themselves on the “Tragic Mountains” which is also the title of a book authored by Jane Hamilton-Merritt to draw the world’s attention to the unnoticed tragedy of “*ethnic cleansing*” befalling the Hmong. Their fate was no less ignominious than the one unfolding in Bosnia at the time.

For the Hmong irregulars who fought valiantly alongside their American allies, the only escape route for them was to cross into Thailand on the other bank of the Mekong. Their only problem: the Thai cruising patrol boats were on the lookout and at the ready to shoot them down on sight. Those fortunate enough to make it to the Thai side were met with indifference by their former American allies. As a result, the Thai government started a program of forced repatriation of the Hmong back to Laos where they are left at the mercy of their ruthless foes whose avowed policy was to “wipe out” the reactionary Hmong, stooges of American imperialists.

In the meantime, their leader general Vang Pao was leading a listless existence in America. He set up a “shadow” government in exile and coerced the Hmong and Lao to buy “government bonds” he issued. This whole questionable affair was being investigated by the FBI. When referring to the treatment the Hmong received from their American friends, Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan sarcastically commented: “*to be an enemy of the United States can be unpleasant, but to be a friend of the United States can be fatal.*”

The experience the Montagnards in the highlands of Central Vietnam had with their American allies was not any better. Gerald Cannon Hickey, an anthropologist during the Vietnam conflict and author of “Free in the Forest: Ethnohistory of the Vietnamese Central Highlands, 1954-1976” sadly commented years later: “*The Americans (like the French) used the Montagnards and coldly abandoned them.*”

Former vice prime minister of Cambodia Sirik Matak, the instigator of the 1970 coup and close associate of Washington, decided to stay in Cambodia as the Americans evacuated. Along with Long Boret, he refused to flee cowardly at the advance of the Khmer Rouge. The two were subsequently executed by their captors at the Olympic Stadium in the capital city of Phnom Penh.

To this day, the whole episode still remains “Lessons Unlearned”. There are a number of Vietnamese inside and outside the country who are harboring the hope that in the coming 21st century their American Ally will stand by their side to protect them from their traditional foes in the North.

CHAPTER VI

THE DAYS IN SINGAPORE AND THE BATTLEFRONT OF CHIANG RAI

*“Inadvertently a desperate cry
Resounds through the empty space
Like an unexpected tide
Surging with the torrential rainfall”*
Thanh Tâm Tuyền

Tân Sơn Nhứt International Airport

A large crowd packed the international flights section at the airport to see their dear ones off. Most of the passengers were students about to board the planes to attend colleges in the United States. They paid their own way and unlike older generations half a century ago, the idea of studying in France or other European countries no longer appeals to them. Nowadays, America is the number one destination. The “American Dream” reigns supreme. It would be the “choice” dream if any. In a Vietnam under “*Đổi Mới*” or Renovation, the American imperialists, once the vilified enemies are now welcome as trusted allies. The Chinese Vietnamese compradors, once condemned as

“reactionaries”, now become reliable, important business partners.

It was no surprise to Xuân known as Dr. Rice when he ran into comrade Sáu Dân, the head of the Vietnam Food Association (VFA), at the airport. The latter came to send off his fourth child to the University of California at Berkeley. As for his three other children, one was attending college in Canada and the other two in Australia. Like other well-heeled comrades, Sáu Dân could not feel fully “accomplished” if he did not send a child to study in the United States. Do not mind the cost! Looking further down the road, with a child in that country Sáu Dân was also preparing for himself and his family a “safe haven” against the uncertainties that were bound to happen once “*Diễn Biến Hòa Bình*”, the peaceful evolution, instigated by outsiders had run its full course.

The second person Xuân met that day was Chú Quách, the owner of “*Công Ty Bột Ngọt ViVan*”, a company that produced Monosodium Glutamate (MSG). Quách’s daughter was also leaving to further her education in the United States.

It must be said that this individual’s fortune went in lock step with the ebb and flow of Vietnam’s history. Prior to 1975, while still the owner of a tiny variety store, Chú Quách ingratiated himself with the generals’ wives and won a contract to supply dried food to more than one million soldiers of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN). After the fall of the Saigon in 1975, he was stranded in the country because of his attractive concubine and watched as much of his fortune go up in smoke in the aftermath of “*đánh tư sản mại bản*” or the campaign against Chinese compradors initiated by the Communist government as a pretext to begin a purge of ethnic Chinese.

Eventually he fled to Yunnan, China as “*nạn kiều*” then managed to immigrate to Hong Kong. A few years later, during the time Hanoi opened the door to “*Đổi Mới*” or economic renovation, he made his reappearance as an aggressive businessman not only in the Mekong

Delta but also in the north of Vietnam. His new business partners ranked from members of the Province Party Committee to those of the Central Committee of the Party or CEO's of state-owned conglomerates.

Again, he started and operated the country's largest MSG factory built on the Thị Vải riverbank. With the support from top members of the Institute of Tropical Ecology - many of them academicians holders of doctoral degrees - he was given a free hand to discharge the wastes from his factory into the river under the pretext "*on purpose of research and development, to experiment [with] long-term effects of biohazards on the environment and human beings in secondary sector of industry in processing and manufacturing of food products.*"

This "R & D" under the umbrella of a socialistic-free market economy ended in an environmental disaster. The 76 kilometer-long Thị Vải fresh watercourse flowing through Đồng Nai, Ba Rịa, and Vũng Tàu Provinces subsequently became a dead river. As usual, no one had stepped forward to claim responsibility for this ecological catastrophe. Another lesson unlearned!

Chú Quách's above-mentioned activities only represented the tip of the iceberg. His business dealings reached out as far away as Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Singapore.

Unable to get hold of a regular air ticket, Xuân rushed to the busy Singapore Airlines counter to register as a stand-by. On the weekly flights to Bangkok and Singapore, one could easily spot familiar faces of the comrades from the exclusive "*Câu Lạc Bộ Ba Đình*" aka Ba Đình Politburo Club travelling not on any official business but for medical treatments. They suffered from all kinds of acute and chronic illnesses caused by deprivations during the war years to the worst afflictions resulting from overabundance this highly privileged group enjoyed during peace time. So they traveled abroad to seek state-of-the-art treatments Western medicine had to offer and it did not take a genius

to understand why Singapore stood out as the favorite destination of those big shots.

The surprising thing was the exceedingly high incidences of heart ailments such as atherosclerotic, alcoholic cirrhosis, viral hepatitis B & C that occurred in this group. A typical case was that of comrade Bãy Thủ, member of the Central Party Committee of Đồng Nai where Chú Quách's factory was located in. Once a week, he flew to Singapore and stayed at a hotel on Orchard Street to receive an injection of interferon alpha for treatment of his advanced hepatitis C.

In consternation Dr. Duy turned to Xuân and asked:

– He may just as well have the drug mailed to him. Why bother to fly all the way to Singapore for an injection like that?"

The answer to Duy's question was all too obvious but Xuân still made an effort to explain in details:

– You're quite right. Medically speaking that is. During the war, they set up a special unit named Health Care for Members of The Central Committee known as Institute of Military Medicine 108 to provide medical care for high level cadres. Real big shots were flown to East Germany or the Soviet Union instead. During peace time, especially after the collapse of the Soviet Bloc and the advent of the market economy the top level comrades lost faith in the supremacy of the socialist system's medical science. Unable to go to the U.S., they make do with the capitalist medical system Singapore has to offer. The comrades trust their health in the hands of Lee Kuan Yew's doctors in spite of the fact that several of them went to Singapore and breathed their last in that tiny island. For sure you must recall the case of a four-star-general who left for an open heart surgery and never returned? Of the Asian dragons, our leaders hold Singapore in the highest esteem and use it as a model for Vietnam to emulate in its march forward.

Xuân paused for a brief moment then continued in a thoughtful voice:

– As far as I am concerned, this is an impossible dream. It's quite apparent that Singapore and Vietnam differ in so many ways. You name it: geographical, political system and so on...

Duy nodded in agreement:

– The fundamental difference is that Singapore doesn't have a corrupt government from top to bottom like Vietnam.

There was not the slightest detectable trace of sarcasm in Duy's comment, yet Xuân added:

– As you undoubtedly know, in the jostling for power among the communist leaders, personal health is also looked upon as a 'national security' concern.

Xuân was freshly home from Bangkok and in the middle of getting ready for an upcoming conference when a telephone call sent him flying to Singapore to help the Minister of Foreign Affairs prepare for a four-nation meeting on the Mekong to be held the following week in the Thai city of Chiang Rai. The host country had tenaciously yet unsuccessfully maneuvered the diplomatic channels to include China and Myanmar in the conference. Those two nations located upstream the Mekong did not join the Mekong River Committee when it was established in 1957.

A Cambodian friend whose country is a member of that institution confided in Xuân:

– To this day, we are still appreciative of the French. Without their intervention, Cambodia and Laos would have disappeared from the

map and the Mekong would probably serve as a natural border between Thailand and Vietnam.

This observation made in a matter of fact way somehow elicited in Xuân an unsettling feeling. He was forced to come face to face with a historical truth that gnawed at his conscience. Thailand was not alone to grab lands from Cambodia. Vietnam did the same during its Nam Tiến or Southward March.

His infatuation with the Mekong never failed to stir up in Xuân a source of inspiration and deep emotions. For him, any effort to conserve the pristine condition of that river was not only for the Mekong Delta's sake. It was actually an effort to safeguard the lifeline of the entire Southeast Asian region and its ecosystem in the long run.

Over exhaustion was offered as an explanation for the hospitalization of the Vietnamese Foreign Minister. However, the rumor mill had it that he suffered from acute chest pain. Besides his treating Singaporean physician, nobody had the slightest idea about his actual health condition.

Puzzled, Xuân turned to Dr. Duy for an answer:

– I heard that the rate of cardiovascular disease in Vietnam is currently higher than that in the West. How do you account for this pattern of health-events?

Preferring not to answer Xuân's question directly Dr. Duy commented:

– There is recently a research about the Chinese community living in the United States. Especially about those who emigrated from mainland China. When they first arrived in America, their cholesterol level was quite low – almost at an ideal level. Three short years later, it shot past the national average by a hefty margin resulting in an extraordinarily

high incidence of cardiovascular diseases among that group. This was not the case with those Chinese farmers who are still living in mainland China. With a rather simple diet of mainly vegetables and tofu products in their native land the immigrants did not have any problems until they abruptly switched to one rich in meat and dairy in the United States. Clearly, we see here that the new environment has something to do with it.

Not entirely convinced with Duy's "environment" argument, Xuân pressed on:

– If so, how do you account for a higher rate of cardiovascular in this immigrant group compared to that of the larger American population accustomed to such a rich diet all their life? Probably "stress" has a role to play in here too?

Undeterred by Xuân's remark, Duy offered a ready explanation:

– The Americans are undisputed champions in the "stress" area. Therefore, we must look elsewhere for an answer. Those immigrants from mainland China are not unlike the "red capitalists" in today's Vietnam. Well-conditioned to a lifestyle of constant food shortage during wartime, their bodies adapted and became "slow metabolizers". When peace was restored, they were blessed with an opulent lifestyle coupled with an unchanged slow rate of metabolism. The end result? An unavoidable jump in cholesterol levels. A simple case of cause and effect – you know.

Without any trace of bitterness in his voice, Duy concluded:

– "Death by starvation" and "Death by gluttony" are just two different sides of the same coin in a Vietnam during the "*Đổi Mới*" or Renovation era – don't you think so Doctor Rice?

Duy's sharp and sensitive mind did not preclude him from having a kind heart and sharp tongue. Though he definitely did not approve of the present government, he still kept a proactive and open minded attitude toward it. As a member of a group of visiting American professors, he just finished a series of lectures at the Medical Universities of Saigon and Hanoi and was waiting for a flight to Bangkok, the first leg of his return trip to the United States.

Duy and Xuân met for the first time, but really hit it off. Forced to live under a brutalizing and oppressive regime, people seemed to be suffering from chronic "split personality" syndrome. To survive, they had to wear a perpetual mask to hide their real "self". Under such circumstances, Xuân found it refreshing to meet a genuine person like Duy. In his eye, Duy acted like a "catalyst" which added some zest to one's life.

The Days in Singapore

From a small island located near the equator covered with swamp lands and devoid of natural resources, Singapore somehow managed to transform itself in less than 200 years into a modern and prosperous Asian nation.

Long gone is the image of a Singapore under colonial rule teeming with opium dens, rickshaws pulled by sweating coolies, and a harbor crowded with junks manned by ferocious pirates. Present day Singapore dazzled visitors with its highway systems, glass skyscrapers, shopping malls, luxury hotels on Orchard Street where guests could savor Italian dishes, taste vintage wines distilled from grapes grown in the foggy and sunny Napa Valley of California or purchase the latest clothe fashions designed in Paris. Foreign visitors would be hard pressed to believe they were actually living in a tiny island nation of Asia.

Lee Kuan Yew was the able prime minister who led Singapore in

its fast transformation into one of the four Dragons of Asia. He ruled Singapore with an authoritarian style – best characterized as Centralized Democracy, yet is loved and revered by his people. His pronouncements always found a sympathetic and attentive ear from world leaders.

Singapore gained independence in 1965. In the three ensuing decades, it developed at a dizzying rate. Even structurally solid and imposing buildings could not escape the demolition team's wrecking balls to make way for more modern and imposing construction projects. Modernization, constant modernization seemed to be the order of the day that was the driving force behind the vibrant economic life of this 267-square mile island nation. Singaporeans were fond of telling whoever wanted to listen: "you only need to turn your head for a brief while for the landscape to change so drastically that you'd be unable to find your way home".

The conference was held inside the posh Shangri-la Hotel located in a five-acre garden on Orange Grove Street. It is only a short walk northwest of Orchard Street. The hotel rooms ran along a spacious hallway overlooking a garden graced with tropical flowers boasting their most vibrant colors.

Dr. Xuân started his presentation:

– Soon after the construction of the 1,500 MW Manwan Dam, China would move on to the next stage and build eight then fourteen additional hydroelectric dams on the main current of the Mekong flowing within its border. It will not suffer any interference from the outside world.

On the other hand, over the last two decades, Thailand has finished building its dam system on the tributaries located along the right bank of the Mekong. The Pak Mun Dam earned its notoriety from the controversy it raised. Disregarding all protestations from Vietnam, the

Thai government pushed ahead with its irrigation project by building a 200 km long canal to divert 400 m³ per second of water from the Mekong into the Lam Pao Lake during the Dry Season. Furthermore, after the completion of the Nam Ngum and Nam Theun Dams with reported outputs of 150 and 200 MW respectively, Thailand is also actively negotiating with Laos to construct a number of hydroelectric dams straddling the tributaries on the left bank of the Mekong.

Bigger dams across the Mekong itself are also planned for in order to supply power to the Thai cities and industrial complexes. In 1988 alone, Thailand's electricity output was reported at 5,000 MW and projected to reach 11,000 in 1996 - which is ten times the maximum output of the Hòa Bình Dam in Vietnam. It is noteworthy to point out that over the last two decades, to the utter indifference of the Thai authorities and World Bank representatives, the construction of hydroelectric dams, though restricted to the tributaries of the Mekong, has gone on unabated causing catastrophic impacts on the ecology and tragic changes to the lives of the inhabitants in the region.

From the podium, Dr. Xuân directed the beam of his pointer to the nine locations of the Mekong dam projects drawn on the map then continued:

– The World Bank experts chose to work solely with the Thai officials in Bangkok while turning a deaf ear to the aspirations of the local population. Never mind that no extensive and serious studies have been conducted on the ecosystem baseline of the Lower Mekong Basin. When commenting on the big dams, Dr. Sato, a World Bank representative, made the irresponsible assertion that they did not cause any impacts on the ecology. This Japanese representative also showed a complete indifference toward the popular protest movements and environmentalists. He coldly stated: “Blocking this project would give non-governmental organizations momentum to prevent much needed dam projects in the Mekong Basin”. With the unfortunate collusion

between the monetary backing from the World Bank and the repressive measures of the Thai government, it would not be surprising that the Thai Department of Hydrology will always prevail.

Dr. Xuân went on:

– In the near future, should Thailand be able to complete the construction of the first big dam like the Pa Mang Cao across the Mekong, this country would enjoy the use of an additional 12,000 MW. As far as Vietnam is concerned, the purported benefit from the project is better flood controls.

He had to pause for a short while to regain his composure before he could continue:

– The lesson learned over the last century from the building of big dams in the world shows that hydroelectricity is not necessarily the cheapest and cleanest energy source for humankind. Their construction will inevitably go hand in hand with large scale devastations of the ecosystems and unpredictable changes to the people's lives. They impede the regular flow of alluvium to the delta and endanger the “rice bowl” of millions of farmers and the agricultural economy of the entire basin.

Granted that the generated hydroelectricity will help develop industrial zones, but it will at the same time bring about harmful water pollution imperiling the existence of fowls, fish, vegetation and the health of millions of humans who depend on that water for their existence. The disaster called “The Black Dragon” that took place in March, 1992 as 9,000 tons of molasses were discharged by the Khon Kaen Factory into the Nam Pong River is still fresh in our memory. It devastated that river's fish and shrimp population prompting the Thai Government to order the release of millions of cubic meters of water from the Ubolrath Dam to force the industrial waste to flow into the

Chi and Moon Rivers and killed another 140 species of fish on its path before it reached the Mekong River. To avoid such catastrophe, the American government spent millions of US Dollars recently not to build but to demolish hydroelectric dams in order to restore the ecology of the rivers and ensure the survival of the migratory fish like salmons that are facing the threat of extinction.

Xuân's persuasive power came not only from his informed mind but also from his passionate heart. This rare combination brings an added earnestness to his voice:

– Continued construction of hydroelectric dams on the Mekong's main current will deprive the Basin that is already suffering from water penury during the Dry Season of its much needed water. In such eventuality, the Vietnamese farmers will no longer have water to irrigate their fields, wash away the alum allowing the brackish water to intrude deeper inland and pollute their source of drinking and farming water.

At this point, it was no longer Xuân, the propagandist or instructor, but Xuân, the private person who expressed his “political opinions” from a Vietnamese perspective:

– Numerous misconceptions have been running rampant about the safety of the hydroelectric dams in regards to the populated areas located at their foot or vicinity. However, it is evident that from a political standpoint, a friendly nation when turned adversary could use the dams to initiate an “ecological” war in the region. For instance, it can retain the water in the dam reservoirs during the Dry Season to cause drought in the delta areas or, worse yet, discharge large quantity of water to flood the nations downstream wreaking havocs that could prove much more destructive than those emanating from the hand of Mother Nature...

At the end of Xuân's speech, Professor Nguyễn, Dean of the

Department of Geology at the University of Cần Thơ, took over the podium. He chose a rather unusual “introduction” to his presentation. All of a sudden, the lights in the room were dimmed. Pictures of the Nile instead of the Mekong appeared on the big screen followed by close-ups of the Aswan Dam.

In a grave and warm southern accent Professor Nguyễn began to speak:

– The full force of the 160 billion cubic meters of water thus far contained within the 100-meter tall walls of the dam suddenly burst out from old cracks. In a split second, the gigantic mass of water contained along the 500 km long reservoir rushed forward all at the same time. The nearest town which was 3 km away was instantly devastated by the unimaginable force of the tsunami like body of water. Then a 30-meter high wall of water inexorably advanced forward submerging streets, 10-story high buildings and wiping away populated areas in its path. On the sixth day, this raging water arrived at Cairo situated on the eastern bank of the Nile. Its wall had then been reduced to half of its original height....

That was the scenario depicted by the German author Michael Heim in his book titled “Aswan”. This is not a work of pure fiction but is solidly based on verifiable laws of physics.

In their studies of big dams, geologists observed that the massive weight of the water continuously contained in large reservoirs could create an imbalance in the surrounding topography resulting in ruptures in the underlying geological strata and damages to the dam structure. This phenomenon is known as “reservoir triggered seismicity”.

The mere mention of “reservoir triggered seismicity” reminded the audience of two actual cases that happened in the past. First is the Xinfengjian Dam near Guang Dong, China. Its structure was similar to that of the Aswan Dam and it was hit by an earthquake registered at 6.1

in 1961. Next is the Koyna Dam near the city of Poona, India. This dam was close to collapse as it suffered a 6.5 earthquake in 1967.

Lloyd Cluff was the first engineer who observed in situ the damages done to the Koyna Dam. In 1981, another earthquake shook the area near the Aswan Dam where the geological strata were considered most stable. The American Embassy appointed him on the spot to form a group to study the event. After two arduous years of research, they concluded that “there exists a correlation between the water level in the reservoir and the earthquake that recently occurred.”

The report also discussed in details the potential disaster that a dam collapse would bring about in its wake. The Egyptian military decided to keep the report’s findings under strict secrecy in fear that it could give ideas to terrorists. The vice minister of Egypt’s Department of Hydrology was moved to state that “*And the flood was forty days upon the earth; and the waters increased, and bare up the ark, and it was lift up above the earth.*” King James Bible

Professor Nguyễn added:

– Closer to home is the lesson from China. A real disaster happened in 1975 involving the Banquiao and Shimantan Dams on the Huai River, a tributary of the Yangtze River. The Banquiao Dam was built by the Soviet and taunted as a construction of solid steel that could withstand a 1,000 year-long flood. Ironically, after just two days of torrential rain, the water level in its reservoir peaked. Though all the drain pipes were opened to the maximum, the sediments that had been accumulating at the bottom of the reservoir prevented the full release of the water causing the Banquiao Dam to collapse. Five million cubic meters of water gushed out of the reservoir overflowing the valley below and sweeping away villages and towns on the way. The second steel dam met the same dismal fate soon afterward. In total, 62 dams were destroyed by the storm and ensuing floods during that year and the death toll

was recorded at 230,000 by drowning or epidemics. The casualties and damages just cited exceeded by far those of the explosion at the Bhopal chemical factory in India or the meltdown at the Chernobyl nuclear plant in Russia. Surprisingly, the Chinese authorities were able to keep the whole story under wraps for two long decades...

Professor Nguyễn captivated his audience with his presentation making them feel as if they were watching an action movie. At the close, he asserted:

– We have absolutely no ground to affirm with complete certainty that such catastrophe will never take place with the Mekong. If this river serves as the lifeline of the Basin then each dam built across its current could be likened to an Achilles Heel for the whole region. Undoubtedly, man caused disasters will exact a much higher toll than natural ones...

A dead silence hovered over the audience disrupted only by the sonorous voice of the professor. Then came the turn of the Minister of Foreign Affairs to address the panel. He ended his speech with a hypothetical question:

– If we cannot dissuade our friends from implementing their dam projects then what alternatives are still open for Vietnam?

His question in itself already implied a compromise, a resigned attitude. Unperturbed, Dr. Xuân replied:

– We have deluded ourselves into doing nothing with the nine dams in the Mekong Cascades which represent 20% of the water flow in the main current of the Mekong. We could not do anything either with the more than 30 dams built on the Mekong's tributaries in Thailand and Laos. Nevertheless, the 2,000 km long stretch of the Lower Mekong is regarded as an international river. Since 1957, the Mekong River

Committee has stipulated that all hydroelectric dam projects on the Mekong's main current must be approved by unanimous decisions and individual member countries hold veto power over them. Probably, this is a fundamental point that must be restored in all future documents signed between the member countries. This point is of vital importance to Vietnam since it lies at the southernmost section of the Mekong.

Xuân went on:

– In the 1960's and 1970's, together, the two big dams Pa Mong Cao in Laos and Stung Treng in Cambodia use up an additional 20% of the water that flows down to the Mekong Delta. Only the Tonle Sap Lake Project is deemed beneficial to both Vietnam and Cambodia because it helps lessen the danger of flooding during the Rainy Season and increase the flow rate of the Bassac and Mekong during the Dry one. For that reason, this project was included in the agenda of the 1988 meeting of the Mekong River Committee in Vietnam. Unfortunately, it met unrelenting opposition from Cambodia on the pretext that it only benefited Vietnam while working to the detriment of the Tonle Sap Lake. As the Cambodians see it, the Lake is compared to a beating heart that would be severed from its body should this project be ever implemented.

He added:

– We will not walk in Thailand's footsteps in building scores of hydroelectric dams simply to satisfy the needs of short-run industrial development while turning a blind eye to the their destructive impacts on the ecology in the long run. At the present time, the construction of dams on the tributaries in Laos and Thailand cause water shortages, during the Dry Season, in the Mekong Delta of Vietnam. To guarantee an adequate water supply to the "granary" of the Delta, willy nilly, we have no choice but go ahead urgently with the feasibility studies of dam building projects on the tributaries of the Mekong within our

own borders. Those would be small dams built on the tributaries in the unpopulated highlands. Consequently, they pose no direct and widespread impacts on the ecosystem as well as populated areas.

In the short term, we must think of building first the “Dai Yali” Dam on the Sesan River, a tributary of the Mekong in the western part of the country adjoining the provinces of Gia Lai and Kontum. This Dam will be connected to the Mang Giang Dam System in An Khê to conduct irrigation water to the plains of Bình Định and Quy Nhơn Provinces.

The next step would be to consider the possibility of constructing dams on other tributaries such as Sekong, Sebang Hiên... The objective, here, is not only to generate electricity but also to store adequate water to secure a minimum water supply to the Delta during the Dry Season. In addition, these dams will have the added capacity of channeling water from the West Trường Sơn Range eastward to the arid plains in the central part of the country and at the same time supply electricity to the cities along Route No. 1 all the way to Vinh, the capital of Nghệ An Province.

The thing Xuân kept to himself and refrained from mentioning was his doubt about the advisability of using Soviet technology in the building of the dams as it was the case with the Hòa Bình then Yali Dams. In his mind, this technology was obsolete and second class when compared to others in the world.

In arriving at that overall plan of action, Xuân was in full command of its most minute details as they were shown on the map. He acted as a well-informed commanding officer in charge of an operation. He had the habit of looking straight into the eyes of his interlocutors when he spoke. Underneath the Minister’s jovial demeanor and his pretension for paying close attention to what he was saying, Xuân could detect in the depth of the man’s eyes a cool detachment tinged with a sense of inquisitiveness. In a split of a second, Xuân was reminded that the

Minister's reaction appeared quite typical of the communist cadres he chanced to meet.

“Chiang Rai Mekong Meeting Spells Disaster” ran the headline of the news release dated May, 1995 by the Environmental Conservation Groups in the wake of the ministerial level meeting of the Mekong River Committee which decided to change its name to Mekong River Commission. Vietnam along with the other member countries gave up their veto power in the process.

The *Friends of the Mekong Group* posted a declaration titled “Call to Stop Large Scale Hydropower Developments in the Mekong Basin” on the website of the Viet Ecology Foundation. In it the group offered this strong and well taken argument:

“Since China has built many major mainstream dams, today the Lancang-Mekong is no longer the same lifeline for 70 million people in the region. The eco-system of the river as a whole is at risk. We recognize the need of riverine countries to explore the river resources for development but we call upon all the nations for a socially and ecologically responsible management of this life-giving river. We call the Mekong River Commission to conduct further studies for environmental assessments and re-examine the risks posed by the cascades of dams and reservoirs to the downstream basin. We call to stop destructive developments for the Mekong’s sustainability for the present and future generations. To Save the Mekong, there must be a sustained commitment to cooperate from all interested nations and observe the ‘Spirit of the Mekong’ in implementation of all their exploitation and development projects.”

Dr. Xuân only realized afterward that during all that time, to safeguard the survival of the regime and in observance of a resolution adopted by the Politburo, the communist government had to gain membership to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) at any cost

and pave the way for its eventual joining of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) organization. To do that, Vietnam could not afford to ill dispose Thailand and all the other issues including the survival of the Mekong were of secondary importance and could be relegated to the back burner. The concerns expressed by the Vietnamese experts like Xuân and Triết inside the country or the Friends of the Mekong Group overseas were looked upon as “emotional overreactions” or narrow minded views lacking in political savvy.

The July, 1995 issue of the Nhân Dân Daily ran this front page headline: “Vietnam was admitted into ASEAN”. In November, 1997, came this news from AP in Vancouver: “*Vietnam along with Russia and Peru are officially accepted as members of APEC*”.

Xuân now fully realized that Vietnam’s seats at the ASEAN and APEC organizations were gained at the expense of an uncertain future for the Mekong and the entire Delta.

CHAPTER VII

RETURN TO THE PAST – PATTIVATTNA AND THE KILLING FIELDS

“We will burn the old grass and new [one] will grow”

Pol Pot

Mr. Nhu Phong showed a particular liking to “La Voie Royale”, the first novel written by Malraux. Actually, he even owned a complete collection of this author’s works. It is quite surprising that, in spite of his fondness for this French author, for a long time, he only got to know of Malraux as an accomplished writer and polished politician.

A short while ago, during a trip to France, he visited the local libraries looking for materials to write a book about Vietnam’s revolutionary movements from 1920 to 1945. By coincidence he discovered a completely “new” Malraux. It was a Malraux who set foot in Saigon for the first time seven decades ago at the young age of twenty three. Right from the start, his adventurous activities led the local newspaper “L’Impartial” to brand him as “a vandal, looter of bas-reliefs chiseled out from the Bantei Srei temple at the Angkor site.” After a Phnom Penh tribunal found him guilty of stealing several steles from that temple in Angkor, he was sentenced to three years of imprisonment and banned from living

in Indochina for five years.

That new discovery, notwithstanding, Mr. Nhu Phong still found Malraux, the man of action, fascinating. On the other hand, the “new” Malraux or Malraux “the man in the street”, was revealed to him not only through that stern sentence handed down by the French colonial legal system but also in the book “*André Malraux: The Indochina Adventure*” (New York 1966) penned by the American writer Walter Langlois. In it, the author evenhandedly depicted a Malraux who set his heart on stealing the Khmer relics – not at all on a sudden impulse or as an impetuous, hotheaded youth his defenders, then and now, portrayed him to be.

Malraux first went to Hanoi and met with the members of the École Française d’Extrême-Orient. He was undoubtedly informed that the Angkor monuments were classified as a “world wonder” that belonged to the protected list. Consequently, he certainly must have known that what he was about to do was illegal. Once in Saigon, he joined company with his wife Clara and a friend named Louis Chevasson to travel to Phnom Penh. From there, the trio sailed upstream the Tonle Sap River, entered the Great Lake to reach Siem Reap before transferring to a land route to arrive at Angkor.

Malraux planned his moves very carefully. He rented ox driven carts and hired Khmer laborers ahead of time. At the Banteay Srei temple Malraux had his hired hands use stone saws to cut a stele depicting a beautiful Apsaras along with a number of smaller statues. They then packed everything in crates mislabeled as “chemical containers” for shipment to Saigon via the Great Lake.

In the beginning, everything appeared to go on smoothly to the great satisfaction of the not so wealthy Malraux. Those precious art works would certainly fetch a considerable fortune from the New York collectors. Unbeknownst to Malraux, nothing the group did escaped the

watchful eyes of the colonial police. As the trio set foot in Phnom Penh with their bounty in tow, they fell right into the waiting arms of the law. On account of her gender, Clara was spared indictment but her two male companions were not so lucky. Malraux was sentenced to a three-year jail term while Chevasson received a shorter time of 18 months.

They appealed on the ground that the Banteay Srei temple was not on the list of protected monuments and were granted a new trial in Saigon. Thanks to his reputation with the literary circles at the time, Malraux managed to rally the support of his fellow writers and intellectuals in Paris. Suddenly, his case turned “*cause célèbre*” and took on a cultural and political overtone. Nevertheless, he was found him guilty a second time by the Saigon court and given a suspended sentence of one year. Malraux did not have to spend a day in jail and immediately left for Paris. By the way, the “rich irony” of this case – to borrow Milton Osborne’s famous terminology – is that the very person convicted of “cultural vandalism” in French Indochina went on to become the Minister of Culture for many years in General De Gaulle’s government.

One year later, a completely “transformed” Malraux reappeared in Saigon. This time he was determined to start the newspaper “L’Indochine” and launch a campaign to denounce the repressive policy of the French colonial administration in order to call for the political emancipation of the “Annamites”. He was intent to reframe the Indochinese issue within the new political context of the Far East as the Xin Hai revolution was unfolding in China. His newspaper “L’Indochine” laid bare the abusive and arrogant behaviors of the French colonialists along with the subservient and corrupt practices of the indigenous mandarins.

As expected, the protectorate authorities responded in kind through its mouthpiece in the person of the director of the daily “L’Impartial” who accused Malraux of being a communist sympathizer. Acting on

that allegation, the security apparatus shut down Malraux's printing press. Undaunted, Malraux did not rest until he was able to republish his paper with the new and more evocative name "L'Indochine Enchaîné". However, owing to insurmountable difficulties, its publication was irregular at best. During that period, Malraux came face to face with the hopelessness of his cause since colonialism still enjoyed overwhelming political support in France. At once, Malraux who was twenty four years old at the time decided to return to his homeland leaving behind this poignant editorial in the last issue of L'Indochine Enchaîné:

"We must raise high the voice of the people and demand that its rulers account for that grave pain, that forbidding anguish that hover over the plains of Indochina... Will we ever achieve freedom? We cannot tell at this very moment. At least we will gain some freedom. That is why I am leaving for France."

Long ago, as a war reporter, Mr. Nhu Phong accompanied units of the ARVN (Armed Forces of the Republic of Vietnam) in their engagements in the remote regions of the country: the highlands, rainforests, rice fields in the Mekong Delta dotted with rivers and canals, and also in their incursion into Cambodia along the "Route Royale" made famous by André Malraux.

He could not help but admire as well as appreciate those brave and resilient soldiers. They won their battles yet were not given a say in the outcome of the war. After thirty long years of sacrifice and hardship, they were ordered to lay down their arms in complete shock and dejection as described in soldier-writer Cao Xuân Huy's book "Tháng Ba Gãy Súng" (Broken Guns in March, 1975).

Mr. Nhu Phong was recently informed by Carl, his colleague working for Reuters, about a project the Institute for the Study of American Wars (ISAW) was planning to build at Valor Park in Maryland. It comprised of a series of museums dedicated to the seven wars the Americans had

been directly involved in since the birth of their nation. Of course, one cannot forget the Vietnam War, the only war for a just cause lost by the United States, along with its South Vietnamese ally.

In Mr. Nhu Phong's opinion, the very "*raison d'être*" for this future Vietnam War museum is to provide the correct facts and search for the correct causes that led to the failure of the American's military endeavors in Vietnam.

Surely, the two million Vietnamese who left their homeland in a mass exodus could not accept a second defeat, an eternal one at Valor Park, imposed upon them by a repetition of historical facts manipulated by the communists as usual. In fact, if things went according to ISAW's plan, the museum would exhibit incomplete, one-sided testimonies which would show, for example, that the warring parties only included the United States and North Vietnam, ignoring the role of the South in the conflict. It was not simply a matter of who had won and who had lost. Rather, it involved the dignity and political struggle of two million Vietnamese refugees who made enormous sacrifices to establish a free political system in their native land.

During the years he rubbed shoulders with the foreign press corps coming from the four corners of the earth, Mr. Nhu Phong had come to know quite a few unworthy knaves whose behaviors were no better than those of the soldiers in the French Foreign Legion. Some just spent a couple of days in the battlefields then bragged about their so called "brushes with death". Upon their return to the safety of Saigon, they indulged themselves in drinking, smoking opium and cavorting with prostitutes in the comfortable suites of luxury hotels. They took pleasure in comparing the more developed labia majora of the Khmer ladies of the night with the narrower ones of their Vietnamese counterparts and pointed to the Indian genes of the Khmer and the Mongolian ancestry of the Vietnamese as the main explanation.

Mister Nhu Phong was fully aware that out of the thousands of foreign newsmen who came to Vietnam to report on the war at least 320 of them never made it back to their dear ones. They were classified as “collateral damages” in the parlance of the U.S. Military. Among them, he could name Bernard Fall as a close friend. In February 1967, Bernard Fall lost his life in a mine explosion while accompanying the 4th Marine Regiment in an operation on the stretch of Route 1 from Hué to Quảng Trị named “*La Rue Sans Joie/ The Street Without Joy*” by troops of the French Far East Expeditionary Corps in the First Indochina War. This “Street Without Joy” again became a Vietcong stronghold and ambush alley during the Vietnam War. And Mr. Nhu Phong considered himself lucky to be counted among the survivors.

Walking amidst the Killing Fields, he could not comprehend how the resplendent Angkor civilization and the enlightened liberal French education known for its celebrated thinkers like Jean Jacques Rousseau, Montesquieu... could together produce those aberrant and atrocious Khmer Rouge leaders, the perpetrators of such hideous acts of “*self-inflicted genocide*” on their people. So unimaginable that people refused to believe it at first. It would appear that nobody knows or wants to believe that Beijing was the actual behind-the-scene instigator of that worst human tragedy in contemporary history.

Pol Pot’s name is inextricably associated with the Khmer Rouge. As it is so often the case with the communists, one would find it near impossible to obtain his complete and accurate biography: “*His real name is Saloth Sar, he was born in 1928 into a peasant family in Kompong Thom, Khmer father Chinese mother.*”

In today’s world, Pol Pot is the personification of a political criminal.

However, the true theoretician of the Khmer Rouge movement was Khieu Samphan, a graduate of the Sorbonne. In his doctoral thesis at the Sorbonne University in 1959, after comparing the Old and Neo Colonialism

in Cambodia, Khieu Samphan concluded: “In order to secure true economic and political independence, it was necessary to isolate Cambodia completely and go back to a self-sufficient agricultural economy.”

Prior to Khmer Rouge’s time, to talk about “revolution” in Cambodia meant “Uprising – Bambahbambor”. Under Pol Pot’s rule, however, “revolution” was synonymous to “Going back to the past – Pattivattna”. It is a desire to revert to the ancient Khmer civilization, turn back the clock to transport Cambodia to the time of its original birth, the “Year Zero”, and refute all values of modern civilization. They dreamt of building a society where education, science and technology, the press or even money as means of exchange are outlawed.

On the day he became head of state, Khieu Samphan declared: “No, we have no machines. We do everything by mainly relying on the strength of our people. We work completely self-sufficiently. This shows the overwhelming heroism of our people. This also shows the great force of our people. Though bare-handed, they can do everything”.

That was the usual manner in which communist leaders talked. It was those bare hands that broke open countless human skulls, dug myriads of mass graves, and built primitive dams for irrigation only to beget scorched fields and a near fishless Tonle Sap Lake. Those dams constructed without the use of “gray matter” and mechanized technology but with the mere power of forced labor were soon reduced to useless heaps of building materials like bricks and cement after a few heavy rains. It did not take long for the inevitable outcome of such foolish policy to materialize: fields became parched because of drought. To remedy this stark situation, tens of thousands of pumps were imported from North Korea. It worked for a short while until they were turned into lumps of rusting metals discarded all over the Killing Fields. The only sensible solution left was for the Cambodian people to dismantle those “Pol Pot Canals” to save the rice fields and fish.

Once more, Mr. Nhu Phong paid a visit to the majestic Mekong. This time around, as I journeyed in his company, I had the strange feeling of traveling back in time. Sailing upstream along the banks of this river of history and time, scattered around in the familiar openings in the jungle or even in the ancient paddies I could see clumps of metallic objects, those vestiges of past hostilities that were slowly but surely rusting away in the humid climate of Monsoon Asia.

Route No. 6 took us to Siem Reap, north of the Great Lake. After almost three decades of absence, Mr. Nhu Phong had the opportunity to get reacquainted with Angkor. To his great disappointment, he found it in a much more decrepit state than expected. He also went to the place André Malraux stood over 70 years ago trying to steal sculptures from Banteay Srei. The desolate look of Angkor reminded Mr. Nhu Phong of a line in Bà Huyện Thanh Quan's poems: "*On its old foundation the palace was outlined in the sunset*".

The walls and monuments of Angkor still stood there as "stoic and inanimate witnesses" to the bloody war years that bedeviled the Cambodian people. Who could imagine that only a few years back, at this very spot, stood young Khmer Rouge soldiers whose innocent faces failed to hide the cold look in their eyes and the consuming hatred in their soul. Those lads, barely 15 years old, did not show any qualms about firing at abandon their AK47's at the splendid Asparas statues during their shooting practice.

In the aftermath of the decline of the Angkor Empire, Cambodia's history experienced a period of extreme violence and self-destruction prompting Henri Mouhot, the first French explorer who traveled upstream the Mekong in 1861, to offer this observation:

"...At first view, one is filled with profound admiration, and cannot but ask what has become of this powerful race, so civilized, so enlightened, the authors of those gigantic works? One of these temples – a rival to that

of Solomon, and erected by some ancient Michael Angelo – might take an honorable place beside our most beautiful buildings. It is grander than anything left to us by Greece or Rome, and presents a sad contrast to the state of barbarism in which the nation is now plunged.” [22]

I turned to Mr. Nhu Phong, my older friend, and asked:

– How could a civilization as splendid as Angkor disappear just like that?

It was a question that Mr. Nhu Phong found himself at a loss to find an answer to. The many theories proposed by different researchers all prove in the end to be speculative at best. An easy explanation purports that the Angkor Empire was attacked by the more powerful armies of neighboring Chenla then destroyed by Siam afterward. Another hypothesis surmises that the callous exploitation of the rulers forced the people to vote with their feet and embark on a mass migration resulting in the destruction of the empire’s agricultural bases and the shifting of the economic centers from inland to the coastal regions.

Present day Cambodia occupies a land area thirty times larger than that of the island nation of Singapore. Its fertile delta makes it one of the rich “granaries” in Southeast Asia. Sadly enough, as a result of American bombings during the war years and the devastating policy carried out by the Khmer Rouge, the Cambodian people were then suffering from a severe food shortage.

Caught in the unforgiving claws of hunger and unemployment, many a young country girl flocked to Battambang and Phnom Penh to look for jobs. They were then faced with two choices. The first one being to slave for 16 hours a day catering to the 20,000 blue berets of the United Nations Transitional Agency in Cambodia (UNTAC) or the personnel working for relief agencies, foreign businessmen, and of course tourists. Or if they wished to avoid hard works – and many

of them did, they could opt for the oldest profession in the world: prostitution so that they could earn fast money to send to their poor families back home. Slavery of the Middle Ages type was still alive and well! Vietnamese young girls were bought and brought to Cambodia to work at houses of ill repute. “*Mean touk mean tray, mean luy mean srey*” “You have water, you have fish. You have dollars, you have chicks”. So went a contemporary Cambodian saying.

From time immemorial, the majestic Mekong remains true to herself. She flows at the same old pace and continues to be the lifeline of the people who inhabit her banks. She is also the river of time that witnesses the rise and fall of civilizations or the sunrises and sunsets of the earth itself.

From the Khone Falls or Si Phan Don meaning 4,000 islands in Laos, the Mekong meanders through the Sambor Rapids between Stung Treng and Kratié Provinces before entering the placid delta that stretches from three to five kilometers in width within Cambodia. It was at Khone Falls that the dream of the French explorer Francis Garnier came to an abrupt end more than 100 years ago.

In sections of the Se Kong tributary that originates from Vietnam one can occasionally spot one or two Irrawady Dolphins that along with the Pla Beuk, a giant Mekong catfish, are included in the endangered species list. It was estimated that over 100 Irrawady Dolphins still survive in the river current. However, the reckless use of explosives by soldiers and civilians alike to fish has indiscriminately killed schools of fish at a time including those dolphins. Some people believe that the dolphins were once raised in the lakes at the Angkor complex many centuries ago. Chao Phraya, another river in Thailand, where the Dolphins used to swim has become so polluted and inhospitable that those fish have disappeared from its water.

The inhabitants along the Mekong’s banks are perennially affected

by the Monsoon that blows in from the Gulf of Siam in a west-southerly direction. The rainy season here starts in May and ends in September. It coincides with the snow melting season in the Himalayas causing the Mekong's water level to rise from two to eight meters and overflow its banks. Every year, the ensuing flood submerges about one third of the surrounding area and covers it with a rich layer of alluvia. This is the time for the Tonle Sap River to change course and flow into the Great Lake. Consequently, the lake's area expands by 10,000 km² or five times its normal size during the Dry Season flooding the nearby forests. The Great Lake is the largest fresh water lake in Southeast Asia. Profiting from this opportunity, the fish from the Mekong swim upstream into the Tonle Sap River then into the flooded forests to seek a safe haven to spawn and grow.

Come November, the Rainy Season gives way to the Dry one that lasts until May. The water level begins to stabilize and the Tonle Sap River reverts to its normal flow carrying along enormous numbers of fish and shrimps from the Great Lake to the Tonle Sap River then down to the Mekong Delta. The Lake again starts to shrink.

At this point in time, the Cambodians are getting ready for the traditional Water Festival of Bon Oum Touk. It is celebrated either in late October or early November of the lunar calendar at the location the French call Quatre Bras. It is the place where four rivers converge. The first arm is the Upper Mekong. Its main current flows in an east-northerly direction to the vicinity of Phnom Penh where it divides into the Lower Mekong and the Bassac representing the second and third arms. Upon entering Vietnam, those two rivers are renamed the Tiền and Hậu Rivers respectively. The fourth arm is the fresh water Tonle Sap River that originates from the Great Lake.

On this happy occasion, Cambodia's royal couple partakes in the celebration with their subjects and conducts the blessing ceremony to pray for an abundant fishing and farming season. The war put an end to

this tradition. Prince Sihanouk who enjoyed continued popular support returned to Cambodia in 1991. He reintroduced the celebration of the Bon Oum Touk Water Festival, also known as the festival of the Receding Waters, in a land still haunted by the carnage of the Killing Fields.

I asked Mr. Nhu Phong for his opinions about the Prince. Speaking as a journalist, he answered in French "*il a manqué les rendez-vous de l'histoire*" (he has let many historic opportunities slip through his fingers). The Prince constantly is a problem and at the same time a solution to his people. He cannot be blamed for having a direct hand in the bloodbath the Khmer Rouge visited on the Cambodian population. Yet, on the other hand, his silence from his haven in Beijing somehow gave them a tacit seal of approval.

As dictated by custom, several days prior to the festival, the racing boats kept at the pagodas throughout the year are given a new coat of paint with the eyes of the Naga predominantly displayed on the bow. Naga is the name of a mythical serpent that can swallow the entire water of the Mekong in its belly sparing the peasants from flooding and allowing them to till their fields. On festival day, the annual rituals called for hundreds of fully manned racing boats to assemble on the river. People congregate along the banks and have fun watching the clowns or listening to humorous songs. Beggars mingle with the crowd to ask for food. Many of them are amputees who lost their limbs to the land mines. The festivities last until dusk of the third day.

The King cuts the inaugural ribbon at a Royal Palace built at Quatre Bras and watches the champion team move forward to signal the start of Bon Oum Touk. To the enthusiastic applause of the crowd, under the bright colors of exploding fireworks, the Queen holds up a shell filled with fresh water from the Mekong and sprinkles it on her cheek and hair in salute of the Moon Rise. The fishing and farming seasons have now officially begun.

Totally immersed in the frenzied merriments the people easily forget about the Khmer Rouge and the Killing Fields. The monuments of Angkor and the Killing Fields of Cambodia are not the only two things that are etched into human consciousness. The country is also well known for having the world largest minefields that still maim thousands of victims every month. There is not a single “unaffected” family in this whole land. Not one that is totally untouched by the tragedies or atrocities of war. The reported number of four million mines scattered all over the country is not a farfetched figure. Those mines could still be used again at a moment’s notice in a new war of attrition.

I asked Mr. Nhu Phong:

– Where in the world do all those mines come from?

It did not take long for Mr. Nhu Phong to reply:

– Those were the inheritance bequeathed by the warring parties. To begin with, they were laid by the American Special Forces infiltrating from Vietnam. Then in 1967, they were dropped by the U.S. Air Force along the borders between Cambodia and Vietnam. Next, the North Vietnamese Communists came to plant thousands more over the landscape. But the lion’s share of it was from the Khmer Rouge who feverishly planted Chinese-made mines. It was said that the Khmer Rouge alone left behind more than three million anti-personnel mines as “rear guards” when they fled from the advancing North Vietnamese. It was not uncommon for tourists to meet limbless beggars loitering around hotels and restaurants in Phnom Penh.

The Cardamom and Elephant Mountains are the two ranges that form Cambodia’s southwest border with Thailand. This area is covered with old forests where precious woods could be found. In the old days, the place teamed with all types of wild beasts like tigers, elephants, wild

buffaloes, leopards, and an extremely rare animal named “kouprey” that is chosen to be the logo for the World Wide Fund for Nature and by Prince Sihanouk as the animal symbol of Cambodia in 1963. Unfortunately, there is a good chance that this animal has become extinct as it is hunted for meat or killed by countless mines.

Mr. Nhur Phong observed:

– This horror is not limited to the past. It extends its grips far into the future. Those mines continue to disrupt the normal and peaceful existence of the Cambodians. Unannounced, it can visit death and misfortune on the daily life of this people. It hinders the fast recovery of this land.

Then Mr. Nhur Phong shifted the focus of his concern to the Mekong Delta:

– The inhabitants of the Delta have known nothing but miseries over the years due to recent irregular rain patterns. Floods come sooner, the water flows faster and more profusely. So, physical damages and human tolls also rise. People all over the world blame the El Nino for all this. Could that really be the case?

I attempted to offer a different explanation:

– The most immediate cause is what environmentalists call “suicidal deforestation”. In Laos, the military monopolizes the exploitation of logs while in Cambodia it is the Khmer Rouge. In 1992, more than one million acres of the country’s rainforests and flooded forests were cut down. The “John Does” of Cambodia might be starving but the Khmer Rouge soldiers looked well fed. In the forested area of Pailin alone, the log trade with Thai businessmen brings in millions of US Dollars per month. The forests in this country could be compared to giant sponges. They absorb and store water during the Rainy Season to dispense it

gradually throughout the rest of the year to the tributaries before they flow into the Mekong.

I went on with more details:

– Pot Pot’s policy to clear the flooded forests around the Great Lake critically curtailed the fishing industry of this nation. The water dropped to an alarming level. The migratory fish coming from the Mekong could no longer find refuge and spawn in the Tonle Sap Lake.

Deeply moved Mr. Nhu Phong inquired:

– Probably this is the vicious circle that bedevils the less developed countries. In spite of their poverty, they put their natural resources to waste aggravating their poverty even further. What about their hydroelectric projects?

The question touched on my field of expertise. I replied:

– First the Mekong River Committee and then the Mekong River Commission advocated a program to build 17 dams in Cambodia in the hope that they would give an impetus to the crucial modernization of that country. This program also complements the dam projects in the nations upstream: 14 in the series of the Mekong Cascades in China, over 40 in Thailand, and 56 in Laos. If Cambodia doesn’t develop in tandem with those nations, considering that it is situated downstream the river, it will suffer greatly in the technological, economic and even ecological sense.

I then went into the details:

– Two big projects had been considered several years back. The hydroelectric dam project at Sambor with an output of 1,000 MW to the north of the city of Kratié – approximately 140 miles from Phnom

Penh. It could potentially irrigate 90,000 acres. The rising water will submerge 800 km² dotted with whirlpools and open up a waterway linking Cambodia to Laos. Regrettably, it will also force 60,000 people to lose their homes and lands not to mention the unpredictable impacts on the ecology. The other project named the Tonle Sap, is a rather innovative brainchild of the Mekong River Committee. The Tonle Sap Lake would be used as a natural reservoir and the gates of the dam will be left open throughout the five months of the Rainy Season allowing the water to flow into the Lake as the Tonle Sap River reverses its course. When the water reaches its peak, the gates will be shut to eliminate the threat of flooding in the Delta. During the Dry Season, the gates will be partially open to regulate the Mekong's water level so that it'd be deep enough to allow large ships to navigate to Phnom Penh.

The resulting reduction in salt water intrusion into the Delta would add 2.5 million acres of arable land that were previously left unused due to alum, drought or flood. Moreover, the water level in the Tonle Sap Lake which has been dropping will now rise by a meter during the Dry Season causing an upsurge in the fish population that has been showing a downward trend so far.

I continued:

– Over the last forty years, a lack of fund and manpower in addition to a perennially unstable political climate have prevented the promising projects of the Mekong River Committee from being implemented. The exception is the Prek Thnot project that was started in the 1960's. Nevertheless, it later came to a sudden halt because of the war involving the Khmer Rouge. As it now stands, nobody is in a position to predict when that project will see the light of day again.

To this date, Phnom Penh is still the largest city located on the Mekong's banks. It was built more than six centuries ago. According to

a legend when a Cambodian king saw four Buddha statues float down the current and stop at the same spot he believed it was a good omen and decided to build at that site his palace and capital.

Almost one million souls reside in today's Phnom Penh. The city looks run down and dirty. Moss covered French style villas remind the people of its colonial past. The city's main streets bear the names of world leaders like De Gaulle, Nehru, Mao Tze Tung. They are replaced with other illustrious names depending on the political weather at the time. A collapsed bridge stands unrepaired and the port equipped with rusty cranes operates irregularly.

When Spiro Angew, the American Vice-president, visited Phnom Penh a few years back he presented General Lon Nol with a "white elephant", a symbol of "good fortune". It failed to prevent, however, the General's utterly corrupt government from total collapse.

In April of 1975, the victorious Khmer Rouge fighters dressed in black uniforms, Mao caps, and Ho Chi Minh sandals marched into the capital city of Phnom Penh to a jubilant welcome from its inhabitants lining the sides of the streets. Lon Nol and his supporters fled to Hawaii with millions of US Dollars in tow. Only Prime Minister Long Boret and his Vice Prime Minister Sirik Matak stayed at their posts until the last minute. They refused to make their escape on board American helicopters and accepted certain execution at the hand of the approaching Khmer Rouge.

Sirik Matak was a prince who played a pivotal role in the 1970 coup d'état masterminded by Lon Nol. For that, he was sentenced to death in absentia by the Khmer Rouge as he headed their list of "seven traitors". In his final farewell letter addressed to the American Ambassador John Gunther Dean he wrote:

"I thank you sincerely for your letter to transport me toward

freedom. I cannot, alas, leave in such a cowardly fashion... as for you and in particular for your great country, I never believed for a moment that you would have this sentiment for abandoning a people which have chosen liberty. You leave us and it is my wish that you and your country will find happiness under the sky. But mark it well that, if I shall die on the spot and in my country that I love, it is too bad because we are all born and must die one day. I have only committed the mistake of believing in you, the Americans..."

Very unlike the leaders of South Vietnam who exhorted their people to stay and fight while they absconded with their heads bowed low, Sirik Matak and Long Boret chose to man the barricades with their followers. The pair faced the execution squads in the Olympic Stadium, the site where a few days back flocks of helicopters evacuated a number of generals and high government officials of the old regime to safety in Thailand.

In Mr. Nhu Phong way of thinking, a country like Cambodia that has sons like those two still has reasons for hope. It was rumored that one day before the Khmer Rouge swarmed into the capital, a white alligator was spotted in a section of the river near Phnom Penh. According to Cambodian legends, this mythical animal only makes its appearance when the country falls in dire times. And nobody had any idea what was in store for this land then. Soon afterwards, an order was issued for everybody to vacate the city. Those not immediately executed were sent to hard labor camps to face gradual death, starvation or diseases. Based on the testimonies from survivors, only the fortunate ones were shot. The vast majority were killed with hammers, iron pipes, or sharp prongs. Others were buried alive in mass graves in the wet fields. Decades later, on those lush green fields, human skulls, bones, pieces of torn clothing would occasionally crop up as gloomy reminders of the bloody past.

Then, in 1979, divisions upon divisions of North Vietnamese rushed

into Cambodia professing to liberate it. The Khmer Rouge was routed and a new pro-Vietnamese government installed. Ten years later, “the inevitable day” for the North Vietnamese to leave Cambodia came. A cease fire was signed among the feuding parties and Prince Sihanouk brought back to the throne.

Following in the footsteps of Laos and Vietnam, it was Cambodia’s turn to embrace “renovation” and recognize the right for private ownership. There were encouraging signs indicating that the country had embarked on a revival path. Huge cargo ships from Singapore anchored at the harbors to unload Japanese made goods and late model cars. The newly built Cambodiana Hotel on the Mekong was fully booked by businessmen from Thailand, Singapore, and Hong Kong. They came eagerly looking for business opportunities.

Despite the presence of a 20,000 strong contingent of blue berets from the United Nations, violence in the outskirts of Phnom Penh did not show any sign of abating. The strange pas de deux between war activities and aspiration for peace somehow managed to cheer on the race to build more hotels and restaurants in the capital. Traffic jams began to choke city streets. The Pochentong International Airport was abuzz with jets arriving from Singapore, Bangkok, and Saigon accounting for an increase in the number of daily flights to Angkor by five times in spite of kidnappings and murders of tourists. Like elsewhere in Asia, development and corruption formed a well-rehearsed pair of actors to perform on the Cambodian stage. The prospect of a bright future appeared like a weak light flickering at the end of the tunnel.

On The Way to The Great Lake

Route No. 5 running along the right bank of the Tonle Sap River ends at the Tonle Sap Lake. In this unusually hot and humid climate, the rice fields on the sides of the road still boasted a lush green coat. In the distance, the rare houses in the villages hid behind trees bearing

tropical fruits like mangoes, bananas, coconuts. Here, the palm trees grew straight and tall. On the roads, one saw mainly thin brown skinned Khmer women in their dark color sarongs. Their pitch-black eyes betrayed a deep and silent sorrow. Only seldom did one encounter a male. Very young Khmer soldiers who seemed to be swimming in their loose and frayed green uniforms stood guard at rusting iron bridges. The only thing new on them was their deadly AK47's with their distinguishable curved magazines. There was nothing that could vouch for safe travel on that route during day time much less so after night fell. After several of their members were reported to have gone AWOL (Absence Without Leave), the foreign press corps in the land of Angkor voluntarily observed a self-imposed "golden rule": No travel outside of Phnom Penh after 4 o'clock in the afternoon.

The city of Kompong Chhnang sits on the bank of the Tonle Sap River. Large fish storehouses were located there. At the docks, tons of fish were being unloaded from fishing boats into huge baskets or ice filled containers to be placed later aboard trucks or horse drawn carriages destined for far away villages. Sin Heang, a member of the National Mekong River Committee of Cambodia estimated that for every four kilograms of fish consumed in the country, three came from the Tonle Sap Lake.

The rest of the route was covered with dust and dotted with pot holes. The submerged forests around the Lake were severely ravaged under Pol Pot's rule. No big trees were left standing and only thick and low bushes grew on the mudflats. Of the 800 km² of submerged forests barely one half of them were spared.

As to be expected, the results proved catastrophic: with no trees left to retain the water, lake shores became eroded and fertile soil sank to the lake bottom. Only a few years back, during the Dry Season the average depth of the lake stood at about 2 meters. Now, at some places it measured only half a meter. During the summer, the water is shallow

and the scorching heat kills thousands of white fish whose remains float to the surface. Only black fish that can breathe with their gills and burry deep in the mud manage to survive. Some species of black fish that can walk on their fins have to move overland for hours from dry to deep water holes to stay alive. The loss of fish supply not only threatens the livelihood of the fishermen in the Tonle Sap Lake, it also deprives the Cambodians of an important source of protein intake. Facing such a stark situation, the environmentalists sound a pressing alarm warning that the Tonle Sap Lake is running the risk of turning into an “ecological calamity”.

We boarded a boat to reach a floating village. The putrid smell of fish left to dry on the rooftops of houses in all size and shape greeted us from afar. Restaurants, bazaars, barbershops, and even gas stations were abuzz with activities. The only difference was that at this place people move around on boats. Like in Châu Đốc, floating cages were used to raise fish. Quite a few Vietnamese fishermen and their families lived in this village. The locals called them “Yuon” or Northerners. It is near impossible to differentiate the two groups by their activities.

Our group spent a night at the Tonle Sap Lake. In the early dawn, when nature was still plunged in darkness, I was overcome with a strange feeling when I overheard fishermen conversing with each other in Vietnamese as they were getting ready to set out for a new day of fishing. “Cấp Duồn”, this terrifying term meaning “being beheaded and your body left floating down the river” still evoked dreadful memories in the mind of the local Vietnamese fishermen. They fell victim to it under the Khmer Rouge’s rule. It could also happen again to them at the hands of ordinary Cambodians considering the long standing historical animosity that exists between the two peoples. Yet, the thought of going back to Vietnam and leaving the Tonle Sap Lake behind never crossed their mind.

Our group of tourists left the port on a big boat. Before our eyes, an immense body of water stretched to the far horizon. Menacing clouds

drifted in the sky above while tall waves raged on the lake below. We had the impression of sailing on the high sea not on an inland lake.

At the mere mention of the project to build a hydroelectric dam at the Tonle Sap Lake, our friend Sin Heang instantly voiced his vehement opposition. And his reasons were quite valid: The fish that came from the Great Lake have to successfully negotiate a 400 to 500 km long swim upstream. The dam would pose a formidable barrier for them to surmount before they could reach their destination. Considering that each species of fish has its own timetable to migrate upstream, there could possibly be no gates or fish ladders large enough to accommodate all of them.

How many Sin Heang can you find walking the earth? In practical terms, the ban on cutting down the flooded forests cannot stop the peasants who need to find new lands to till from doing so. Their number is small but the destructions they wreak are immeasurable. It was humans who turned the Aral Sea in Central Asia into a desert. Whether the already anemic heart of the Great Lake can go on beating or not depends not only on men like Pol Pot but also on every ordinary peasant in the land of Angkor.

CHAPTER VIII

IN THE DARK SKY ECHOES THE CRANE'S CALL OF SORROW

*Stranger, since you have come all this way, please stay.
When your trees take root and your plants grow green,
You may return, if so desires your heart.*

Folk song from Southern Vietnam

Being a member of the Mekong River Committee, Xuân is in the best position to see how majestic and at the same time how vulnerable the Mekong is. Besides, being born and raised in the Mekong Delta of South Vietnam, he gets to be intimately familiar with that river. In his tender youth, he grew up and regularly swam in the Tiền River, the Vietnamese name for one of two main branches of the Mekong, that flows by his village. The other branch, the Hậu River, runs far south. As he grew older, he began to explore its length and felt as if its current and his heart seemed to be beating at the same rhythm.

For millenniums, this river which appears to be indomitable also serves as the lifeline of the 20 million inhabitants in the Delta. Just over

one century ago, people had no inkling as to the location of its source.

That turbulent river can be likened to a dragon whose head rests in the high clouds hovering over the sacred highlands of Tibet. Its whole body undulates over an unimaginably long stretch of land. At times, it wriggles violently, foams at the mouth, or screams on top of the highlands and old forests. At others, it unwinds placidly on the plains or deltas where its nine tails continuously wag and snake their way to the continental shelves bordering the East Sea.

At the onset of the Rainy Season in September, the Mekong transforms herself into a “vast sea” dyed in the red color of alluvia. She overflows her banks then floods the surrounding lands. The houses now look like conic hats floating on the surface of the water. By the time April comes, it ushers in the Dry Season. The Mekong still keeps her considerable size unchanged: the same dark mass of water stretching from two to three miles across, the familiar scenery and sparse villages.

Several months into the Dry Season, Xuân undertakes a trip northward. Upstream the river, near the Khemerat Rapids, he is taken aback at the sight of a river so parched that one can almost walk across its bed. It dawns on him then that it is the water from the Mekong’s tributaries that spares the deltas in his country from drought and wretched misery.

At that moment, in Xuân’s eyes, the Mekong takes on an anatomical or even a mathematical model with myriads of statistics: Flow rate 40,000 m³/second in the Rainy Season compared to 2,000 m³/sec during the Dry one – 20 times less!

Only tens of thousands of years back, the Mekong began to carve Đòng Bằng Sông Cửu Long or the Nine Dragons Delta from the seabed. The iron in the river’s silt combined with the sulphur of the seawater to form pyrite sediments that slowly settled to the bottom of

the ocean. As millenniums went by, those layers upon layers of deposits raised the seabed higher and higher until it emerged from the water and gave us the vast and fertile fields we have today in the Mekong Delta. Subsequently, the riverbed has a negative incline meaning that as the river approaches the East Sea its bed becomes more elevated.

Nevertheless, the pyrite still remains buried under the soil and water. When exposed to oxygen, it produces sulfuric acid rising slowly to the surface and turns into a scourge, a torment to the inhabitants of the Mekong Delta.

Not long ago, Dr. Xuân found out that the characteristics of the soil in that region can vary noticeably within a small area. It can be very acidic at one spot and totally different a few hundred yards away depending on the water levels, the thickness of the soil layer or the vegetation that grows there. Xuân learned a lot from the local peasants. More than anybody else, they know the land they live on intimately. Its secrets are like an open book to them that's why, against all odds, they succeeded in devising ingenious ways to cultivate the land. They wisely realize that the sulphate in the soil is like a sleeping tiger. The best is just to leave it alone.

Far from being an intellectual locked up in his ivory tower, through his voluminous book "*The Ecosystem of the Mekong Delta*", Xuân demonstrates that he possesses an open mind that has helped him learn valuable lessons from the past.

His academic training leads him to believe that in order to increase rice production first it is necessary to build dykes to prevent saltwater intrusion then construct gigantic reservoirs to store the fresh water of the Rainy Season to irrigate and wash away the acid and salt in the soil during the Dry Season.

To his utmost surprise, Xuân discovered that instead of trying to

fight salinization, the farmers living in the southern tip of the Delta just leave the intruding seawater alone during the Dry Season. When the Rainy Season comes, the ensuing annual flood will automatically wash away the sulphate and salt deposited by the seawater to ready the land for cultivation. The added benefit is the large quantity of shrimps and marine life that is left behind in the fields and canals by the receding seawater. Those farmers have in fact introduced an ingenious “rice-shrimp culture” that proves amazingly adaptable to the complex ecosystem of the Delta. What the farmers are actually doing is practice the “*trắm thuy*” technique or let the land be submerged in water with extraordinary results.

It is not Teacher Xuân but innovative farmers who appear as guests on TV shows to advise their peers on how to cope with the problems caused by seawater and maximize the harvest of rice and shrimps. Xuân and the hydro-engineers sent from the central government to build a dam in Gò Công Tây to ward off the seawater learned an unforgettable lesson in humility when the enraged peasants took matters in their own hands and tore it down on account of its uselessness.

Then there is the scourge of flooding the unruly “nine dragons” visits on the terrified population each year. Relying on their time-tested experience with the Red River in North Vietnam, some people firmly believe in the building of a solid system of dikes to tame the Mekong.

In Vietnamese old legends, the Mountain God Sơn Tinh stands for the strength of dikes while the Water God Thủy Tinh symbolizes the destructive power of water. Those two vied for the heart of the beautiful princess represented by the Delta. So, the competing suitors became locked in mortal combat. The higher the water rose, the taller the mountain grew ending in the final victory of the Mountain God. In other words, the story shows the triumph of humans over water as they build higher dikes along the Red River’s banks.

On the other hand, the people in the Mekong Delta opt for a more Taoist approach that is to let things take their natural course and achieve harmonious union with mother nature. In lieu of confronting the flood, they choose to cohabit with it: “*sống chung với lũ*”. Never mind building higher and bigger dikes. Their strategy is to dig deeper and larger canals not only for the purpose of irrigation, but at the same time to improve their transportation network and open ways for the water to discharge into the East and West Seas. In fact, they are just carrying out the traditional method adopted by the Óc Eo civilization of the Funan Empire which was wiped off the map by a catastrophic flood around the mid-6th century.

The motor boat glides full speed along a five-year old canal. By the end of this century, thousands of miles of new canals will be added to the system. The most noticeable thing is the yellow tinge of iron rust that colors the landscape: the trunks of mangrove trees, hulls of boats, landing jetties, pontoon bridges, fishnets, human feet, you name it... in brief, everything that the water touches. Apart from the rare fish and shrimps that come inland with the high tides during the Rainy Season, no other living thing can be spotted in the clear water mixed with sulphate acid. Except maybe a few water lilies that are able to adapt to the new environment!

The evidence is indisputable: since 1975, the inhabitants in the Mekong Delta have been witnesses and victims of the relentless deforestation of the mangroves occurring in their area. This destructive and unsustainable activity comes at a price. The tiger has been awakened from its slumber! It only takes a glance at the weeds for the peasants to tell if the land is ready for cultivation or not. To this day, they continue to wait for heavy rains to come and wash away the acid and salt so that the weeds can grow on their land. Meanwhile, they will go on digging canals, cutting down the forests and looking for higher grounds for farming.

Wetlands such as Tam Nông continue to shrink and not much of them are left intact. The future of bird sanctuaries like Tràm Chim is hanging in the balance. Probably Đồng Tháp Mười or the Plain of Reeds would turn into salt infested fields suitable only for shrimp farming amid a few green paddies and red roofs. The day will come when the cranes will stop returning to the sacred river that is helplessly watching its brown current slowly occluding.

The young guide urges the group consisting of Bé Tư, Đạt and Xuân to return to the boat so that they can reach Tam Nông Province before dark. In the warm light of dusk, the boat picks up speed leaving golden crested waves on its wake. To keep in good terms with the local authorities, they pay a visit to Mười Nhe, the District Committee Secretary of Tam Nông.

On this special occasion, Thuận, Mười Nhe's son, accompanies them. A fresh graduate of Cần Thơ University, Thuận heads a hydrological research project at the Tam Nông area. This tall and robust looking young man is a study in contrast of his short and thin father. There is a romantic side in Thuận that is totally absent in his father, the consummate pragmatist. He is passionate about his work to preserve nature and the bird sanctuaries. To put it differently, Thuận is the negative of his communist father's photograph. He feels estranged from his father's past, disconnected from the war and does not wish to be reminded of it.

Though a good student, Thuận did not score high in the mandatory political science courses on Marxism-Leninism and Hồ Chí Minh's Ideology at his University even though they earned credits that counted toward any degree or diploma since Liberation Day. It is a fact that courses in political science are not very popular with the students these days. Lý Chánh Trung, a leftist professor and journalist, has ironically observed that those are courses that "*instructors [are] unwilling to teach and students reluctant to learn*".

Thuận's cold indifference to the "revolutionary background" of his family may account for his poor performance while taking those courses. The thought of joining the Communist Youth League let alone the Communist Party, never crossed his mind. Judging from an ideological standpoint, one can say Thuận proves to be a total disappointment to his father Mười Nhe.

With the support from Bé Tư, Thuận was awarded a scholarship from the International Crane Foundation to further his education either in Europe or America. Without hesitation, he chooses to go to the United States because as far as he is concerned that country leads the world in everything. This feeling prevails from the North to the South of Vietnam. Especially in the North where every family cherishes the "American Dream" of sending at least one child to study in the United States.

Thuận confides in Bé Tư:

– I still need to pass the TOEFL English tests first. It's quite a pain! They require a score of at least 550 while mine hovers from 530 to 540 with no hope for improvement!

Bé Tư tries to reassure him:

– You did very well already. I know of native speakers who failed the test too.

Thuận changes to another subject:

– Oh! I want to ask you. What is the situation with the cranes in the United States now?

Bé Tư replies:

– Only the Whooping and Sandhill Cranes still exist in North

America. The Whooping Cranes are in the throes of extinction and every effort is made to save them. The other species is faring better. At first glance, the cranes look similar to the herons but they are actually very different species. The cranes belong to the Grudae family. In flight, they strain their necks forward, flap their wings at a slower rate and emit a sound like “Kar-r-r-o-o-o” that can be heard from far away. Very similar to the Eastern Sarus Cranes in Vietnam! In general, cranes prefer to live outdoor. They build their nests on the ground and only lay two eggs at a time. Their food of choice is shrimps, crabs, clams, and occasionally small plants that grow in the mudflats of Florida and California that look like those at Tam Nông.

Thuận is not only bright but he also shows an extraordinary eagerness to learn. He always keeps a cassette recorder handy to record the calls of the birds or practice English pronunciations. Bé Tu never stops marveling at Thuận’s ability to mimic the bird calls including those of the cranes.

As they walk, Thuận begins to open up:

– I’d love to work at this place for a long while. The thing is my father and I. We are constantly at odds with each other. On several occasions, he almost threw me out of the house! However, he has his reasons to do what he has been doing in order to care for the people under his charge.

That’s all Thuận manages to say as he tries to get hold of himself. While walking amidst the bare lots that have been cleared of mangrove trees they are surrounded by cut logs lying around the banks of the canal as well as the sides of the road. Even young mangrove trees are being indiscriminately cut down and left to bask under the hot sun.

Overcome with sadness, Thuận continues:

– Since the advent of “Renovation”, more and more people from all corners of the country have come and resettled here. They compete with each other in cutting down the mangrove forests to turn them into paddies or shrimp farms. They love to say: “Rice or shrimp will bring in cash – and fast one at that”. If everything goes on unchecked, it wouldn’t be long for the mangrove forests to disappear from Đồng Tháp Mười. In such an event, then “bye-bye” to the Tam Nông Bird Sanctuary.

Bé Tư impatiently asks:

– You mean there’s no existing program to preserve Tam Nông’s ecosystem?

Thuận replies:

– Of course, Teacher. The central government has launched a program to conserve “*làng cổ Đồng Tháp Mười*/the ancient villages of the Plain of Reeds”. It’s sad for me to say it but the old adage “the edicts of the king must give way to the customs of the village” still holds true. It means that there are no clear cut rules and laws to follow. The people still do as they see fit. Just like during the war years. All authority still rests in the hand of the local party committee. Tam Nông “offers” a “*điển hình*” example.

Bé Tư is intrigued by the new term Thuận used. She inquires:

– What do you mean by “*điển hình*”?

Thuận explains:

– It means typical, a representative model – something to emulate. Like the term “role model” in English.

Xuân, Đạt, and Bé Tư all burst out laughing lightheartedly. Bé Tư

learned from Xuân that in Mùì Nhe we have the stereotype of the rare “orthodox” communists who still walk the earth. He was born, grew up in Đòng Tháp Mùì and joined the resistance before finishing elementary school.

Proclaimed a “hero” of the war against the American imperialists he was without equal in bravery. During an engagement with the Americans, a bomb shrapnel robbed him of his left eye. Nowadays, he serves as member of the District party committee of Tam Nông.

It is beyond doubt that Mùì Nhe loves his Đòng Tháp Mùì. The “problem” lies with his outlook. As far as he is concerned, a “good” ecology is synonymous to an “easy” living condition for his compatriots. That end in itself justifies all the “modern” means that are being widely used all over Tam Nông. To cut down the mangrove trees, besides the traditional machetes, people also resort to electric saws. To fish, in addition to regular nets, one does not have any qualms in giving explosives and electric currents a try. To catch birds, besides ordinary traps, people do not hesitate using other kinds of weapons such as shotguns loaded with shrapnel and even equipped with telescopic sights.

One must say that conditions at Tam Nông, the birth place of Mùì Nhe, change with every passing day: the forests are shrinking by large stretches; fish and shrimps, regardless of their size, are being killed en masse and their dead bodies float on the surface of the water; birds, even endangered ones, are being hunted for their meat. In one word, Mùì Nhe manages to bring about “easy” if not affluent living conditions to the local inhabitants under his charge. One even dares to say that he succeeded in introducing instant “prosperity” to his province.

The guests are treated to a lavish meal of rice wine, meat, fish and even crane meat stewed in herbs. That special recipe which is also considered a form of medication according to Oriental Medicine is

reputed to have the ability to prolong life. In Mùrì Nhe's book, that dish tastes especially delicious when enjoyed with *đế Gò Đen Long An*, a famous rice wine from remote past since the time of Nam Tiến/Southern March.

The Tibetan nomads believe that a dragon named *Zjiadujiawangzha* lives at the top of the sacred mountain. That animal protects the purity of the water and anyone who drinks from it will enjoy a long life. But in Mùrì Nhe's case, instead of believing in the magical power of a sip of water, he prefers to put his bet on the meat of the "messenger of the ecology".

That meal served with the meat of an endangered species reminds Bé Tur of her student years when she was actively engaged in the protest movements. She was, at the time, an enthusiastic member of the World Wildlife Conservation Society. In the company of her friends, she demonstrated in front of the Soviet Embassy in Washington D.C. to protest against a restaurant in Moscow that was issued a permit to serve dishes of endangered species. Diners had to pay thousands of greenbacks for a meal at that place. The rarer the animal, the bigger the bill. Hopefully, the Eastern Sarus Cranes did not figure in that restaurant's menu as it is being served at Mùrì Nhe's table.

It takes Bé Tur a while to learn of an illegal ring that runs from the Bird Sanctuary to supply the *Quán Chim Restaurant* with the rarest of bird meat. That eatery is the favorite haunt of the Saigon jet set. Regardless of time and space, in Bé Tur's view, the act of seeking out the meat of animals on the way to extinction for personal gratification is nothing less than criminal and barbarous.

Judging from the criteria set in the "Five-Year Plan" for economic development, Mùrì Nhe has achieved these outstanding records: the local population has doubled in size; the once vast area of mangrove forests in *Đông Tháp Mùrì Province* has been reduced in half; in the bird

sanctuary, the crane population previously reported to be in the thousands now stands at less than 500. In the eyes of the peasants, comrade Mùrì Nhe is to be highly commended for having rapidly transformed the once wetlands around Tam Nông into a prosperous province.

Mùrì Nhe greets his visitors in a spacious and comfortable room within the newly built provincial office building. The bright red national flag on the wall serves as a background to an altar decorated with incense burners and a white plaster bust of Uncle Hồ. The noteworthy thing is the absence of the customary banderols.

Mùrì Nhe is thin and small in stature. The pale color of his skin is indicative of people afflicted with anemia that is brought about by chronic malaria. His bony and shiny face betrays past hardships and deprivations while a large scar at the corner of the left eye added a sense of fierceness to his appearance. Mùrì Nhe no longer wears the customary mortar shape hats “nón cối” and rubber sandals “dép râu” favored by the old communist cadres. He meets the group in a short-sleeve white shirt, dark pants, and leather shoes. A gold Seiko watch, the prize from the campaign against the bourgeois class and Chinese compradors after “liberation day”, adorns his left wrist. On his desk rests a leather briefcase indicating that its owner is an important government official. A 19” color Sony TV and a VCR player occupy a corner of the room.

Mùrì Nhe proudly states:

– I have to depend wholly on my son to handle the electronic equipment. Our neighbors all go to him for technical advices.

Turning his eyes in Thuận’s direction, Mùrì Nhe cannot conceal his pride while speaking. Nevertheless, as usual, he immediately puts his son down afterward:

– He’s good at that. But in matters of politics, he’s no good – a zero. He’s a bookworm and too gullible. He even talks with me about such nonsense as the ecology or stuffs like that!

Caught up in his own world, Mùoi Nhe continues:

– You have come a long way to talk with me about the preservation of birds. But, first, let me make clear to you that above all things the people of Tam Nông District must be assured of having two meals a day. Those who settle in this area are true proletariats. They do not own any land and have to work as hired hands to survive yet do not bring home enough to feed their families. All year round, they earn their keep with the sweat of their foreheads. My immediate task is to find land for them to grow rice and raise shrimps. This is the very reason that prompted our committee to approve the cutting down of mangrove trees, develop the buffer zone at the Tam Nông Sanctuary to have enough land to give the people.

Mùoi Nhe enthusiastically elaborates:

– The area used for rice cultivation and shrimp farming keeps on expanding faster every year. The tax on agriculture collected in our district far exceeds that of others in Đồng Tháp Mùoi Province. I’d like to draw your attention to the spirit of volunteerism of the people. They do not have to wait for someone to urge them on because they know that the committee party “Đảng Ủy” has their best interests at heart.

As he speaks, Mùoi Nhe points to the newly built houses with red roofs not very far from the office of the District communist party. They all have tall TV antennas rising straight up to the blue sky.

From Mùoi Nhe’s place, the group pays a visit to Tư Trung, a war veteran and native of the far away village of Phú Hòa Chợ Lách, province of Bến Tre. Penniless, he resettled in this place but managed to

lead a comfortable life after only three short years. With his own hands, Tu Trung cleared more than five acres of mangrove forests which he then sold for tens of millions. In this way, he had enough money to build a new house and enough land left to plant two rice harvests each year that earn him a bundle. Much more than what the mangrove trees can fetch.

The thing that surprises Bé Tu the most in this trip to Vietnam is that everywhere she goes, she constantly hears people say : “Fast money, fast business, fast revenue, fast income” - even in the field of scientific research. It seems as if during the post-war era, people have come to the sudden realization that they have only one short life to live and nobody wants to strive for the distant paradise promised by the Communists any longer. As explained by Mười Nhe, Tu Trung and his family are praised as a typical pioneer “unit” in Tam Nông District. They join the entire country in the common march toward modernization and industrialization as the government launches its “Renovation” program.

It was Teacher Xuân who helped Mười Nhe introduce the HYV (High-Yield Variety) rice into the buffer district of Tam Nông in the hope that the more abundant harvests would improve the standard of living of the local inhabitants and eliminate the need to cut down the mangrove trees.

The ensuing events did not bear out Xuân’s expectations. It all started when the Department of Hydrology of the University of Cần Thơ called for the construction of four large drain pipes connected to the canal ringing the core area in order to regulate the water levels of the Bird Sanctuary. Unfortunately, the local farmers abused the system by draining the water in the wetlands to irrigate their fields during the Dry Season. Worse yet, while the water level subsided in the sanctuary, people realized that the cultivation of the High-Yield Variety rice would earn them more money so they continued to cut down the mangrove forest at an even faster pace. To make matter worse, this rice variety

has such unquenchable thirst that the farmers were forced to use more of the water from the Bird Sanctuary and build additional reservoirs to prevent their water from flowing south to the great despair of those who till downstream. With no designated authority to coordinate or arbitrate, Mùrì Nhe was given “*carte blanche*” to successfully develop Tam Nông at the expense of the Bird Sanctuary, the existence of thousands of cranes, and the water supply in the provinces to the south.

Mùrì Nhe confides in a soft voice:

– The war has exacted a horrific toll in life and suffering already. With the restoration of peace, the Party has the opportunity to work for the happiness of the people. For us, District communist party, that’s our top concern. Yet, some comrades from the central government in the company of blond hair and blue eye Americans came and questioned our way of doing business. They blamed us for being “cavalier” in the performance of our duty, for destroying the ecology.

Let me ask you this, comrades: “Why is the ecology so important that we have to offer the people’s need for food and clothing as sacrificial lamb on its altar?” Why is it that when people come to visit, they have to tell us how to arrange the furniture and where to put the altar? For years, like leeches with so many suckers, the colonialists, imperialists have been bleeding white the countries of Africa and Asia of their resources. Now that they are rich, well fed and well clothed, they turn to their favorite hobbies. They return to Vietnam, care less whether our people have enough to eat or not, lord it over us and preach to us to “conserve the green color”, preserve the mangrove forests and save those cranes and other birds. That’s unacceptable!

The anger and hatred that were kept pent up in him for so long burst wide open:

– Speaking about destroying the ecology, who could outdo the

American imperialists? During our struggle, we knew no fear. But when it comes to chemical warfare, we became helpless. To flush us out of the forests, they stopped at nothing. They used the most sophisticated equipment to dig canals and dry up the wetlands, dropped napalms and Agent Orange to defoliate the forests and other vegetation. After the war, the forests still stand there hopelessly polluted and completely destroyed.

Mười Nhe continues in his steely voice:

– The peace we enjoy now has been bought with much blood. Yet the comrades in many of the Party’s organizations have already put down their guards forgetting that the imperialists whether in war or in peace do not change their stripes. Our comrade, the General Secretary, has wisely warned us about the traps of the tricky peaceful evolution doctrine “*Diễn Tiến Hòa Bình*” advocated by the enemies. Surprisingly enough, many people do not seem to be aware of the danger.

Then Mười Nhe begins to dwell on his misgivings:

– I wish we could return to war time footing when everybody was of one mind and unquestionably obeyed the Party. Now, everybody is allowed to have his own opinions. Particularly, those who claim to have been trained abroad. They are being promoted rapidly without consideration for how long they have been a party member. They may be experts in their fields but not being politically adept, how can we expect them to lead correctly?

Mười Nhe changes to a more subdued voice:

– I am a wounded old veteran. At my age, it’d be high time for the Party to let me retire so that I can care for my elderly mother in her remaining years. I cannot keep on working like this forever you know? However, I still hear the call to duty from Uncle Hồ and the Party and

consider it my responsibility to hang around some more. The ongoing internal conflict among our leaders can lead to perilous times ahead for there is no clear cut frontline. I always frankly voiced my concerns on this issue during the meetings at the provincial level and to the visiting comrades who came from the central government...

As he speaks, Mươi Nhe glances at Uncle Hồ's bust on the altar in deep admiration and fondness. He adds with a shade of nostalgia in his voice:

– It's too bad that Uncle Hồ is no longer with us. Otherwise, this instability would not have happened. Take Thuận, my son. He grew up not knowing a single day of war. What has he learned aside from books? What does he know to claim to be a teacher to me?

Mươi Nhe is acting like a ferocious tiger while Thuận is content to listen to his father in silence, like a gentle puppy. On the way home, Xuân comments:

– A comrade from the central government who knows Mươi Nhe well said that the only way to convince him to stop destroying the mangrove forests is to appeal to his hatred of the enemies, his duty to maintain military vigilance...he must be convinced that cutting down the mangrove trees is tantamount to destroying the resistance bases for him to desist.

Đạt shares his thoughts on the subject:

– Probably, to the end of this century, the “degenerate” Red Capitalists and the unrepentant dogmatic Red “Purists” will continue to be a source of pain not only to mankind but also to birds and vegetation as well.

As a scientist, Bé Tư trusts that the wetlands and bird sanctuaries not only represent the wealth and beauty of the land but also act as

a rich biological treasure, a habitat for the reproduction and growth cycle of numerous birds and fish species or other animal lives. It is at those places that the rain water is stored and used to regulate the water level during the Dry Season. This vital tool to maintain the balance of the ecosystem has been in existence for millenniums but is now being threatened.

Diary of a Witness

Bé Tu felt she lost her innocence and her old way of thinking or feeling during a hasty trip to admit aunty Ba's child to the Saigon hospital. In the heart of the city once called the "Pearl of the Orient", one could still find "hell on earth": it reared its ugly head at a ward reserved for children who were afflicted with the mother of all diseases: malnutrition. Bé Tu could never erase from her mind the image of emaciated and pot-bellied kids lying forlornly on single mats reeking with the odor of urine. They lied without mattresses on rusty iron beds whose paint was long gone.

Those poor souls were kept in a room with dirty looking white washed walls spotted with dark blotches. A water container with human excrements floating on the top was placed in a damp and inadequately lit toilet next door. Not very far away, on the opposite side of the green lawn, stood an elegant, brand new pediatric clinic. This brightly lit and air-conditioned building of glass and tiles was stocked with the most costly brand-name medicine and equipped with the state of the art machines. Understandably, only loaded communist cadres or a small number of well-to-do families can send their offspring to be treated there. The medical fees at that place were astronomical and paid for in greenbacks. That did not prevent the clinic from being fully occupied.

By the time Bé Tu arrived, it was too late to save the life of aunty Ba's child. A needless death caused by a lack of medication. How many unlucky kids have breathed their last in such a quiet and unwarranted

manner each day? Only a narrow and grassy strip separated the two opposite worlds: one of light and the other of darkness.

In her teens, Bé Tư accompanied aunty Ba to seek work during the summer and fall harvests. They joined a group of peasants and rented a boat to sail from Bến Tre to Đồng Tháp Mười. Except for aunty Ba, the rest of them were all born right before or after 1975. Their age group accounted for more than half of Vietnam's 80 million strong population. This good-natured group was mostly poor, uneducated and lacking in ambition. The thing that shocked Bé Tư the most was that a good many of those illiterate people were addicted to cigarette and alcohols.

The weather was dry and sunny with no signs of incoming flood. Once more, they found lodging with uncle Mười Tân, an old acquaintance. His house was spacious but sparsely furnished so they split up into small groups to sleep at their allocated spaces. Uncle Mười Tân reserved a plank bed for Bé Tư and aunty Ba in an adjoining room.

This group of laborers traveled on boats along the canals. At the sight of a field in need of hired hands, they disembarked and set up temporary shelters made of nylon canvasses of the kind used in field combats to protect them from the sun but not from the rain. They cooked their meals using a communal kitchen. Young men or girls just went their separate way to bathe in the river.

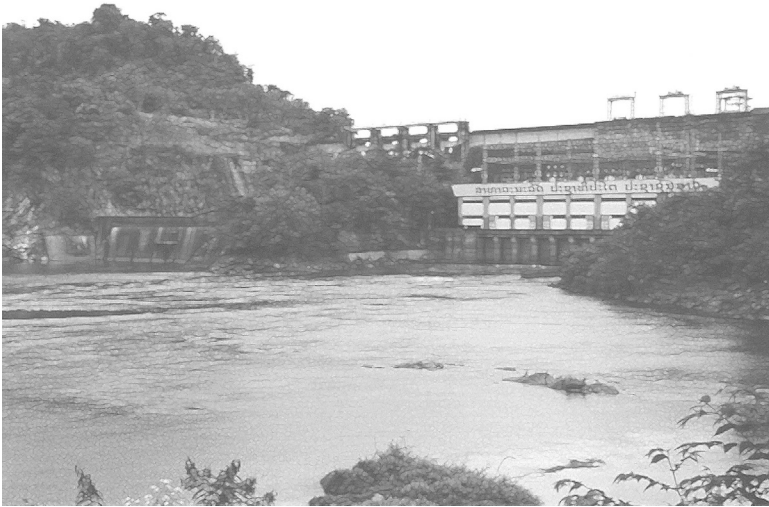
Hundreds of groups descended like that on the flooded paddies at the same time. They had to get the harvesting done before the onset of the rainy season so they toiled and moiled from early dawn until late dusk in the fields. Either under the scorching sun or drenching rain they had to cut the rice stalks feverously throughout the day while standing half submerged in the water. Their task would be rendered simple if all the stalks were growing straight up. Those stalks that grew flat on the muddy ground needed to be washed in the river before they were left to dry in the sun. After a day working under such harsh conditions,

the harvesters were completely exhausted, their limbs frozen stiff, and their bodies covered with cuts from scythes or sharp rice stalks. Their coveted wage for a month of hard work was several measures of rice - enough to stave off hunger for a whole year. Their lot was not very different from that of the Mexican migrant workers in California. Those second class citizens labored under the burning sun of the deserts, in the vegetable fields or orchards to be paid less than the minimum wages.

Anywhere she went, Bé Tu was overwhelmed by the indescribable poverty that plagued the common folks. Nonetheless, she found in them a disheartening sense of resignation. Any display of opulence only helped to accentuate their abject poverty.

Bé Tu loves nature with a passion. She writes about social issues with a dedicated yet measured, thorough yet thoughtful pen. Consequently, the first publication of her article "*Witness for Nature: A Divided Country, The Ecology of the Rich and Poor*" created quite a stir. At a time when the ecology becomes a hot topic of discussion throughout the nation, the soothing words in her article acts like a refreshing stream singing the happiness shared between man and nature, a harmonious pairing that is instinctive.

That night in Tam Nông was one more long, dark turn in the cycle of karmic revolution, spreading its dark cape over Vietnam and the whole continent of Asia. Mingled with the gushing flow of the Mekong in its thousand-year-old rhythm and the echo across the pitch-black firmament of a lone crane's sorrowful lament, Bé Tu thought she also heard the cries of a child.



Nam Ngum Dam completed in 1971, the first hydroelectric dam to be built during the very early and stormy years of the Vietnam War; represented the proud achievement of Laotian people on their march toward progress and development [photo by Ngô Thế Vinh, 12/2000]



Mittaphap Friendship Bridge, Vientiane-Nong Khai, built in 1994 by the Australians to provide Laos a door to the outside world



The Golden Stupa of That Luong, a symbol of Laos historic past



Arc de Triomphe Pantouxai, Vientiane



The Buddha Cave of Pak Ou



*Big fish and a kid in
Laos, fishes as main
source of protein
[source: IRN]*



*The Khone Waterfalls in the Dry Season and the Buddhist Monk
[source: Tom Fawthrop]*



*Pla Beuk, Giant Catfish, Pangasianodon Gigas of the Mekong, aka
Trey Reach in Khmer [source: Suthep Kritsanavarin]*



Catching fish at the Khone Waterfalls [source: Tom Fawthrop]



Crossing the Mekong to visit the The Buddha Cave of Pak Ou



Xayaburi construction site 1,260 MW, wide angle view, year 2014: the first hydroelectric dam in the series of projected 12 dams on the mainstream of the Mekong in Laos, started in 2012, projected date of completion and operation 2018 [source: Tom Fawthrop]



Laotians protest: Stop the Xayaburi Dam [source: Tom Fawthrop]



Don Sahong Project, warning sign at entrance of construction site: “Entering Without Permission Will Be Punished And Prosecuted” [photo by Tường Năng Tiến 03-18-2016]



Don Sahong Project, deforestation of construction site with bulldozers for clearing ground [photo by Tường Năng Tiến]



Don Sahong Project, Blasting Area Schedule [photo by Tường Năng Tiến]



Don Sahong Project, life in Khone Falls will never be the same again [photo by Tường Năng Tiến 03-18-2016]



Don Sahong Project, a new bridge and heavy equipment at construction site not from MegaFirst, a Malaysian construction company, but from Sinohydro International Corporation, the world's largest hydropower dam company [photo by Trương Năng Tiến]



Don Sahong Dam Unmistakable Fingerprints from China: Housing area for Chinese construction workers [photo by Trương Năng Tiến]

CHAPTER IX

THE SACRED RIVER WILL NEVER BE DRAINED DRY

*The fields are vast, the birds can fly at will
The river is large, the fish can swim in schools*
South Vietnamese Proverb

From the Sacred Mountain in the Tibetan High Plateau and the immensity of snow-covered mountain sides, the Mekong starts in a trickle then transforms itself into one of the major rivers in Asia. It snakes its way over a tremendously long distance.

At times, this turbulent river turns into whirlpools, and waterfalls. At others it traverses different climates and visits scores of ethnic groups before entering Vietnam where it acquires the new name “Cửu Long Giang” or Nine Dragons River. In this country, the river embraces the land’s sacred soil and goes through an extraordinary metamorphosis to branch out into nine estuaries stretching all the way to the East Sea. It is a well-known fact that the Tiền and Hậu Rivers, the two main branches of the Mekong, flow into the East Sea through their eight estuaries. Since nine is considered a lucky number, the tiny mouth Tranh Đè was added in order to arrive at the desired total. Likewise, the Thất Sơn or

Seven Mountains region has more than seven mountains but “seven” was chosen to make it a propitious name.

How does the river get that name Cửu Long Giang. As recorded in the “*Gia Định Thống Chí*” or Chronicle of Geography and History of the Land of Gia Định later known as South Vietnam, the name Cửu Long was coined by Trịnh Hoài Đức, a descendant of Chinese immigrants who resettled in Trấn Biên, today’s Biên Hòa. Trịnh was born in Fukien, South China in 1765 – in the same year as the revered Vietnamese poet Nguyễn Du, author of *The Tale of Kiều*. He successfully passed the court examinations and served under the emperors Gia Long and Minh Mạng reaching the highest position of Hiệp Biện Đại Học Sĩ. Trịnh Hoài Đức passed away in 1825, five years after Nguyễn Du.

Đạt and his sister Bé Tư were born in the Mekong Delta. The mere mention of that name conjures up in people’s mind the idea of rain and flood. To deal with flood is nothing new to those who inhabit along the banks of the Delta’s countless arroyos and rivers. Every year, like clockwork, the rivers bring with them layers upon layers of silt to fertilize the land as well as fish or shrimps to nourish the people. The high water also comes to wash away the acid deposits and reduce the content of Agent Orange buried deep inside the dead forests, a legacy of the Vietnam War.

It happened many, many years ago but Đạt can never forget the biggest flood that occurred when he was only ten years old. It was then in mid-May. The first waves of water that came crashing down from upstream already took on the deep red color of blood. Silt was not the only thing that dyed the water red. Đạt’s father sometimes mentioned to him that in some years the water also contained real human blood without any additional comments. It took Đạt a long while before he learned of the true meaning of his father’s words.

Unlike the ferocious Red River, in times of big floods, the Tiền and

Hậu Rivers usually just overflow their banks and gradually submerge the surrounding land. The fact that in the Rainy Season the Tonle Sap River reverses its course and flows into the Great Lake upstream is in part responsible for the mild behavior of those two rivers.

Đạt vividly remembers in that particular year, everything took a fast and unexpected turn. The water flowed more profusely, rose higher at a faster pace, and came almost a full month early. It caught the farmers completely off-guard even though they expected high water and possibly a big flood because yellow ants had moved their eggs to taller trees and mosquitoes and bees that arrived from the mountains also nested in higher grounds.

The water rushed down fast carrying with it broken branches and huge clusters of purple hyacinths in bloom. Then, the water began to rise from 20 to 30 cm a day. Even floating rice stalks could not grow apace with the rising water and just died out. Canals, rice paddies, highways... were all inundated and became undistinguishable from each other.

The flood was exceptionally big that year. In the lowlands, houses were submerged to their roofs and the tree leaves - all beaten up by the waves - hung tattered from their branches. Surviving dogs, chickens, or people were stranded on rooftops made of thatch or corrugated tiles. Only ducks that adapted well to water appeared unaffected in their shiny feathers.

Đạt and his two siblings were crouching on the roof. Being a shy young little girl, Bé Tu was allowed by her mother to stay fully clothed while her two brothers were left running around naked to keep their clothes dry. The sky seemed to drop and its somber color gave the impression it was soaked in water. It was not until noon that the sunrays came out and brought with them some warmth. However, on the earth below, there was nothing but an immense

and frigid body of water. The golden rice stalks had disappeared and only “*bông điên điên*” or the blooming yellow *Sesbania sesban* flowers were still floating up and down with the undulating waves. Đạt went along with his father on a boat to gather some “*bông điên điên*” *sesbania* and catch innumerable mud carps descending from the Great Lake.

*Lục bình bông tím, điên điên bông vàng
Điên điên mọc ở đất làng
Lục bình trôi nổi như phường hát rong...*

Duckweeds wear the purple color
Sesbania flowers the gold color
Sesbania flowers grow in the villages
Duckweeds float to all places...
Like a group of wandering actors

The Khmer people call the *sesbania* flowers “Srock Snor”. These weed-like plants grow all over the riverbanks. Mixed with scampi shrimp or prawns, they would make a delicious salad. A good chef would know how to use them to prepare a terrific soup. The best time to cut the flowers is before the sun reaches high in the sky otherwise they can give a bitter flavor when cooked.

Enthused by the sight of the silver fish jumping in the nets, Đạt forgot all about the rain, flood and chilly wind. “In the Rainy Season people eat the silver fish, come the Dry Season they switch to the black ones”. In little more than half a day, the two of them were able to catch several bucketsful of fish. They kept some for the day’s meals and use the rest either to make fish sauce or sell at the market. You can call it a “market” if by it you mean a few bamboo stalls temporarily erected on an elevated dry lot to cater to the needs of the locals.

Đạt and his father carried the few measures of dark rice the latter

had to dive under the water to cut a few days back to the road side to let them dry. It is true that theirs is a hard life but like their countrymen they just endure it stoically since it is not in their habit to complain. For more than 300 years, the pioneers from the Hai Huyện, Thuận Quảng Provinces had answered the calls of the Nguyễn Lords to march South, also known as Nam Tiến. In the new and inhospitable frontiers they found mountains and forests infested by armies of humming mosquitoes, the water swarming with blood sucking leeches and the riverbanks the stomping ground of ghosts, vipers, tigers, crocodiles... Once in the new land, they kept reminding each other of an old saying that reflects their frame of mind:

*Tới đây thì ở lại đây
Bao giờ bén rễ xanh đây thì về*

Stranger, since you have come all this way, please stay,
After your trees take root and your plants turn green,
You may go back home if so desires your heart.

That year's harvest had come to naught and the loss in human lives - mostly helpless children, was heartbreaking. Personally, Đạt lost Sanh, his dearest friend since the fifth grade. Those lucky enough to survive just wiped their tears dry, waited for the water to recede to repair their homes, replanted the few rice seeds they could save... then went on with their life. It is never too late to start anew.

Regardless of what happened, the years Đạt spent as a child in his village were blessed with more fond memories than sad ones. Mother Nature can be bountiful yet also heartless. At times, she proves unforgiving while at others lenient towards her children. In the absence of flood, the harvests will be plentiful; trees in the orchards weighed down with fruits; rice paddies teeming with fish, shrimps and frogs.

So much so that there is a proverb from South Vietnam that says:

*Chiều chiều quạ nói với diều
Cù lao Ông Chưởng có nhiều cá tôm*

In the afternoon the crow tells the migrating kite
The Ông Chưởng Island is teeming with fish and shrimps.

Not only are they thriving but their meat when cooked takes on the scent of the local paddies and orchards.

Each time that he was allowed to visit his paternal grandmother, Đạt was thrilled thinking of the dishes she was about to prepare for him: sweet tamarinds, coconut milk, coconut candies, coconut fritters, prawns roasted with coconut, fried palm worms, fish stewed in earthen pots, not to forget sweet and sour fish soup. In Đạt's young mind, there was no better cook than his grandmother in this world! The proof? He had never tasted anything better than the food from her kitchen, drank a glass of coconut milk more refreshing than that of his native land.

If Bồng Sơn Tam Quan in Central Vietnam is famous for its coconuts, then Bến Tre, where Đạt's father came from, is the coconut capital of the South. The way Đạt looks at it, every single part of this tree is useful to man. This may be the reason why the project he submitted for graduation from the famed College of Architecture at Cal Poly in San Luis Obispo did not deal with a big shopping mall in Hanoi or Saigon, but "*nhà ánh sáng*" or a "sunny coconut house" built mainly with materials from the coconut tree to provide shelter to the peasants in the Mekong Delta.

In the people's mind a rice field is considered immense when egrets can fly over it for a long distance with their wings completely outstretched. In his childhood, Đạt has gone to such a field hunting for egrets and field rats.

In the old days, Đạt often accompanied Xuân on those hunting trips.

The two went to the open fields, smeared their face with mud except the eyes then lay still waiting for the egrets to come. Large flocks would land nearby but the two just grabbed the unlucky ones that happened to be standing within their reach. Of the two, Xuân was the more audacious one. He just lay in wait motionless and impervious to the risk of having his eyes pecked by the birds. So it is not at all surprising that he alone caught egrets. On the other hand, Đạt and his younger sister Bé Tư were adept at catching a lot of soft-shelled crabs that their grandmother used as the main ingredient in her famous dish “*bún riêu cua*” or crab noodle soup. The remainder she would preserve with salt for later use. It is a lot of fun to go egret hunting. However, the idea of eating egret congee or field rats is somewhat unappealing to Đạt.

By the time, the two childhood friends Đạt and Xuân met again after a long absence, Xuân already earned his doctorate degree and Đạt had become an American-trained architect. When Đạt reminisced about the times the two of them went hunting for egrets and rice-field rats, Xuân just smiled. His attachment to the countryside remained deep but by now he had acquired a new passion.

Except for the time spent lecturing, in good or bad weather, Xuân would be busy with his students in the Agriculture Department tending to the rice seedlings they planted in the fields. They were doing experiments in intensive cultivation aiming to have 4.5 rice crops per year by applying the rotation planting method with weekly harvesting. Their goal was to double the annual yield of 15 tons of rice per acre thus assuring a steady level of rice export and consumption for Vietnam throughout the next century.

Xuân played a crucial role in the introduction of the Miracle High Yield Variety Rice (HYV) into the Mekong Delta. His single most remarkable achievement was to succeed in persuading the peasants to give up their traditional farming methods and switch to the new rice variety with short stalks but high yield. They eventually

grew so fond of it that they called it “Honda Rice” because thanks to it they became well off enough to buy Honda motorcycles, Honda electric generators...

Every night, they watched their favorite TV programs. Topping their list were “*cải lương*” the renovated theater shows on Saturday nights to be followed by Teacher Xuân who came on the screen to answer questions from the viewers. In Đạt’s opinion, if Vietnam became the second rice exporter in the world, it was in large part thanks to Xuân and the Agriculture Department at the University of Cần Thơ.

In all modesty, Xuân attributes that feat primarily to the works of the farmers, the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI), the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and other unsung heroes. Among them, Xuân still remembered Thomas Hargrove, a long-time colleague and friend at IRRI in the Philippines and in the Mekong Delta.

Tom Hargrove graduated with a double major in Agriculture and Journalism from Texas A&M University. During the Vietnam War, he was drafted into the Army (1969-1970) and served as a U.S. military advisor to the Pacification Program run by the U.S. Special Operation Forces and the South Vietnamese security apparatus in Chương Thiện (renamed Long Mỹ Precinct, Hậu Giang Province). His passion for “rice” led this Vietnam Veteran to bring the high yield rice varieties IR5, IR8 from the IRRI to Chương Thiện at his own expense. This generous act helped triple the annual rice production thus dramatically improved the living standards of the Vietnamese farmers. The Vietcong suspected him of being a CIA agent but left him alone because of what he did for the local peasants.

After his tour of duty in the Mekong Delta, this American first lieutenant returned to civilian life in the United States. But his

Vietnam experience changed him drastically. He began to show all the classic PTSD symptoms. Even though he was not directly involved in the killing of Vietnamese civilians, especially the innocent women and children by B52 bombers and mortars, Tom still felt guilty and depressed. He often suffered from nightmares and flashbacks. All known cures, including drug or group therapy, proved helpless in the treatment of his “Vietnam syndrome”. Consequently, he turned to long hours of work in his lab to find some relief. That was his own way to cope with his personal demon.

During a visit to the IRRI in Los Banos, Xuân met Tom at a time the latter was going through a bout of depression. In their conversation, Xuân let Tom know that the Vietnamese farmers never forgot the good that he did and reassured him that “as an agriculturalist, an international rice breeder” he will remain forever their benefactor.

At Xuân’s invitation, Tom took a “homecoming” trip to the Mekong Delta. He went to Chương Thiện – renamed Long Mỹ - the same old district where he used to serve. Though still very poor the people were then at least living in peace. Tom was shocked to witness the huge gap that separated the rich and poor in his travel. The old farmers still remembered Tom and welcomed him with open arms. Once there, Tom finally was able to find a closure to his inner struggle. He got rid of his PTSD and regained his latent inner strength. As his family life began to improve he found it easier to resume his normal duty.

In a subsequent visit, Tom brought with him the new rice variety IR 50404 to give to the farmers. This short grain variety has a short gestation period of less than 90 days and is relatively resistant to acid and salt infested soil. Among the pluses: easy to plant, reduced demand for fertilizer as well as pesticides, and higher yield of 7 to 9 tons per hectare. The farmers loved it and started large scale seedling of IR 50404 all over the Mekong Delta. Regrettably, not many farmers from the younger generations are aware of the connection between this new

high yield rice variety and Tom Hargrove, a former Vietnam veteran.

After his return to the IRRI in Los Banos, Tom devoted himself to the “*Green Revolution*” to help the world’s poor. At the same time, he obtained a Ph.D. degree, and became a long-time editor and head of the IRRI’s Communication and Publications Services (CPS; 1973-91).

After an eighteen-year stint at IRRI, Tom left the Far East to embark on a new adventure in South America working for the International Center for Tropical Agriculture (CIAT) in Colombia. This trip turned into a suspenseful saga. In September, 1994 he was kidnapped at gunpoint and held captive by FARC guerillas for 11 months. He was eventually released after his family paid two separate ransoms to his captors. From that experience, he wrote a book named “*Long March to Freedom*” that was published in 2011. It was later made into the movie “*Proof of Life*” in which he was the inspired character. Tom Hargrove died of heart conditions in Galveston, Texas in January 2011 at the age of 66. His extraordinary life history deserves to be remembered. One day, a plaque in his honor should be placed in the future “*Rice Museum*” of the Mekong Delta.

Xuân came from a farmer family in Bến Tre, well known as the cradle of the “*Đông Khởi*” Uprising (January 17-25, 1960), and was educated under the former South Vietnamese governments. In his youth he was an outstanding student of the Mỹ Tho High School. After passing the Baccalaureate with high flying colors he obtained a scholarship to study abroad and graduated with a M.Sc. in agricultural chemistry from the University of the Philippines and then a Ph.D. in crop science from a university in Australia. The extensive doctoral thesis “*The Ecosystem of the Lower Mekong Basin*” Xuân submitted caught the attention of the university which offered him a teaching position. However, the thought of living and working abroad never appealed to him. His past endeavors showed that, against all odds or challenges, Xuân was an intellectual fully committed to his Mekong Delta and all its beloved

people, rice fields, and orchards.

After the North took over South Vietnam in 1975, Xuân was “*lưu dụng*” meaning he was allowed to remain in his teaching position thanks to the communist government’s tolerance but certainly not “*lưu dụng*” meaning kept at his post on account of his abilities. A physician at the Phủ Doãn hospital - renamed Việt Đức - in Hanoi observed that although the difference between those two words is only in a diacritical mark, in real life it makes a sea of difference. This gentleman knew what he was talking about.

Xuân’s tenuous circumstances did not prevent him from devoting 14 to 16 hours a day to his work. A feat not many of those voted “*Chiến Sĩ Thi Đua*” or Advanced Model Workers of the new regime could accomplish.

Moreover, he directly managed the magazine “*Khoa Học Phổ Thông/Popular Science*” to disseminate general scientific knowledge to the mass. The articles it published ranged from the story about the “*cây mù u*” or calophylla tree, the “*cây so đũa*” or sesbania grandiflora grown in the people’s backyards to the American space shuttles.

There is nothing new about those spaceships which had undertaken regular flights into outer space. It was then beyond Xuân’s comprehension that the planned publication of a straightforward article about the space shuttles could create so much problems for him. Mười Tân, a communist propaganda cadre with a 7th grade education, ever-minding the political angle of the article insisted that Xuân add a comment that the Soviet Union was at least half a century more advanced than the United States in the space sciences. During a meeting of the editorial staff, Xuân openly used photographs and printed materials to prove that this was not the case. The end result? The article was shelved. Xuân would rather have it that way than consenting to “disinformation” in the realm of science.

In his view, this is not a matter of choice between the new and old, Capitalism and Socialism, but rather between the “true” and “false”. For him the slightest sign of compromise on this issue would surely start him on the gradual path of moral turpitude that had plagued a number of his colleagues in the North. Xuân believed that, regardless of time and space, one is partly responsible for the good and bad sides of the government under which one lives. The “*Cải Cách Ruộng Đất*” or Land Reform in North Vietnam and its scenes of “*đấu tố*” or kangaroo people’s courts could not possibly have happened in the South. Even if it did, it could not be carried out in such a harsh or draconian manner.

Born in the South, Xuân nevertheless maintains a wide circle of friends both in the North and overseas including the Friends of the Mekong Group. He never met its members personally but on account of their shared concern for the future of the Mekong and the ecosystem of the Mekong Delta, Xuân keeps in frequent contacts with them via the Internet.

Among them was Dr. Duy, a professor of Molecular Biology and Genetics at Stanford University. Duy came from the North, grew up in the South and graduated from an American university. Though a true native of North Vietnam, he holds an “extremist” view as far as the culture of the Mekong Delta is concerned. According to him, in the next millennium, the cultural center of Vietnam will shift from the Red River Delta to that of the Mekong. In past history, there were cultures that reached a high degree of attainment only to fall into total decline due to the inevitable work of time and the ecological impacts caused by humans. Borrowing the terminology of genetics one can say that their “cultural genes” have degenerated and become “defective”.

In the last fifty years or so, the prolonged war and division of Vietnam have caused its people and language to be mindlessly abused for subversive and deceptive political ends resulting in a completely devastated land. Words no longer keep their true meaning and the body

as well as spirit have lost their “oneness”. Even the decent, “common person” has turned into a “rarity”. From a historical standpoint, the duration of that sad period is insignificant. Yet, it has brought about a “detrimental mutation” that shook the nation’s culture to its core. Duy firmly believes that the vigorous, youthful “genes” of the Mekong Delta will conquer, replace and potentially revitalize the ruined heritage of the entire nation...

Xuân does not fully agree with Duy’s radical view but this novel way of reasoning does make him think. Personally, Xuân would place his bets on the “*Văn Minh Miệt Vườn*” Orchard Civilization or more precisely the “civilization of rice” of the South. It is a term coined by Son Nam, one of the most distinguished writers and descendant of the pioneers of the Southern March. Those down-to-earth, straight-talking and bighearted people still remain unspoiled or unaffected by intransigent traditions or rigid customs. The revival of the country requires nothing less than a well-defined and genuine new order.

A Home Town Revisited

During the Rainy Season, many sections of the roads become flooded and people have to resort to boats to move around. In this tropical climate, showers just come and go unannounced. A fresh breeze blows the silvery waves against the hull of the boat splashing tiny dust like water drops against Bé Tur’s face. This is not the first time she goes back to her native village. She has come to the Bird Sanctuary several times before in her efforts to obtain funding from the American Conservation Groups (ACG), World Wild Life Fund (WWF), and the International Crane Fund (ICF)... to sustain the sanctuary’s activities.

Bé Tur received her academic training from the University of Colorado. Her enthusiasm to study bird’s lives has paved the way for her to become a young and respected ornithologist and conservationist. The Tam Nông Bird Sanctuary and Bé Tur form the ideal duo that her

countrymen can possibly wish for. In another word, this providential match could also be looked at as the embodiment of a distant and mysterious Shangri-La that somehow still exists on this planet.

Very early on, Bé Tu realized that the Tam Nông Bird Sanctuary is not only the habitat of immense mangrove forests and wetlands overgrown with all kinds of tropical plants but it is also the feeding ground for countless invertebrates, fish and shrimps that come with the Mekong's current during the Rainy Season. They migrate to this place to provide an unending food source to the local birds and beasts. Bé Tu's amazement knows no bounds as she watches the baby cranes gain twice their weight in just a few weeks while living in the Bird Sanctuary. For many years already, Bé Tu has made it a point to come on a pilgrimage to the sanctuary from October to May to observe the migratory birds as they arrive from distant, far away horizons. Her joy grows with each successive visit as the birds keep on arriving in larger and larger number.

This is the first time Đạt accompanies his younger sister Bé Tu on her return to Vietnam. The Rainy Season has just started and Đạt's mood is a far cry from that of his sister. He has lived through the tumultuous years of military service and endured the perils of the boat trips he took to flee from Vietnam. He knows how it felt to be shot at, imprisoned and barbarously tortured by the security forces. And he has scars on his face and forehead to show for it. Mindful of their conflicting viewpoints, the siblings agree to stay clear from engaging in political discussions when they meet.

At Xuân's suggestion, Đạt goes on this trip with the clear objective of conducting a feasibility study to build "*nhà ánh sáng*" or "sunny coconut house" mainly made of materials from the coconut trees grown in the Mekong Delta. During the first phase of his study Đạt has successfully produced a dry wall composed of a mixture of coconut fibers, clay, and chemicals that could withstand the humidity and water

of the Rainy Season. Clay deposits are plentiful at Bến Cát and coconut fibers can easily be obtained locally.

Đạt and Xuân see eye to eye on the issue of ecology. They oppose the hydrology experts at the Central Government who rely on their experience working with the Red River to advocate the building of dykes costing in the billions of US Dollars for the purpose of flood control at the risk of turning off the faucet that has been dispensing life giving water to the Mekong Delta over the past thousands of years.

Xuân is a true believer in a safe and harmonious coexistence with flood and the maximum use of the boundless wealth that it brings i.e. alluvia, food supply... Besides, the flood water can also be used to wash away the alum in the rice paddies. He even goes as far as extolling the beauty of the Southern landscapes during the Rainy Season and finds in it a rich potential to develop tourism in the future.

In his opinion, during both the Dry and Rainy Seasons, the Mekong Delta possesses unique advantages that cannot be found in any other sections of the river upstream. The lively landscapes of the Delta would prove tremendously appealing to the tourists: the houses enclosed in lush green gardens planted with fruit-bearing trees all year round; the floating markets at Vàm Rạch, Cái Bè, Phụng Hiệp; Ngã Bảy or Seven Corners where the rivers diverge in the shape of a “Wet Star” prompting the French to name them “Les Étoiles”; the floating villages and fish farms at the three-way intersection of the Châu Đốc River; and the Thất Sơn or Seven Sacred Mountains region renowned for their shamans in the old days. Then there are the vestiges of the Óc Eo civilization of the Funan Kingdom. One would be remiss if one fails to mention a visit to the Tam Nông Bird Sanctuary where visitors can watch cranes performing their graceful dance and flocks of migratory birds...

Xuân can categorically assert that what he has envisioned is not merely a figment of his imagination but it also reflects the World Tourism

Organization's thinking when this institution ranked the Mekong among the top ten tourist destinations in the world for the year 2000. There is no stopping Xuân the moment he starts talking about the rosy and boundless prospects that are opening up for this river in the future.

The house his uncle built on an earthen foundation has mud walls and a roof made of macaw tree leaves. It looks quite rundown after having weathered several big floods. This old sage who used to be Xuân and Đạt's teacher is now retired and leads an austere lifestyle in that house. As an admonishment, he told his two students that: "*These days, to lead a simple and honest life is no simple task in itself*". Nobody has ever heard a word of complaint or reproach coming out of his lips.

Đạt chooses to build a prototype of his "sunny coconut house" on a lot owned by his uncle in the low lands. This structure will have three rooms and an adjoining lean-on on either side so that it would stand in harmony with the existing landscape. He promised himself that he would later offer the prototype dwelling, the fruit of his labor and love, to that "sage". His joy would be complete if the peasants were to welcome his "sunny coconut house" and provide him with the needed incentive to move on to the large-scale manufacturing phase of those houses for the entire region.

Prior to their visit to the Bird Sanctuary, Xuân took Đạt and Bé Tư to Cái Bè floating market at Vàm Rạch on the Tiền River. The market was selected as a potential candidate to be developed into a tourist destination.

In the early morning, hundreds of boats in all size and shape congregated at the spot. Sampans loaded with local fruits in bright colors slowly snaked their way through the maze. In their holds, young children and their mothers on their way to the market jostled for space with golden oranges, red tangerines, green bananas and freshly cut coconuts with green leaves still attached to the stems. Women wearing

the “*nón lá*” or conical palm leaf hats standing on the sterns of smaller boats rowed them toward bigger crafts to sell their farm products that will be later distributed to the warehouses of the Cầu Ông Lãnh Market in Saigon or even those located as far away as Phnom Penh, Cambodia. From the distance they looked like herds of baby pigs huddling around their mothers’ breasts. Owners of roof-covered boats resorted to an ingenious marketing technique to attract customers. They hung samples of their wares such as fruits, vegetables, corns...on tall poles for all to see and buy.

The boat Xuân and his friends were on had a hard time negotiating its way through the crowded place. The skipper led them to the deck of a larger boat. It was spacious enough to accommodate a stall selling coffee, noodles, alcoholic beverages and cigarettes including the imported “555” brand. That morning for breakfast Đạt again tasted “*cà phê bit tất*” coffee prepared in a sock and sipped from a saucer and a “*bánh bao*” literally “enveloping cake” containing pork meat, onions, eggs, mushrooms... freshly steamed from the kitchen.

After a long absence from the homeland, that scene that vibrated with life and the freshness of nature filled Đạt with a sense of rediscovery and fascination. He could see nearby a boat selling gas to motorized dinghies; then another with a red cross painted on it where sick people could receive treatments from a roving nurse. Farther down, sailed a mobile bazaar plying its ware and even a rice mill on a floating platform catering to the needs of the farmers at the market.

Such is the Civilization of the Mekong.

The idea came to Xuân that he should arrange a trip for Duy to visit the country and the Medical School at the Cần Thơ University which was in dire need of equipment and “gray matter”.

At the close of the market in the afternoon, the entire place just

folded leaving behind a vast and hushed section of the river to be disturbed only by the humming engine of an occasional “vô lãi” or high speed long tail fiberglass boat rushing by with full loads of passengers. The waves it trailed behind dashed toward the riverbanks and rocked the smaller sampans nearby.

After spending a day at Cái Bè, the group again boarded a boat to continue their trip on the fresh and charming waterway. On the river, the beauty of dawn gave way to the splendor of dusk. At night fall, their craft entered a narrow section of the river. Here and there, the travelers saw the lights of oil lamps flickering along the banks. The young moon ascended in the sky to the accompaniment of a folk song that came from nowhere like an echo of a distant past as the breeze blew by:

*Xứ đâu có xứ lạ lùng
Con chim kêu cũng sợ
Con cá vùng cũng kinh*

What a place this is! A strange landscape
A bird calling in the tree can scare you!
A fish splashing in the water can terrify you!

The boat carefully traced its way along the lights to avoid getting entangled in the nets set in the current. By the break of dawn, they finally arrived at the Bird Sanctuary located in the midst of wetlands. The guide led them through the dense forests of mangrove trees and reeds. Frightened by the sounds they made, wild ducks flapped their wings then flew away quacking noisily all at the same time.

The diversified setting of a tropical ecosystem appeared bountiful and complex but at the same time fragile. The forests sheltered a multitude of nests built by thousands upon thousands of birds chirping their distinctive melodies. Relying on his childhood memory, Đạt was able to recognize the songs of the kingfishers, and wild doves coming

from the distant tufts of leaves. Then all of a sudden, a fascinating scenery opened up before their eyes: packs of hundreds of red cranes each were leisurely moving around on their elongated legs to forage for fish in the safe environment of the reserve. Others, in pairs, performed their elaborate courting dances displaying their elegance and colors.

Bé Tu enumerated to Đạt the names of the rare birds like Black Neck Storks, Greater Adjutant Storks... that are peculiar to Vietnam. Just a few years back, they were presumably facing extinction but somehow made a slow yet miraculous comeback. For the first time, the Eastern Sarus Cranes made their reappearance.

Those beautiful creatures “*Sếu Đầu Đỏ*” Redhead Cranes have elongated white necks, red heads dotted with white marks, slender bodies, pink long legs and elegant gaits. They came not in the hundreds but thousands as if they were the last migratory birds of Southeast Asia flying on one of their last trips. Following an east-west flight pattern, they arrived at the bird sanctuaries bringing with them good tidings not only to Vietnam but also to the whole world. The elders of Đồng Tháp Mười regard their coming as a good omen. Granted that the lands offer propitious feeding and breeding grounds to the birds but it is also a matter of faith to those old folks that precious birds like the cranes only visit sacred grounds located along sacred rivers.

In addition, the local people hold that in the Mekong Delta, probably in the Thất Sơn or Seven Mountains area, there is an extremely rare and precious flower name Ưu Đàm that only blooms every three thousand years. Each time it does, a Buddha will be born to save humanity. Though our third millennium has barely started but based on the Buddhist calendar we are already in the year 2544. Consequently, in less than 500 years from now, the Ưu Đàm flower will bloom in the sacred land of the Mekong Delta. To the followers of the Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương/ “Marvelous Fragrance from Precious Mountains” sect, the Buddha Master or “Phật Thầy” will be reincarnated to bring salvation

to mankind. Both Man and Earth are suffering under the scorching sun and desperately long for a shower that brings with it fresh and sweet water.

Đạt could not help thinking about Bé Tư and her generation. They were born during the time the Vietnam War reached its peak. His younger sister saw life on the day of the 1968 Tết Offensive and she was only seven when the hostilities came to an end. So, we could safely conclude that the Vietnam War was not theirs to fight. It would be reasonable for us to expect them to be spared from that joyless and heavy burden. They should be able to feel free and unfettered to march toward a brighter future.

Bé Tư abruptly turned to Đạt and asked:

– Anh Hai – Oldest brother! What is the meaning of the Vietnamese word “tuổi hạc”?

Without hesitation Đạt explained:

– It means advanced age or longevity – Bé Tư

Đạt found pleasure in calling his sister by her name as it was his habit when they were still living with their parents in the home country. During the summer, Bé Tư took Vietnamese lessons at the Hanoi National University. A while back, Xuân offered her a professorship at Cần Thơ University and she wanted to be prepared for it. Besides, she also wished to teach at the village’s school that she and her student friends have helped build.

The ride back to Saigon did not take long. Đạt and Bé Tư were surprised to learn that the news about the flood in the Mekong Delta only reached a limited number of the capital’s residents. When his thoughts turned to the Vietnamese communities overseas, Đạt felt his heart sink

a bit. In faraway Europe and America, the informed few would grow even fewer and the saying “out of sight out of mind” would prove truer than ever. For one rare soul that dared to raise the idea of launching a relief program, there would be many more to oppose it claiming that not a single dollar should be given until the day the true nature of the present regime became unmasked forcing it to show its real ugly face.

Bé Tu on her part had more than one ax to grind. Besides her preoccupation with the bird sanctuaries, she was debating heatedly with her brother on how to rebuild the village school to keep the classes going through the Rainy Season.

Deeply moved by his sister’s good nature, Đat came to the realization that, like everybody else, he would have to forgive and forget the hatred, the darks days of war, the killings, chemical weapons like Agent Orange, the Killing Fields, the bloody and deadly attacks with B40s on the boat people on the sea and rivers... only in that way could he one day return to bathe in that river as well as wash away the vicissitudes of this life and live in harmony with the high or low water that comes every year with the Dry and Rainy Seasons.

At long last he would be able to find his peace of mind as he strolls along the banks of the sacred river that would never be drained dry.

CHAPTER X

EL NINO AND THE SACRED NAGA SERPENT IN THE MEKONG DELTA

*Into her nine estuaries the Mekong runs
Her endless ode the mighty current hums*
Nguyễn Sa

The Landing Place of the Legendary Dragon

Up in the lofty sky of Tibet, the Legendary Dragon hovered then descended to a site that was to become the birthplace of the Mekong. From there this turbulent river begins her long journey southward and punctually each year exacts her deadly tolls from the people living downstream. Whether they believe in the Legendary Dragon or the Sacred Naga Serpent or not, the more than 70 million souls that reside along her more than 4,800 km long banks have been telling to whoever wants to hear the story of those sacrosanct beasts. According to them, from time immemorial, those creatures have been swallowing the Mekong's water during the Rainy Season and release it in the Dry one to spare the people from floods and assure them of a steady supply of water to till their lands throughout the year.

For that very reason, people celebrate the annual High Waters Season to honor and entreat the sacred river to desist from her anger and bless them with an abundant harvest of shrimps and fish from her current as well as rice from the paddies.

The Boat Race Festival to Celebrate the High Waters Season

In the seventh century, the Khmer were the first settlers who marched along the Mekong into the land named Funan in the Mekong Delta. In the beginning, they lived in scattered “*phum*” of five to ten huts or so. With time they began to build houses on stilts and gathered in “*sóc*” or large hamlets to gain strength to more effectively clear the land for farming.

Ten centuries later, Funan, then known as “Water Chenla”, fell into Vietnamese hands. Nowadays 900,000 Khmer Vietnamese still reside mainly in Trà Vinh and Sóc Trang Provinces, northwest of the Delta. They live in simple stilt houses with roofs made of leaves from the water coconut trees. Their dwellings usually are built around a golden Cambodian Temple graced with a curved red roof, the classical style of Khmer architecture. The Temple serves both as a religious and cultural center for the community.

Along the stretches of the Mekong that run from the Cambodian border to the Mekong Delta, in every Cambodian Temple one can find a traditional racing boat “*Ghe Ngo*” with a pair of menacing eyes of the Sacred Naga Serpent carved on each side of the bow. They stare down from their hanging place ready at a moment’s notice to dive into the nearby current.

The figures of the Buddha and the Sacred Naga Serpent are common motifs found in Khmer folk arts. According to a story, when the Buddha was meditating by a lake in the middle of the jungle the Sacred Naga Serpent, the embodiment of Evil Spirit, came to him.

As their encounter was coming to an end, the Holy man succeeded in converting the creature. Later on, during a storm, the Serpent gulped down the storm water and inhaled the wind. It then rolled its body into seven coils, raised its head high to shield the Buddha from the wind and water. From that day on, the Khmer use the long trunks of the oak tree to construct “*Ghe Ngo*” decorated with the eyes of the Sacred Naga Serpent.

Every year, the Khmer in the Mekong Delta use the “*Ghe Ngo*” in a race to commemorate the High Waters Season. As the Water Festival draws near, the racing boats are taken down to be given a fresh coat of paint. Special care is given to the eyes of the Sacred Naga. When everything is in order, they are brought to the river ready for the race.

First, the honor goes to the Buddhist monks to pray and bless the racing boat. A plate containing a hand of bananas, a flask of rice wine and incenses is placed at the bow as offerings for victory to the Sacred Naga. Sixty four most robust young men from the village are selected to participate in the race. They each hold an oar in their hands and file in pairs aboard the boats that threaten to sink under their weight. The team leader sits at the bow to strike on a small gong and urge his teammates to row to his rapid cadence. When the boats are fully assembled at the river, a signal is given for the race to start. In the blink of an eye, the men raise their oars and begin to row vigorously splashing white water foams along their sides. The boats rear their bows up into the air then shoot straight ahead giving the onlookers the impression that Sacred Nagas are gliding full speed on the water.

On one of the boats, a characteristic sign of the “Renovation” era is noticed by a number of onlookers: one of the racing teams wears bright yellow baseball caps, blue jeans, tricolor T-shirts printed with a Shell logo to advertise the Shell Oil Company.

Recent political and social developments inevitably bring about

changes to the seemingly immovable century-old customs of the inhabitants residing along the Mekong's banks. Anthropologists give that process the civil name "acculturation". The Ghe Ngo race no longer is meant uniquely for the celebration of the "*Mùa Nước Nổi*" or High Waters Season. Nowadays, it is often used as entertainment for festivities like the "Quatorze Juillet", France's national day under the French colonial rule, or "*Quốc Khánh*" the Vietnamese National Day commemorated by the successive South Vietnamese governments.

This year, for the first time, the village team meets with defeat at the hand of the one sponsored by Shell Oil. The pain shows plainly on the faces of its members. The young men take the boat back to the temple then gather at the beach to drown their sorrow in rice wine. Those who lose their second battle to the bottles just lie on the sand and sleep it out.

Only the village monk remains unperturbed. Victory or defeat cannot make him lose his gentle and ubiquitous smile. The pagoda keeps an ample stock of Coca Cola bottles but the religious orders his novice Thạch Sary to serve fresh sugar palm juice to the guests. Thạch Sary walks toward a palm tree in the backyard that looks like a coconut tree except that it grows taller and straighter. A ladder leans against its trunk to make the climbing easier.

Thạch Sary is a student in the Science Department at the University of Cần Thơ. In observance of the Khmer tradition, he serves as a novice at the temple one month out of the year. He remarks:

– It takes thirty years for the sugar palm tree to bear flowers and fruits. When the fruits are still green and in their sheaths, they are encased in bamboo screens for them to ripen. When the right time comes, the stems are cut and the fruits put in a hollow bamboo receiver to collect the sap. People keep on cutting the stem as the sap drips out less and less. Sometimes it requires a whole month for the process to end.

Curious, I point to a nearby male palm tree and ask the novice about its characteristics. He calmly explains:

– Male palm trees do not bear fruits. However, they do have flowers that bloom and give juice. You can drink it fresh. The juice is also used in making sugar at the ratio of seven liters of palm juice to one kilogram of sugar bars. The cities of Vĩnh Bình and Châu Đốc are reputed for the palm sugar they produce. Green bean puddings cooked with palm sugar taste by far more delicious than cooked with cane sugar. Besides, they are also more refreshing.

I just learned an instant lesson in botany from novice Thạch Sary. The latter brings down from the tree a bamboo receiver filled to the brim with palm honey. He observes that it will be sweeter, clearer and more fragrant if collected at nighttime.

As if something just came to his mind, the novice adds:

– Oh! I forgot to mention that the palm leaves also have their usefulness. In the old days, young Khmer who study at the temples used to write on palm leaves. Texts written on palm leaves called Satras can still be found in a number of temples.

That night I taste for the first time the delectable Khmer dish of green rice mixed with palm honey, a marvelous recipe that embodies the essential flavors of the Mekong River.

I do not have any inkling about how deep is the friendship that binds Mr. Nhu Phong and the senior monk. I only know that thanks to Mr. Nhu Phong's recommendation, the old man has reserved for me a warm reception on our first encounter. The religious goes by the name Chao Athica. Throughout his long monastic life, he has attained a high level of personal virtue and knowledge. His training at the Buddhist Institute in Cambodia has equipped him with an extensive command of the

Sanskrit language. On top of that, he speaks Cambodian, Vietnamese, and French fluently. Meanwhile, he is working on his English.

The monk tells me:

– About 95% of the Khmer are followers of the Lesser Vehicle or Theravada Buddhism which is somewhat influenced by Brahmanism.

Anticipating my question, the senior monk continues in a soft voice without trying to humor me:

– You wish to ask about the remaining 5% don't you? They belong to the monkhood like me. In our tradition, all pagodas provide religious as well as conventional instruction to the young.

During the night, to the background music of the Mekong current, the monk introduces me to the meaning of the religious festivities of the Khmer people.

The New Year Festival – The Festival to Welcome the Skull

Based on their calendar, the Khmer people celebrate the New Year Chôl Chnam Thmây around mid-April. The actual date varies with the year. They mark the New Year Festival with a procession of the Brahman four faced god Kabinh Mahaprum within the temple premises.

As legend has it, at the time the god Indra created Heaven and Earth, a king and his queen celebrated the birth of their son named Thommbal. The prince was so intelligent that at the young age of seven he was already well versed in astrology and religious teachings. He shared his knowledge with all his subjects and in return they held him in deep reverence and admiration. His reputation for being a young sage reached as far away as the heaven causing the gods to turn green with envy.

The god Kabinh Mahaprum descended on earth and said to the prince:

– I heard that you are extremely bright and wish to put you to a test. I'll ask you three questions and you have seven days to answer. If you do it correctly I'll cut off my own head before your eyes. If not, then I'll take yours. Here are the questions: where does a man's karma reside in the morning, noontime and evening?

As soon as the god finished speaking, he flew back to the Heaven. In spite of being regarded as a well learned sage, the prince was unable to find the answers after five long days of striving. Afraid of losing his head, the prince fled to the jungle to hide from early dawn to noon. Totally exhausted and starving he leaned against the trunk of a tree to rest and at that very moment overheard the conversation between the falcon gods Sat Angry.

From the tree top, the female asked: "What are we going to eat tomorrow?" The male replied: "Probably we'll feast on the prince's head because tomorrow is the deadline for him to answer Kabinh Mahaprum. The prince will surely lose his head for he cannot find the right answers to the god's questions".

Surprised, the female inquired: "Do you know what those questions are that a man as wise as the prince is at a loss for answers?"

The male companion explained: "The god's questions are so simple: where does your karma reside in the morning, noontime, and evening? The answers are equally as simple! Listen! In the morning it resides at your face that's why you wash it when you wake up. At noontime it moves to your chest so you go and bathe in the river. Come evening, it shifts to your feet and you wash them before going to bed."

Overjoyed at hearing that, the prince hurried back to the palace. On

the seventh day, the god Kabinh Mahaprum flew down to earth with a golden sword in his hand. The prince knelt in the presence of the god and gave him the correct answers.

The god lost. He called for his daughters the fairies and told them:

– I lost to the prince and have to cut off my own head as promised. You must take it to a stupa and forbid anybody from touching it because should my head fall to the ground, the ground will become parched. If dropped into the sea, the sea will drain dry. If thrown into the air, the rain will never come.

That said, he drew the sword from its sheath and cut off his own head. He handed it to his oldest daughter named Tungsa then turned into a blue smoke that rose swiftly into the sky.

Tungsa placed her father's severed head on a golden plate and took it to an isolated stupa deep inside a jungle in the Himalayas. Ever since, on the anniversary of god Kabinh Mahaprum's death, his daughters descended on the stupa. They carried the four faced head in the direction of the rising sun to the Meru Mountain, the axis of the Samsara or listless world. After circling the foot of the mountain three times, they returned his head to its original resting place.

For thousands of years later, the skull procession of the four faced god Kabinh Mahaprum is used to usher in the New Year.

The Khmer people believe that the character of the patron saint or fairy of a particular year will determine how good or bad it will be. They also use this occasion to wash away the improprieties of the past year and usher in a more propitious one. During the first four days of the New Year, they take meticulous care of the preparations while refraining from violating any taboos. They tidy up their homes, keep the candles and fragrant incenses burning throughout the night, use

fresh flowers for decoration, and stay on good terms with everybody to make sure they'll be blessed with a good new year.

Though the story belongs in the realm of mythology, the thought of decapitation or carrying a skull in a procession to welcome the New Year does give me a blood-curling sensation. Then there is also the Vietnamese tale of Thạch Sanh cutting off the head of a boa that I later found out originated from a Khmer legend.

I wonder whether those gruesome legends and myths have anything to do with the aggressive and combative behavior of the Khmer who ordinarily give the impression of being so gentle and pleasant? Could it be that their “cáp duôn” or decapitation of the Vietnamese and letting their headless bodies float down the river just an aberration? I intend to ask Mr. Nhu Phong about that the next time we meet. He will also be the first person to whom I will reveal my newfound interpretation concerning the symbolic meaning of the Legendary Dragon, Sacred Naga Serpent and the Rainforests growing along the Mekong's banks.

News from Vietnam

The newspaper's headline reads: *“Widespread drought and salinization pose a threat to the Mekong Delta. Forest fires in Cà Mau.”*

The current year is marred by bad news about the ecology: reduced rainfalls, strong winds, higher heat, and lower water levels in the Mekong River

(They dropped by half a meter). The inhabitants of Cà Mau had hardly put the ordeals of tropical storm Linda behind them when they were hit by a sweltering heat wave.

The water stored in the wetlands surrounding the mangrove forests in U Minh dipped to their lowest levels. There are roughly 60,000 acres

of mangrove forests left in Cà Mau. With the current water shortage and the broken branches left by the storm, the chance for big forest fires to occur at any moment would be greatly higher. It does not help any when, in total disregard of the government's bans, thousands of impoverished people continue to go to the forests to hunt for beehives, cut down the mangrove trees, and even practice slash-and-burn farming to make a living.

I thought it is the “in thing” nowadays for people to blame everything on “El Nino” as if by doing so all of their problems would be resolved. Vietnamese as well as foreign experts in climatology and hydrology met in Singapore and Bangkok. Among other things, they predicted that El Nino has yet to run its course and there would be even less rainfalls in the following two months resulting in more droughts in Southeast Asia including Vietnam.

The undisputable fact is that compared to the past, this year's Rainy Season ended two months early followed by drought all over the South. Consequently, people are witnessing the lowest water levels in all of the Mekong's tributaries. This situation entails a chain reaction of events that left at least 10,000 acres of farm land in Long An Province affected by salt water intrusion and another 600 acres in Tiền Giang Province covered with alum. In Sóc Trang Province, salt advanced tens of kilometers deeper inland invading districts that remained till now unaffected. Lakes and ponds dried out forcing people to buy water at double the normal price.

I have a different take after reading the news. In the context of the Southeast Asian region, El Nino and other things aside, I trust that the Mekong will always remain the principal source of water for the Mekong Delta.

In recent years, with the complicity of corrupted governments of the six Mekong countries especially in Thailand and Vietnam, suicidal

deforestation had been going on in Yunnan, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam.

Rainforests normally act as a huge sponge that soaks up then retains the rain water. With their disappearance, droughts are more likely to occur during the Dry Season. In the Rainy Season, early and more severe floods are to be expected leaving the people completely unprepared and exacting more serious crop damages and higher fatalities than usual. The poor inhabitants of the Mekong Delta are the ones left holding the bag. Furthermore, rainforests have the ability to absorb carbon dioxide from the atmosphere and reduce the effects of global warming. The legend of the Sacred Naga Snake tells us that after its conversion by the Buddha, it swallows up the storm water to protect him. Looking for a modern equivalent of that legend, I wonder whether or not the rainforests and flooded forests are our present day “Naga” that soaks up the rainwater to doll it out during the Dry One and save us from water shortage or famine.

Dispatches from Reuters in Bangkok

Global Witness accused Vietnamese political and military leaders of involvement in the grand scale illegal deforestation that is devastating the rainforests of Cambodia. Those precious trees are being indiscriminately cut down and smuggled to the ports of Quy Nhon or Saigon via Gia Lai and Sông Bé for final export. The text adds that “such large-scale business activities, in flagrant disregard of the laws, can only be conducted with the complicity of the corrupt authorities in both countries.” I am also aware that a similarly deplorable state of affairs is happening to the rainforests of Laos and of central highland in Vietnam.

By cutting down the rainforests and signing unequal agreements allowing foreign countries to build factories that discharge toxic materials unchecked, the communist authorities in Vietnam are visiting

self-inflicted ecological disasters on their people. Over the long haul, the harmful outcome of that policy will not only be limited to the Mekong Delta but will spread to all the rivers, waterways and water sources of Vietnam.

Made in China

From New York to California, from Thailand to Laos, Cambodia to Vietnam and all the way to Cà Mau, everywhere I go, I am surrounded by goods made in China. How many of those goods were manufactured in the export zones in Yunnan along the Mekong?

The river that managed to stay pristine for thousands of years is now undergoing rapid changes. Mining operations are being vigorously pursued at 28 locations upstream the river. The extraction of lead and zinc at some of those places is deemed most detrimental to the ecology.

Downstream, sections of the Mekong are being swamped by an influx of waste and black oil spots coming from the factories or alluvia resulting from landslides or deforestation. Those materials are free to migrate to other places downstream the current.

On a trip to China after the lifting of the bamboo curtain, I could witness in person how polluted the Yangtze and Yellow Rivers were. One of my traveling companions made an observation that I fully agreed with: *“A China with a present that cannot match with its past.”*

When the Chinese do not care for the wellbeing of the rivers that flow within their territory then there is little hope that they would be mindful of the Mekong that crosses into their neighbors' lands to the south.

The Mekong originates from the Tibetan High Plateau then meanders through a distance of over 4,800 km visiting different climates

and various ethnic groups and their civilizations. It makes its way to the tropical delta near the equator. I could not help wondering whether, when all is said and done, the Legendary Dragon Zjiadujawangzha will eventually turn out to be a lowly serpent-like creature and the Sacred Naga Serpent a band of venomous vipers.

The Mekong is losing its purity and going through a total transformation reflecting the declining cultural heritage of the people who live along her current. Slowly but surely, it is those very ingrate people who are poisoning the water of that sacred river. With every passing day, each drop of water from that river will become less fresh and less palatable.

The Debilitating Chest Pains

It is now time for the peasants of South Vietnam to feel the impacts of the far away – seemingly very far away dams. China's Manwan - the first dam that was built in the series of 14 in the Mekong Cascades - has claimed up to 20% of the water flow in the Mekong's main current. Then, we have to add to that another 10% for the dams constructed on the tributaries in Thailand and Laos. We have yet to consider the huge mass of water China and Thailand have been diverting from the Mekong all year round to irrigate the vastness of their parched high plateaus.

Even though dams like the Xayaburi and Don Sahong in Laos or Sambor and Stung Treng in Cambodia still remain in the planning stage, it becomes quite apparent that symptoms of angina have already been felt in parts of the Delta due to the local tributaries going dry. In medical parlance, we can say that those tributaries may also be considered as collateral vessels of the heart. Consequently, The Mekong's rate flow of 40,000 m³/sec during the Rainy Season dropped twenty folds to 2,000 m³/sec in the Dry one. And it is expected to dip even lower on account of El Nino. How can droughts in the Mekong Delta be possibly averted

under such conditions?

To come to the Friends of the Mekong Group

Driven by a strong commitment to the Mekong, I know full well I have embarked on an indefatigable journey whose beginning and end remain unknown to me. That this journey will never end is the thing I can be sure of.

I have chosen this River to be my second homeland. It will forever remain a “red string”, a providential string, that binds together the future, present and past.

A past that goes back to primeval times when nothing existed: no Himalayas, no Tibetan High Plateau, not even the first drop of water in the Mekong. In that nothingness, I feel like a speck of dust floating and searching for my root in the geological past. Over a time span lasting for millions of years, continuous continental shifts had caused land masses to move, overlay, compress... until numerous strata slowly rose from the earth’s crust and combined with alluvia to form Vietnam with her present day’s landscape including the formidable mountain ranges in the Asian Continent that stretch all the way to the Indochinese Peninsula and the three deltas in the North, Center, and South of Vietnam.

From China the mountain ranges, with an average height of 2,000 meters, spread out to the East Sea in the shape of an open fan and connect with the Red and Thái Bình Rivers to form the Northern Delta.

In the center, from the Mekong’s left bank, the Trường Sơn Ranges reach out all the way to the coastal beaches and divide the land into narrow valleys forming the Central Delta.

Upon reaching the South, the Trường Sơn Ranges burrow

underground leaving the lone Núi Bà Đen or Black Virgin Mountain still visible in Tây Ninh Province, the “Thất Sơn” or Seven Mountains in Châu Đốc Province and the Ba Thê and Sập Mountains in Long Xuyên Province that form the tail of the Cardamom Ranges. They dominate the vast landscape of the flat Mekong Delta that rose up from the ocean bed during the Tertiary Period.

The coastal stone cliffs overlooking the Gulf of Siam, are remnants of the high plateaus that had collapsed into the ocean. The countless small islands scattered over the Gulf are actually the tops of the mountains in the submerged Cardamom Ranges extending from Cambodia. On the Phú Quốc Island Group stand tall mountains with names like Bãi Dội, Chùa, hòn Phú Dự, hòn Nân. Nearby is the “Hải Tặc” or Pirates Archipelago while the Thổ Châu Archipelago marks the visible outermost limit of the Cardamom Ranges.

In the past, those islands and their territorial waters in the Gulf of Siam have remained a bone of contention between Cambodia and Vietnam that occasionally flared up into bloody confrontations. In 1957, Cambodia unilaterally extended its territorial waters by 6 miles encompassing the Phú Quốc Island. In the following year, Cambodia’s permanent delegation to the United Nations disseminated a “White Book” asserting that “South Vietnam is part of Cambodia’s territory” and demanded that Vietnam return its Southern Provinces, the Phú Quốc and Thổ Châu islands to Cambodia.

Historically, on that “S” shaped land of destiny, from the Đèo Ngang Pass southward, there are two countries which were completely wiped off the map in the past. The first one, Champa, was invaded and eventually conquered, step by step, by Vietnam in the 19th century (1832). The second country originally called Funan was known for its Óc Eo civilization. Its territory included the Southwest of Vietnam and Southeast of Cambodia. This kingdom was destroyed by the Angkor Khmer Empire in the 7th century and its name changed to “Water

Chenla”. Ten centuries later, Vietnam invaded “Water Chenla” and developed it into the present day South Vietnam.

Over those thousand years much blood and tears had been shed. But that time span is just like the blinking of an eye when viewed in the large context of the primeval chaos.

In Search of the Lost Time.

The disappearance of the Funan Kingdom. The Vietnamese have the mythology of “One Hundred Eggs and One Hundred Children” to account for the birth of their people and nation. Similarly, Funan has its own mythological origin.

Long ago, there was an Indian king named Kaudinya who was told in a dream by a god to seek his fortune in the East. Believing in the dream, the next morning Kaudinya headed in that direction and came upon a bow leaning against the trunk of a precious tree. He had a boat made and sailed the ocean eastward in the hope of reaching his future kingdom. When he set foot in Funan, it was already inhabited by a tribe ruled by a queen who led a fleet out to confront him. Using arrows from his sacred bow he shot at the queen’s ships and forced her to surrender. They married and founded the Funan Kingdom.

At the end of the 5th century, Jayavarman was reputed to be the bravest monarch of the Kaudinya Dynasty. He commanded a merchant fleet as well as a band of ruthless pirates. They constantly attacked commercial ships and neighboring countries like Vietnam.

I was greatly intrigued by the fact that both the Funanese in the Mekong Delta and the Tibetans living at the source of the Mekong observe the “sky burial” custom of feeding their dead to the vultures. As a result, I am also greatly interested in finding out whether it happened by pure coincidence or there was something else behind it.

Before the rise of the Angkor Khmer Empire, the Funan Kingdom had carried out maritime trade with the countries in the north as far away as China. Since the first century, Funan had acted as a transit port between India and China. The only vestiges left of that kingdom are house foundations and ancient objects buried deep under the ground. A great number of Óc Eo's antiquities like sea shells were found at the foot of the Ba Thê Mountain in Long Xuyên Province. On the basis of that finding, a number of archeologists have offered the theory that many centuries ago, Óc Eo was once a port city that was later buried in alluvia and receded inland as the coastlines continued to advance.

If there is a story about a Chắm monarch who fell in love with a Vietnamese princess and lost his kingdom, then there is a different legend telling the story of a Funanese princess who caused turmoil to her land because of her infatuation for a valiant knight from Champa. It was said that as their people were enjoying a time of peace and utmost prosperity, the Funanese King Kaudinya and his queen were blessed with the birth of an extremely beautiful daughter. Since the king was from India, he had a temple built outside the palace to worship the god Vishnu. A stone bridge built over a stream gave access to the temple which was considered to be a most holy place. Only the king or his priests were allowed on the bridge because it was believed that any violation of that rule would lead to the demise of the Funanese Kingdom.

One day, a fearless Chắm knight named Sarrida crossed the sea and landed in Funan where he was arrested by the soldiers and brought before the king. Suspected of being a spy for the Champa king, Sarrida was mercilessly tortured in spite of his persistent claim of innocence. The queen took pity on him and pleaded with the king to spare his life.

Being a brave knight highly skilled in martial arts and a champion archer, Sarrida was enlisted into the palace guards to help protect the royal family. During a trip outside the palace ground, he saved the

princess from the deadly coils of a constrictor. She later fell in love with him. However, the knight was stricken with homesickness and only longed for the day he could return to his country. Claiming he needed a pleasure boat to sail on the river, Sarrida had one built for him with the real intention of using it to make his escape. The king could read Sarrida's mind and ordered his subjects to use the stones from a nearby mountain and build a seven-step barrier across the river. With his hope to return home thwarted, Sarrida retired to a small hut. He made a bamboo flute and played mournful Chẵm songs in the hush of the night.

However, through tireless inquiries he learned that at one end of the stone bridge there was a small road leading to a jungle trail that could take him back to Champa. Sarrida carefully planned his getaway.

On a pitch dark night he made his move and dashed across the bridge but was unfortunately arrested by the Chẵm patrols. Informed of the news, king Kaundinya was furious because he believed a disaster was about to befall his land. Brushing aside the tearful supplications of the princess, he ordered Sarrida to be taken to the tall barrier across the river and shot by the archers. Deeply grieved by his death, the princess went to the barrier every night to cry and mourn. An angry and indignant mob gathered in front of the palace demanding that the king pass a judgment on the affair. In order to save Funan from potential disintegration, a disconcerted king had no choice but had his daughter executed at the barrier where Sarrida breathed his last.

To this day, the ruins of “*Thất Thạch Thang*” or Seven-Step Stone could still be seen somewhere on the Phước Long River. And at the Trĩ An Waterfall, there is a stone rumored to resemble the figure of the princess mourning her beloved Chẵm knight in a sitting position.

For seven centuries, Funan had functioned as a prosperous kingdom in Southeast Asia. It had to ward off constant attacks from warlike Champa in the north and the mighty Angkor Khmer Empire in the west.

In the end Funan succumbed to her fate and her imposing monuments reduced to ruins at the hand of neglect. Nonetheless, the artistic imprints of this civilization still pervade in the temples at Angkor, the pagodas and statues of Buddha, and even in the Khmer customs and traditions such as the worship of the Sacred Naga Serpent of today.

The Immigrants Who Did Not Come Late

At the close of the 17th century, Nguyễn Hữu Cảnh led a group of settlers from Hai Huyện (Thuận Quảng provinces) to join the Southern March and establish the first all-Vietnamese settlement in the Mekong Delta. In the aftermath of the Vietnamese conquest of Champa, Nguyễn Hữu Cảnh played a crucial role in the development of the South clearing the way for the subsequent take-over of Water Chenla. He did his works long before Thoại Ngọc Hầu appeared on the scene.

When the first settlers from Vietnam set foot in the Mekong Delta, they encountered the Khmers who lived on elevated grounds and tilled small fields that had been cleared long ago. In this vast land, the dry and habitable lots were occupied by the Khmers and only the flooded mangrove forests and wetlands tracts were not taken. The Vietnamese newcomers had no choice but set up house along the arroyos and streams whose banks were swarming with buzzing mosquitoes and water infested with blood sucking leeches. Not a sign of humans walking around. They rolled up their sleeves and got on with the task of dominating nature: cut down trees, kill tigers, hunt crocodiles, control the water, prepare the lands for farming... to quote the words penned by the southerner Sơn Nam, the author of the “Civilization of Orchard”: *“people from Hai Huyện have transformed ‘the legless swamplands’ into pounded grounds on which to farm”*.

Those pioneer left behind their godforsaken lands empty handed with only the dream of building a brighter future for themselves and their dear ones to sustain them in their march. As a saying has it: “when

the going gets tough, the tough get going”.

With no beasts of burden i.e. cows or water buffaloes to help out, they had to rely on their two hands to do the hard work. They made their own tools having only the *cây rựa* / bush hooks to cut down trees and *cây phảng* / scythes to cut grass. As soon as the trees were felled and the grass cut, they cleaned up the land and started tilling. If the soil was hard, they used pointed stakes to drive holes into the ground to plant the rice seedlings. With those primitive tools they farmed the inhospitable land. They were fully aware that the deeper they dig, the more alum they will bring to the surface, and the less productive will the land be. Three centuries later, Dutch agronomists came to do research in Vietnam. When presented with that difficult dilemma, they were unable to offer any new advice except to embrace the time-tested policy of “live and let live” with alum.

With no existing land roads, those pioneers had to use boats to navigate the wide network of arroyos and rivers. Their faithful companion was “*cái nóp*” or a straw mat that could serve both as sleeping bag and mosquitoes net. When not in use it could be easily rolled up and stowed away. Either on land or on boat, in the wild forests or on the deserted riverbanks, they only needed to unroll the mat, slide inside and sleep through the cold night oblivious to mosquitoes or worms. For cooking, a small terra cotta stove will do the job. This appliance is a jack of all trades: it can cook rice at the top, grill sweet potatoes or fish below, and repel mosquitoes with its smoke.

With such a stark beginning, they somehow survived and prospered. By sheer determination and hard work they transformed the flooded mangrove forests and desolate marshlands of the Mekong Delta into the fertile rice paddies and orchards we see today.

There is a Mekong River Civilization

People refer to the Civilization of the Nile, the Civilization of the Ganges but refute the existence of the homogenous “Civilization of the Mekong”. But, how do you define “homogenous”? Is there really a “Civilization of Chopsticks” or a “Civilization of Eating with Hands”? For my part, I would argue that on that land of destiny, along the long current of the mighty Mekong River which runs through seven countries, there is actually a relatively homogenous civilization that bears the common name of “Civilization of Rice” associated with the Buddha’s blissful smile and tears.

CHAPTER XI

CHIN THANAKAAN MAI - NEW THOUGHTS FROM THE MAE NAM KHONG

*In a continuous downpour, the rainy season drags on
In the immense Delta, the sky and water become one*
Tô Thùy Yên, author of Spratly's Saga

Though trained as an engineer in ecology, my work habits resemble more those of a journalist. I completed my professional training in Montréal but choose to live and work in the United States. Besides being a senior consultant of a corporation that employs experts in various fields I am also known for being the brain behind major projects in America. This is not a fact commonly found among young minority professionals. In a sense, against formidable odds, I succeeded in breaking out of the “ghetto” the recently arrived immigrants usually are caught in.

From the first day I set foot in America, disregarding all conventional wisdom, I made the conscious decision not to anglicize my name just for the sake of avoiding “*discrimination raciale à l'Américaine*”. In my eyes, to do so would be tantamount to a shameful denial of one's

root or identity in exchange for a job. I fully realize that I am of the colored race and speak English with a heavy accent. Nevertheless, I am totally confident that my professional competence, intelligence, and creativity are at par with those of my Caucasian colleagues. It is not out of a feeling of stubbornness but rather self-respect that I developed such a frame of mind. And later events have proved me right.

My family came from the Red River Delta in the North but I saw life and grew up in the Mekong Delta. Probably, for that reason, I often joke that “my feet are tainted with phèn or pyrite” and have shown a deep as well as unrelenting concern for the future of the Mekong’s ecosystem. Being independent by nature, I hold an aversion to any organizations or political groups. Somehow, I feel kinship with the non-governmental Friends of the Mekong Group that monitors and champions the preservation of the Mekong’s ecology. I soon realize however that ecology cannot be divorced from politics.

To prepare for my first trip to Laos, I go to the library but can only find a limited number of materials written during French colonial times about that country. Those materials relate the eventful but tragic expedition led by Francis Garnier and Doudart de Lagrée sailing upstream the Mekong’s wilderness in order to find a waterway connecting Saigon to China. Other materials include: the tale of Auguste Pavie, a French Consul in Luang Prabang, who went barefoot in a land reputed to be infested with snakes; articles by the École Française d’Extrême-Orient; a recent study of the social customs of Laos along with a UNICEF report concerning child-relief works. Information on tourism about Laos usually is included as subsections in the publications concerning larger countries like Thailand.

Laos’ recent history is fraught with frequent interventions by foreign powers. In 1820, Thailand invaded Vientiane leaving behind only a few intact pagodas. In the Thai’s footsteps came the French, Japanese and finally Americans who through the CIA carried out their Secret War

using the Hmong fighters. One cannot omit the incessant bombings of the Ho Chi Minh Trail during the Vietnam War with the dropping of over two million tons of bombs resulting in unverifiable human tolls classified as “collateral damages” by the U.S. Military. A fact unnoticed by many is that the American interferences in the internal affairs of the “Neutral Kingdom of Laos” predated the hot war by a good number of years.

During the 1950’s, not only in the United States but all over the world, people were captivated by the admirable image of a young Dr. Tom Dooley who devoted his life to the care of the destitute people in the jungles of Asia. This U.S. Navy doctor gained worldwide notoriety for participating in the “Flight to Freedom” program to evacuate refugees who fled communism from North to South Vietnam in the wake of the 1954 Geneva Accord. He also authored a book that became for a time a best seller. But things were not as simple as they appeared. At the height of his fame, Dooley was under investigation for homosexuality - an absolute taboo for the U.S. Navy at the time.

Facing possible dishonorable discharge, Dooley “volunteered” to resign from the Navy and joined the Indochinese Disinformation Program of the CIA. With the American General Lansdale’s arrangements and in accordance “with the request from the Laotian Minister of Health”, Dooley well known as Dr. America “volunteered” to go to Laos to set up a clinic in Nam Tha, a desolate area in Northern Laos, close to the Chinese border. As a result, he was hailed as the jungle doctor of Laos. His clinic received extensive news coverage as the “Outpost of Peace” but in reality it was a clandestine military operation.

Overtly, his clinic was tasked to receive drugs and medical supplies to run the facility. Covertly, Dooley was sent weapons to bury in the clinic grounds for the intended use of the Laotian military in the impending war. Since the clinic only acted as a front, it was understaffed and supplied with expired medication donated by the

pharmaceutical firm Pfizer.

In the meantime, Dr. Dooley was constantly acclaimed by the media as an outstanding American, a Dr. Albert Schweitzer of Asia. He ranked third among the ten most admired persons by the American public after President Eisenhower and the Pope. Tom Dooley succumbed to melanoma at the age of 34. He passed away the same day his clinic in Nam Tha was overrun by the Pathet Lao. By then, the United States was ready to get involved in the Indochina war, a region that had so far remained terra incognita to the American people.

Bidding farewell to Bangkok means to leave behind a metropolis well developed but at the same time irretrievably polluted. I do not give credence to the rumors about the corruption of the Laos Airlines' employees until the day I fall prey to their greed. Though I am in possession of a valid ticket, my name is taken off the flight manifest. It takes almost an hour of protestation and haggling before I can board a fully booked Boeing 727 that has certainly seen better days.

The passengers consist mainly of Lao and Vietnamese expatriates who fly in on leave from France, Australia and the United States. After a short one hour flight, the plane enters Vientiane's airspace. As the pilot starts the descent the jet engines begin to shake violently. Looking down from the window, I can see on one side the Isan High Plateau of Thailand and on the other Laos. Demarcating the two is the Mekong current colored red with alluvia stretching like a ribbon to the far horizon. The already crowded Wattay International Airport seems to be more so with the conspicuous propaganda panels calling for "*Farmer Worker Soldier Together to Defend Socialism*". The waiting area overflows with people negotiating their way amidst a jungle of luggage, gifts and commercial goods.

Since the day the French-trained Marxist leaders who were accustomed to good wines and cigars descended from the mountain

caves to take over the reins of power in the cities 15 years ago, the implementation of a centralization policy has managed only to wreak havoc on that nation's economy.

Following in the footsteps of their Vietnamese big brothers, albeit in a more draconian and orthodox manner, these leaders immediately built countless "reeducation camps" or more accurately prisons to hold officials of the old regime. Fearful for their safety, a number of Laos' intelligentsia fled the country prior to 1975.

The Lao monarch Savang Vatthana who was remembered as a learned, decent, and simple person decided to stay behind. The victorious Pathet Lao did not have any qualms about sending him, the royal family along with 40,000 of his subjects to concentration camps in the jungles. Due to grief, disease, and deprivation the king breathed his last in a "reeducation camp" near Sam Neua. The queen also passed away soon after. To the pressing questions about their fate by foreign newsmen, the Lao authorities gave this explanation: "The king died of malaria in 1984 while the queen also died from natural cause". No news about the queen mother came out since then. It is unconceivable that a gentle people like the Lao had to resort to the reeducation camps as a means to put an end to their monarchy. Fifteen years later, barely one third of the detainees were released. Most of them stricken by old age and disease.

With the demise of monarchy in Laos, the royal palaces were renovated into tourist destinations for foreign visitors. Ranked as the poorest nation on earth, with an area comparable to that of Great Britain, Laos has only a population of 4.5 million who are mostly illiterate and have an average lifespan of 46. Though spared from the scourges of modern times like industrial pollution, cancer, AIDS, and cardiovascular diseases, the country's mortality remained high due to malaria, tuberculosis, liver disease, and intestinal infections.

One fifth of Lao infants died before the age of 5 as a result of

malnutrition. In spite of their meager annual per capita income of US\$ 200, the Lao still manage to lead a leisurely life. They are content with what they have, harbor no ambitions, and only grow what they need.

Flying in from Singapore via Bangkok to Laos, I have the feeling that I just landed on a different planet totally insulated from modern progress. My first visit to Laos introduces me to a land in the Far East still in its relatively pristine condition with rainforests covered by layers of verdant flora and inhabited by wild beasts. Laos is reputed for its elephant herds and is known as "*Lan Xang – the Land of a Million Elephants*". The country's rainforests act as giant sponges absorbing the rainwater during the six months of the Rainy Season to gradually discharge it over the rest of the year into small streams which merge into tributaries of the majestic Mekong running along the length of the land. The ethnic minority groups live in spread out hamlets in the high plateaus and jungles in a semi primitive state reminiscent of the Stone Age.

Not much has changed since the time Graham Greene depicted Vientiane as a small city of green trees and bird songs. A place where time seems to come to a standstill. A handful of cars roll down the streets: a couple of old 4CV- Renaults, relics of French colonial rule, and several Molotova trucks left behind by the Russians. Just across the river, tall buildings of the Thai city of Nong Khai rise to the sky. At night, those brightly lit structures offer a striking contrast to Vientiane's dim, unpaved dirt roads and one or two stories brick houses built under the French. Many an American comes here in search of a long lost time when Asia was still untouched by Western civilization.

The Land of a Million Elephants Revisited

This is the second time I return to Laos in the company of 15 NGO representatives in order to carry out on-site visits and evaluate the accumulative impacts of hydroelectric dams on the ecology of this tiny

nation. Based on the findings, they will submit their recommendations to the World Bank and especially the Asian Development Bank. Those two financial institutions are considering extensive funding for 26 dam projects on the Se Kong and Se San Rivers that emanate from the high plateaus of Central Vietnam.

Instead of taking a direct flight from Singapore to Vientiane, I make a stopover at Bangkok onboard a plane from the Royal Thai International or the “Smooth As Silk – First Time Every Time” Airlines. From there, I switch to a local flight destination of Udon then use a land route to reach Nong Khai. In that way, for the first time, I can cross the Mekong by car on the Mittaphap Bridge built by the Australians to connect Nong Khai and Vientiane marking an era of cooperation and development between Laos and Thailand.

In April of 1994, the Thai king Bhumibol and the prime ministers of Australia and Laos attended the inauguration ceremony of the bridge. On that occasion, the Royal Post Office of Thailand issued a commemorative stamp showing the first bridge built downstream the main current of the Mekong. Though the bridge project dated back to the 1950’s, war hostilities and the animosity between Laos and Thailand had put a hold on its implementation until the end of the Indochina War. This 1,200 meter long structure is a main link in the projected international freeway connecting Beijing to Singapore. For a land locked country like Laos, this bridge offers a convenient access to the sea via Thailand. From the Thai perspective, the bridge provides direct entry to a land underdeveloped but richly endowed with unexploited natural resources. As for the Australians, it represents a symbol of the influence of the Down Under country over the Southeast Asian region.

With time, I come to the full recognition that as far as the ecology is concerned, the issue of national borders is of little relevance. It has become a regional if not global concern. I am no longer perplexed at the sight of people from not only Asia but North America, Australia,

and Europe descending on Laos to preserve her rainforests, the purity of her rivers or survival of her fish population.

The Lane Sang Hotel on Thanon Fa Ngum Street

This four story building boasts 100 rooms air-conditioned by a Soviet-made central unit. It ranks as a luxury hotel by Lao standards. We are in April in the middle of the Dry Season. From the balcony of the hotel room one can see small boats gliding on the Mekong under a blue sky.

Turning to my Thai friend, I inquire:

– I was told that you can find the giant Pla Beuk fish measuring as long as 3 meters and weighing as much as 650 pounds in this river. Is that true?

Chamsak, my interlocutor, is well informed about the eco-system of the Mekong as well as the folklores of the Lao and Thai people who live along the river banks.

He opens up:

– The fish can measure up to six meters in length and weigh 340 kilograms maximum. Ichthyologists in the west began to study them in the 1930's. Actually, the British explorer James McCarthy had referred to them at a much earlier date. More precisely, in his two-year journey (1881-1883) from Siam to Laos. In his book "Surveying and Exploring in Siam" published in 1900, McCarthy wrote that he helped the fishermen pull aboard a Pla Beuk weighing 130 lbs, measuring 7 feet in length, 4.2 feet in waist line, and the tail was 1.9 feet long. He also described very accurately that it is "a fish without scales and teeth..." the author added that the eggs of the Pla Beuk could be compared to the sturgeons' caviars. They were so tasty and sought after that the

Luang Prabang court never failed to include them in their tribute to the Chinese emperor.

Chamsak continues:

– In addition to the Pla Beuks you also have the Irrawaddy Dolphins.

He goes on and mentions a tale concerning a serpent-like creature with a body measuring up to 16 meters long living in the whirlpools and waterfalls of the Mekong. The inhabitants of Luang Prabang said that when those creatures happened upon a drowned human body, they would pluck at its hair, pull its teeth and suck its blood. Looking at such a disfigured corpse, people would know that it is a victim of the “nguak”. True or not, stories like abound and turn into a treasure chest of folklores about the Mekong.

Chamsak begins to talk about the traditional Pla Beuk Festival that is still being celebrated in a Thai village on the right bank of the Mekong:

– Every year, in April, the inhabitants of the Had Kai Village in the Chiang Khong Province of Thailand observe the Pla Beuk Festival. It is a giant species of catfish that swims against the current, about that time, from the south all the way to Lake Erhai near the Citadel of Dali in Yunnan Province of China to spawn. In the morning of the Festival, people gather along the riverbanks to watch skilled fishermen row their boats and catch the Pla Beuks. The Lao fishermen say that on that day, the Pla Beuks congregate at a deep water hole in Luang Prabang north of Vientiane to elect those among them that are strong enough to swim to the Lake to lay their eggs and those that will volunteer to be caught by the fishermen during the Pla Beuk Festival. Both the Thai and Lao fishermen believe that the Pla Beuks are sacred fish. Those who are fortunate to catch Pla Beuks with a lot of spots on their backs will be blessed with abundant catches throughout the year. Sadly enough, in recent years there are less Pla Beuks to be caught while the catches are

becoming meager and meager.

The Mekong never ceases to surprise me. I ask:

– Are there also Dolphins living in the river?

Chamsak replies:

– Yes. They belong to the species with short beaks called the Irrawaddy Dolphins. They have the scientific name *Orchaella brevirostris* and grow to the average length of 2 to 2.5 meters. They are relatively smaller than the other Dolphin species. The fishermen say they live in pairs in groups of ten to twelve individuals and hunt small fish for food. Since the Mekong's water is murky and red with silt they cannot see clearly, so they rely on the melon, an ovoid fatty organ between the blowhole and the tip of the snout that emits sonar beams to echolocate the prey. This species of dolphin has disappeared from the main rivers of Asia like the Ganges in India and Irrawaddy in Myanmar or in Bengal and the Gulf of Siam.

In a deeper voice Chamsak continues:

– In the four years from 1975 to 1979, Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge carried out a massacre not only of his own people but also of the dolphins in the Tonle Sap Lake and downstream the Mekong in order to make machine lubricants. Not long afterward, people witnessed the indiscriminate use of explosives and electricity to kill fish of all size in the Mekong current running from Laos to Cambodia then Vietnam. Such a self-destructive way of fishing will inevitably result in the extinction of rare fish in a very short time.

I look at Chamsak and ask:

– But, have you ever seen a dolphin with your own eyes?

Chamsak answers:

– Only once. It was a dolphin carcass floating along the bank of the Se Kong River. You certainly know that fishermen are reluctant to catch dolphins. The Lao call them Pakha or “human fish” because they believe those are sacred creatures. Tales of dolphins helping fishermen in their catches or rescuing drowning men abound in Laos and Thailand. They are convinced that the dolphins are humans turned fish because they have breasts and their sexual organ resembles that of women.

The elders say that, very long ago, all the people in China and Vietnam were killed by a devastating earthquake and natural disasters. The Chinese were reincarnated in the form of Pakhas and the Vietnamese river wild geese. The wild goose said: “I was formerly human now I do not harm humans”. The Pakha also said: “The same with me. I was once human, now I only want to save humans”.

During the Rainy Season, the water level rises and villagers occasionally see dolphins swim upstream the Mekong to the Se Kong River. But in the aftermath of the war years, it is rare to see them swim up the Mekong.

Chamsak continues in a saddened tone:

– After the completion of the Pa Mong Dam, we will not see those migratory dolphins or celebrate the festival in the Chiang Khong village any more. Nowadays, fishermen prefer bigger boats to fish. On top of that, the Cambodian and Vietnamese soldiers use explosives or electricity currents to catch fish irresponsibly. Soon, we will have to worry about having enough fish to eat much less care about the survival of the sacred Pla Beuks or Pakhas!

The stories about the river wild geese, the Pakhas and the traditional Pla Beuk Festival transport me back to the distant past of a Mekong

civilization that was on the verge of disappearing.

In such a frame of mind, my Thai friend Chamsak and I leave the hotel to head for the Nam Phou Restaurant where we are supposed to meet Fuji, a representative of the Asian Development Bank. The restaurant is located on Thanon Pangkham Street. It is the favorite rendezvous spot for the personnel of foreign embassies; the United Nations; Australian experts; businessmen from Hong Kong, Japan, Thailand and of course newsmen.

As to be expected, the main menu here is French but if the customers prefer, they can order Lao dishes cooked “royal style” or blue cheese hamburgers the “American way”. The bar is well stocked. Besides the customary French wines, the place also offers imported ones from Eastern Europe - notably the quite reputable Sofia wine from Bulgaria. The owner is a Lao lady highly sophisticated in the ways of the West. In her forties, she radiates a poised and gentle charm. She wears her black hair pulled up into a chignon. Her beige silk blouse hides a full but firm breast and matches perfectly with her traditional wrap around cotton skirt. The restaurant’s good food and elegant ambiance are complemented by impeccable service. The average meal here costs 9,000 kip, the equivalent of 180 of the 50 kip banknotes printed with the picture of the Nam Ngum Dam or one tenth of the annual per capita income of the average Lao.

Fuji, a high official of the Asian Development Bank, comes to Laos to do on site observations to assess the possibility for his bank to finance development projects in the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS). He does not object to their funding but comments in a disappointed voice:

– You know, Laos is the last country people wish to invest in. They pour in millions of Dollars only to make it worse. The Australians build bridges, the Japanese send buses, the Thai set up teams to cut down trees and build roads in the jungles for consortiums to construct

hydroelectric dams. Does it improve the life of the Lao? No one can say for certain. But the important thing is it makes everybody feel good.

Trying to stay calm, I observe sternly:

– The issue here is not “does it make life for the Lao any better?” The question you must ask is how disheartening it is for them to lose their homes; see their ecosystem, their rivers devastated by the series of dams your bank finances but still tells the contractors: “Go ahead! Build.”

Forced to defend himself, Fuji argues:

– The ADB provides the funds while the Mekong River Commission coordinates the research of the Advisory Consortium to gauge the ecological and social impacts caused by the dams on the basin of the Se Kong and Se San Rivers. The works of this consortium are supported by the UK Engineering Firm in Great Britain, the Electric Power Development Co. International of Japan, and the MK Centennial in America. They are now assessing in detail the data to ascertain the sustainability of the use of renewable resources to generate energy without polluting the global or regional environment.

It’s Dr. Chamsak turn to take over the conversation:

– I trust that Mr. Fuji knows beforehand what the conclusions of the study by the Advisory Consortium will be. Based on our past experience with the more than 30 dams we constructed in Thailand, I can say without fear of being too far off the mark that the Advisory Consortium will conclude that the social and ecological impacts of the dams on the basin of the Se Kong and Se San Rivers will “be negligible, acceptable and improvable” or “the project offers lasting and harmonious benefits. It is sustainable and environmentally acceptable”. Such lack of objectivity will only make life more miserable for the

inhabitants of the region.

Fuji challenges Chamsak with a counter argument:

– Before pouring hundreds of millions of US Dollars into this poor and unstable nation, the ADB has spent extra millions of Dollars to please and reassure activists like you. What else can NGO’s like yours demand from us?

Refusing to give ground to Fuji, I join in:

– A lot! Instead of encouraging the construction of dams, your institution should focus your efforts on conducting “truthful and transparent” assessments giving due consideration to what the inhabitants along the riverbanks think is harmonious development, clean energy and so on. The ADB should not have the final say in this situation.

The two friends left Nam Phou before midnight. Fuji stays behind to keep the bottles company until the late hours of the night. Outside, the air is cool thanks to a light breeze blowing in from the Mekong. A bright full moon shines up high in the sky on this 15th day of the lunar month. In this land of the Buddha, it is a day to go to the pagoda, observe a vegetarian diet and pray.

A familiar scene, in this land of Golden Pagodas, is to see in the early morning the residents line both sides of the street, bow their heads and offer food to the bonzes in yellow robes as they file by. This same scene took place in the Na Bon Village before it was submerged by the water of the Nam Ngum Lake many years ago. The sad thing is: more than 40 years back, the residents of Na Bon were neither told that unknown outsiders had the right to decide on how and where they live nor were they consulted about it. In the coming days, how many more villages like Na Bon in the Na Kay High Plateau will have to suffer the

same lot at the hand of heartless, insensitive strangers like Fuji?

Professor Chamsak, holder of a doctorate degree in economics, teaches at Thammasat University in Bangkok. He is a well-respected liberal environmentalist. His experience in his homeland convinced him that to expect industrial zones to bring prosperity to the mass amounts to nothing more than wishful thinking. In fact, it only offers an opportunity for greedy entrepreneurs to line their pockets at the expense of a deteriorating ecology.

Chamsak further remarks:

– You know, economic prosperity in Thailand is but a myth. It's a catch word used to distract public attention from the disadvantageous situation the majority of the people find themselves in. If we maintain that this path to national development will bring about prosperity, then a question arises: "prosperity for whom?" For sure, it brings prosperity to a small number of industrialists and entrepreneurs but absolutely not for the lion share of the population, the mass.

The Nam Ngum Dam on the 50 Kip Banknotes

It is an irony of history that the construction of the massive Soviet embassy complex in Vientiane was completed in the year Laos witnessed the collapse of the East European Bloc and the Soviet Union. Left with no other alternatives, the Lao communist leaders again chose to march in lockstep with their Vietnamese big brothers. They launched their own "Renovation era". However, instead of calling it by the Russian name "Glasnost" they gave it the indigenous label "Chin Thanakaan mai" meaning "New Thoughts". They did away with trade barriers, switched to the free market economy, and recognized the right of farmers to own their land. The Bamboo Curtain was lifted and the "Hammer and Sickle" quietly removed from Laos' national emblem.

With the ascent of “New Thoughts”, Nam Ngum was transformed into a tourist destination. It is the first big hydroelectric dam built in Laos, 90 kilometers north of Vientiane. To reach the dam, I choose national route number 13 instead of 10 so that I can pay a visit to the Lai Village known for its handicrafts and porcelains. I also plan to have enough time left to stop by Phon Hong where the market meet of the ethnic minorities is held in the early dawn and closes at 9:00 o’clock in the morning.

The reservoir of Nam Ngum Dam covers an area larger than one third that of Singapore. It offers an amazingly striking panorama to the tourists: clear water the color of azure, sand bars and islets scattered around the lake surface offering refuge to birds and water snakes, imposing mountain ranges guarding the distant horizon...the whole scene looks like a Chinese painting of an immense landscape where the sky and land merge with no clear demarcation.

It is inconceivable to think that under that deep water surface lie submerged and unexploited jungles of hardwood trees like teak, mahogany, rosewood and the 600 roofs of the entire village of Na Bon. Its villagers have dispersed to the four corners of Laos without receiving any compensation from their government. Homeless and unskilled in the technique of farming on elevated terrains, they turned to cutting down the forests to clear lands for slash-and-burn cultivation. The results proved catastrophic: rainwater began to erode the mountain sides, washed away the fertile top soil leaving them denuded and covered with rocks. The eroded soil eventually slid down to the reservoir below, raising its bottom and rendering the reservoir shallower. This is what happened to the dams in Thailand. The Nam Ngum Dam is heading in that same direction and in a not too distant future will cease to be operational due to a lack of water.

A similarly deplorable state of affairs is befalling humans. Animals do not fare any better. Those that escaped death by drowning would be left stranded in the sandbars dotting the lake to face starvation or

death at the hands of hunters. Even fish cannot survive when tree leaves washed down from the jungle begin to decompose reducing the oxygen content in the water and rendering it foul smelling and so dark that even sunlight would find it difficult to penetrate. The stagnant body of water provides an ideal haven for mosquitoes and snails to proliferate spreading malaria, dengue hemorrhagic fever or tapeworms.

I learn that the water's blue surface conceals hundreds of tree tops that can tear up fishnets and make travel on the lake hazardous forcing tour boats to keep close to the riverbanks where flocks of cranes are foraging unperturbed. When the boats make too much noise, they frighten the birds causing them to flap their wings and fly away emitting their peculiar sounds.

While staying at the floating hotel, I make maximum use of the insect repellent I brought with me. I rub it on all the exposed parts of my body to ward off the female anopheles mosquitoes, carriers of malignant *Falciparum malaria*, and resistant to treatment.

The Nam Ngum Dam was built during the stormy years of the war. At that time, not a single soul was collected enough to select which villages or forests to destroy. As early as 1957, the Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East (ECAFE) of the United Nations supported the dam's construction. This decision was also espoused by the advisers working for the Mekong River Committee or World Bank and the experts in dam building who only focused on the technological and statistical aspects of the project.

Not wanting to let go of a golden opportunity to attract foreign exchanges and "modernize Laos", the Lao government joined in and wholeheartedly embraced the project. Eventually, the dam was built thanks to funding from the World Bank and a number of other countries.

During that same time, to support their war efforts in the Vietnam

conflict that was at its peak, the Americans poured money into the Isan region to pay for the building of bridges, highways and four airstrips. They also helped Thailand improve the living conditions in that nation's countryside by assisting in the implementation of its programs for irrigation, industrial monoculture plantation, and electrification. In addition, the United States also provided financial assistance to Laos for the construction of the Nam Ngum Dam. Soon after, a high-voltage distribution grid conducted electricity to the city of Udon in the Northeast of Thailand where the Americans maintained a strategic U.S. Air Force base.

Stage I of the Nam Ngum Dam Project was finished in 1972. On this historic occasion, the Lao and Thai monarchs met on a brightly decorated barge on the Mekong's main current. To the enthusiastic applause and beaming faces of high ranking officials, they jointly pressed a button to start a two-way flow of electricity and dollars between their two nations. As far as Laos was concerned, the benefits it derived from the dam were two-fold: part of the power output was earmarked for export earning a significant inflow of foreign exchanges to the national treasury while the rest is destined for domestic consumption particularly in the Central Region of Laos.

The benefits the dam offers are evident but for the villagers of Na Bon its construction brings them nothing but hardship. And I am much interested to learn about their fate. During a dinner at the floating hotel, I am introduced to Cham Thao, a displaced victim from Na Bon.

This new friend reminisces:

– For the longest time, we live and die on the land of our birth. Living in a fertile valley by the banks of the Nam Sane River, we had everything: land and rice, river and fish, pagoda and school... We led a placid and happy life. We did not need the dam. We did not want to move! How could we forget the peaceful way of life in our

village: children swimming in the river, women washing clothes on the riverbanks, men if not busy tilling the green fields then fishing on small boats. After that they brought back basketfuls of live fish too.

Of course, during the fighting between the Royal Army and Pathet Lao or with the North Vietnamese our life got tougher. But the villagers of Na Bon never thought of moving away. Then one day, a group of Japanese engineers came in the company of a Royal Army squad. They told us we had to move because the dam was about to be built and our village would be submerged by its water. At first we did not pay attention to them because the location of the dam was hundreds of kilometers from our village. What's more, when night came, the Pathet Lao guerillas returned to the village and reassured us that that day would never come. That they would protect our village and their sappers would blow up the dam.

After a short pause to recover his breath Cham Thao continues:

– Then the unexpected took place. Just a few months later, the water came flooding our homes and fields. We barely had time to flee for our life. We left empty handed. For the last twenty years, our life doesn't get any better: we are still poor and miserable. We were told we would be compensated. When we asked, the officials told us the government did not have the money but we will be able to use the electricity free. However, there were no power lines to bring it to us. To this day, we are still using oil lamps. So you see, we were told the dam will bring about all kinds of good things. We the villagers of Na Bon, we only experience all kinds of misfortune.

The American ambassador to Laos (1996-1999) Wendy Chamberlin was a former member of the International Volunteer Service (IVS) in the 1970's. She speaks fluent Lao and offers this observation:

– After years of isolating themselves behind the bamboo curtain,

watching their neighbors develop and prosper, they also wish to join the club.

She is referring here to the aging Communist Lao leaders who only wished to see their nation removed from the list of the 25 poorest countries in the world. Chin Thanakaan or “New Thoughts”, or whatever slogan you wish to choose, those captains of the national ship still come from the ranks of the same “dictators” of the Politburo of the Lao People’s Revolutionary Party. If a Lao intellectual ever dares to express the same thoughts, he or she would be immediately accused of being a “reactionary”. For that very crime, three Lao nationals were sentenced and incarcerated under extremely harsh conditions. They may, God forbid, have to spend the last day of their life in jail.

After only a decade of absence, returning Lao expatriates will find a Vientiane waking up after a long slumber. Like a silkworm coming out from its cocoon, Vientiane, the symbol of Laos, is making earnest attempts to adapt to the new lifestyle of a consumer society. Anywhere one turns, one can see store signs with the lettering “Import – Export” painted on them or goods imported from Thailand, Japan and China.

The young generation in Laos knows what it wants: riding Japanese Honda motorcycles, wearing American Levy jeans, listening to Rock music from Thailand. At nighttime, they like to take their dates to the Mekong River to sip coffee and do things young boys and girls do. New cars, including Mercedes, are replacing the rickety 4CV-Renaults on the city’s narrow streets. Airports are being expanded to accommodate heavier air traffics.

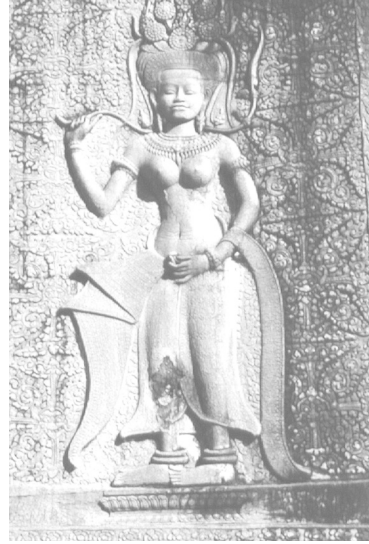
Foreign experts never tire of reminding the Lao leaders that their country is exceedingly rich in unexploited natural resources - be it gold, precious stones, iron or particularly hydroelectricity of which only 1% of the estimated 18,000 KWH has already been exploited. And the communist leaders are holding tight to their dream of turning Laos

into a “Kuwait of hydropower of Southeast Asia”. Laos’ electricity is exported mainly to Thailand. The Thai Foreign Minister on a visit to Laos in 1990 commented: “*The dams in Laos are like sleeping beauties, waiting for their Prince Charming.*”

The problem is that there are too many “inconsiderate” princes bearing the banners of international consortiums who rush into Laos to harness her rivers. Those rivers that are humming with joy and serenity, up till now, will soon be smothered in woe and grief.



Angkor Buddha Smile



Apsara showing gun-shot wounds (GSW) by AK47 or M16



Post Khmer-Rouge Angkor Dance revival



Cham Islam Temple in Phnom Penh



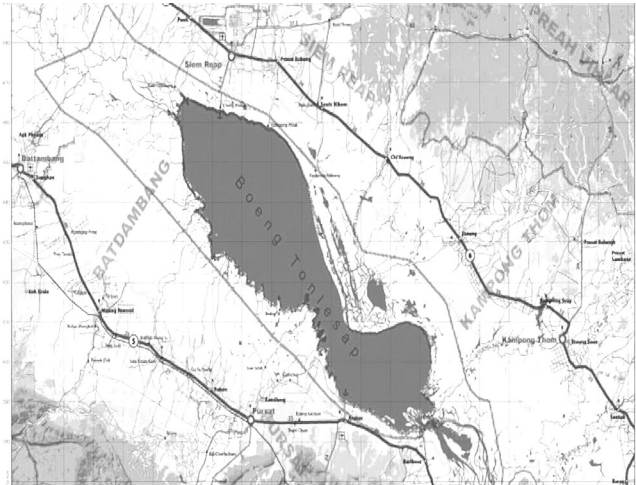
Ramadan in the ninth month of the Islamic calendar: Chām Islam praying on Tonle Sap River, Cambodia



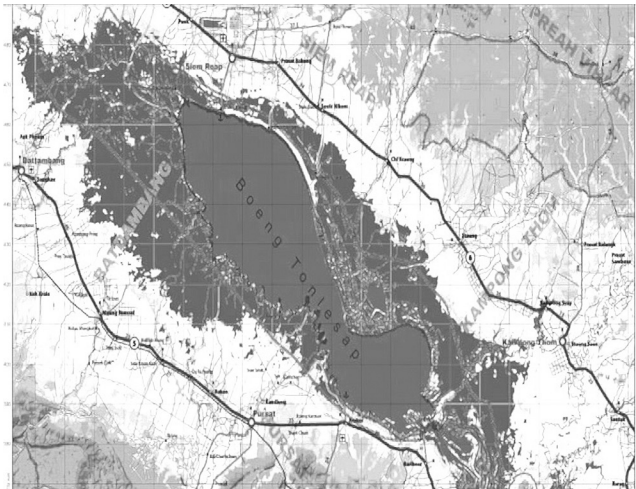
Chăm woman on Tonle Sap River near Phnom Penh



Poor Chăm youngsters going barefoot



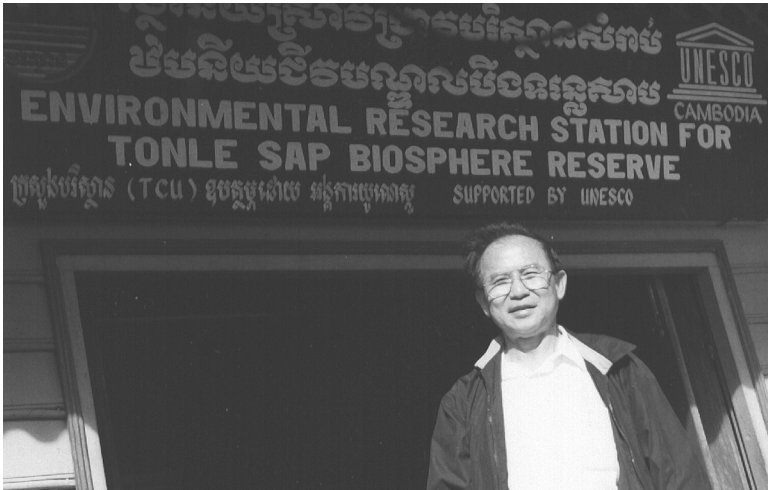
During the Dry Season, the Tonle Sap Lake dries up and measures only 2.500 km². Come the Rainy Season, the Tonle Sap Lake expands to almost five times its size to 12.000 km² [source: Tom Fawthrop]



Since the year 2010, a dying Tonle Sap Lake can no longer expand or contract with the Dry and Rainy Seasons; it is shrinking and drying up [source: Tom Fawthrop]



Crossing the Tonle Sap Lake on the way to the Bird Sanctuary Prek Toal



*Crossing the Tonle Sap Lake to visit the Tonle Sap Biosphere Reserve
12/2001*



*Kompong Cham the
Japanese Bridge
across the Mekong*

*Vietnamese-Cambodia Victory Monument in
Norodom Sihanouk Square, Phnom Penh*



*A protest of Mekong River fisherfolk and their families against the
construction of the Don Sahong Dam. [photo by Tom Fawthrop]*

CHAPTER XII

THE VIOLIN CONCERTO OF THE TONLE SAP LAKE

*My dear, at the Tonle Sap Lake, harsh is our life
All night, we cut the fish to dry them at daylight
Saying of Destitute Vietnamese on Great Lake*

AFP News (3/6/1998):

UNESCO classified Cambodia's Tonle Sap Lake as an International Biosphere Reserve along with 337 other natural wonders of the world. This classification helps preserve the ecosystem of the Great Lake and induces the Cambodian Government to participate in the harmonious development of the region.

At first, The Friends of the Mekong Group greets the news in various ways. In fact, it does not come as a complete surprise to me because for the last several years I have been monitoring closely the efforts of the Cambodian environmentalists to have the Great Lake granted the status of a world reserve.

Nonetheless, it still fills me with a sense of joy and optimism. To preserve the Lake's ecosystem is also tantamount to preserving the

ecology of the Mekong Delta. The file I keep on the Mekong since the day that river captured my attention never ceases to grow in size. In addition, I also made numerous on-the-site fieldtrips to the area. To prepare for my coming visit to Cambodia, true to my work habits, I do my homework and update my Mekong file in view of helping me and Bé Tur arrive at an overall assessment of Vietnam's clout in the Southeast Asian region.

The Great Lake in the Land of Rebirth

“Bung Tonlé Sap” in Cambodian means “The Fresh Water Lake”. The Vietnamese call it “Biển Hồ” meaning the “Sea Lake or Great Lake” because of its immense dimensions. This largest natural lake in Southeast Asia is located 80 miles northwest of Phnom Penh. Through the professional lenses of the surveyors, it looks like the number “8”, or to put it more musically, the sound box of a violin. It is unquestionably a gift Mother Nature bestows on both the Khmer people and the farmers of the Mekong Delta.

This vast body of water measures 160 km long and 30 km wide. Looking across from the Lake's banks, all one can see are sky and water stretching endlessly to the far horizon. The Lake regulates the water flow of the mighty Mekong River and is called the “heart of Cambodia”. Half the population of Cambodia lives in the seven provinces bordering the Lake which is considered the country's second wonder after Angkor Wat. Besides the huge catch of fish, annual rice harvests in this area account for more than half of Cambodia's rice production. Indeed, to say that the Tonle Sap Lake is the lifeline of Cambodia is not an overstatement at all.

As planned by the Cambodian Ministry of Environment, the Lake's 300,000 acres are divided into three distinct zones where the conservation efforts are to be concentrated: (1) the Prek Toal zone near Siem Reap, (2) the Boeng Chhmar or Moat Kla zone, a small lake

connected to the eastern bank of the Tone Sap Lake, (3) and the Steung Sen River that runs into the southern part of the Lake through flooded rainforests inhabited by endangered species like spotted leopards, spotted cats, civets, rare birds and Siamese crocodiles. The remaining lands are classified as buffer or transition zones with economic activities specifically tailored to each of them.

The UNESCO decision implicitly attests to the historic and ecological importance of the Tonle Sap Lake. It will also bring in, at the same time, significant source of funding and worldwide attention to promote the harmonious development of the region.

Regardless of the plans people may have for them, the Mekong and Tonle Sap Lake have a mind of their own and will persist on doing their own thing.

In June, the Mekong becomes even more majestic as its current gains strength with the infusion of water from the melting snow in the Himalayas and the rainwater of the Rainy Season. A peculiar phenomenon then takes place: The water level rises swiftly causing the Tonle Sap River to reverse its course and flow into the Tonle Sap Lake. The current brings with it fish that find refuge in the flooded forests to spawn. Now, the Lake surface swells to five times its original size covering about 1.5 million acres or 1/7 the area of Cambodia. At places, the water may reach up to 15 meters deep. Under a sky covered with dark clouds occasionally lit up by bolts and thunders and with strong winds whipping up high waves below, the boat rocked perilously up and down giving the sensation that one is sailing on the high sea. After everything has cleared, the Mekong and Tonle Sap Lake remain submerged under an enormous body of water. However, underneath the surface tinted the color of “café au lait” exists a whole world abounding with life and fish.

The wind begins to change direction during the last days of October.

Then the south wind coming from the Gulf of Siam gives way to the gusty north easterly one that blows in from the north stirring up big waves in the Mekong and Tonle Sap Lake.

Going into November, the start of the Dry Season, the Tonle Sap Lake teems with fish. It's time for the Tonle Sap River to resume its normal flow toward Quatre Bras, the name the French gave to that place under their colonial rule in 1863. This is the location where four rivers meet: the Tonle Sap, Upper Mekong, Lower Mekong, and Bassac Rivers. The last two take on the new Vietnamese names of Sông Tiền and Sông Hậu after they cross the border into South Vietnam.

The first species of fish that migrate from the Tonle Sap Lake downstream are the fresh water white fish namely *cá chép*/carb, *cá linh* /mud carbs, *cá hô*/ trichiure, *cá thu nước ngọt* /mackerels... they come mostly from the Cambodian borders to the region north of the Tiền and Hậu Rivers. The fish are so many that the people cannot consume them all and use any surplus to make fish paste or fertilizer for the paddies. The black fish i.e. *cá lóc*/snake-heads, *cá rô*/anabas, *cá bóng*/goby, *cá trê*/catfishes... have gills that allow them to take in oxygen from the air. That biological trait helps them survive in the mud or shallow waters and allow them to stay behind in the Lake. The black fish named Anabas Scandens can “walk” by using their fins behind their gills to lift their bodies up and their tail to propel them forward. So, during chilly nights, people often see them “walk” on dry land in search of deeper water pools.

Come February, the Lake shrinks to only about 300,000 acres and turns into a gigantic pot of uncooked “vegetable and fish” soup. The cycle of expansion and contraction of the Tonle Sap Lake proves quite beneficial to the Cambodian people as well as the Mekong Delta. It helps reduce the chance of flooding, brings alluvia to fertilize the fields, and breeds over 300 species of fish with an output of 10 tons per square kilometer representing the main protein source for the

Cambodian people.

Every year, near the end of October, when the fresh water of the Tonle Sap River resumes its normal flow to the East Sea, the Cambodians celebrate the Water Festival, Bom Oum Touk, marking the start of the busy fishing and planting seasons. Fishing nets bulging to the brims with fish still fill the “barang” or foreigners with amazement.

This abundance conceals a fragile ecology bearing signs of an impending ecological disaster. Industrial waste has not yet grown into a serious problem but according to J.P Carbonnel - from CNRS, Laboratoire de Géologie Dynamique, Université Pierre et Marie Curie, Paris - the bottom of Tonle Sap Lake is being raised at the unprecedented rate of 4cm per year threatening to render the lake shallower. In addition to the silt deposits that come with the Mekong current one must also take into consideration the tons of earth that continue to slide down from the flooded forests into the Great Lake. A case in point is the Snuoc Tru area: the ground at this place is being raised up so fast that it prevents the Mekong current from gaining easy access to the Great Lake. With the existing policy of cutting down flooded forests to have more arable land, the situation is rendered more precarious than during Pol Pot’s time. Never before has the water level reached such low marks as in recent years. During the Dry Season, the water sometimes drops to only half a meter deep and becomes so hot that the white fish cannot survive. They either perish and their carcasses float to the surface or migrate to safer haven downstream.

Prince Sihanouk had long nurtured the dream of turning Cambodia into a Switzerland of the Far East and yearned for the day the Tonle Sap Lake where he used to swim and water ski as a youngster would be classified as a World Heritage Site. He, nevertheless, met the staunch resistance from developers who feared that such an eventuality would present a stumbling block to their projects of building hydroelectric dams on the Mekong and obstruct

the “modernization of Cambodia” [sic]

Grief from the Salty Sea

Each year, the Mekong discharges 475 billion cubic meters of fresh water carving out in the process two huge underwater valleys extending from the river mouths into the East Sea. Over time the silt in the river current spreads over the valleys’ surface and forms a crescent shape continental shelf that reaches 400 km out into the high sea. The Mekong’s flow rate is twice that of the Red River but thanks to the Great Lake its water only gradually inundates the millions of acres in the Delta.

During the Dry Season, especially from March to May, that flow rate is reduced to a mere 2,000m³/second compared to that of 4,000 m³/second required to sustain the agricultural activities in the Delta. This requirement is projected to double in the middle of the 21st century. In the absence of a program to retain the water in the Tonle Sap Lake upstream- to be released during the Dry Season - one can expect a number of potential disasters to occur downstream: droughts, water shortage for farming, salinization, and shallow currents hindering water travel to Phnom Penh.

With its high inclination and strong flow rate the Mekong is deemed ideal for the construction of hydroelectric dams. However, unlike the other rivers of the world, it is still spared from being intensively dammed in spite of the numerous exploitation projects being reviewed over at least half a century. Not counting the dams in Yunnan, in the 1960’s, the Mekong River Committee has approved three priority projects in the Lower Mekong:

1/ Pa Mong Project: 15 km from Vientiane, this dam is to be used mainly for water retention. With a 2,000 MW output and a 360 foot-tall wall, it boasts a capacity twice as big as that of the Hoover Dam in the

United States. The dam is expected to supply water to the 2.5 million acres of parched land in the Isan Plateau, improve water transportation, and help develop the entire northeast of Thailand.

2/ Sambor Project: 140 miles north of Phnom Penh, this project calls for the construction of a water way connecting Cambodia with Laos. In addition, the dam will generate 1,000MW enough to meet the needs of industries, civilian uses, and irrigation in Cambodia as well as the southern part of Vietnam.

3/ Tonle Sap Project: considered the most promising project that combines the building of a hydroelectric dam with a natural reservoir to provide enough water to irrigate millions of acres during the Dry Season. The proposed site of the dam straddles the mouth of the river running between Phnom Penh and the Tonle Sap Lake. The dam's floodgates will be opened during the Rainy Season to help the current reverse its course and flow into the Lake to its maximum level thus minimizing the risk of flooding in the valleys below. In the Dry Season, the flood gates will be partially opened to supply enough water for the purpose of farming, prevention of salinization and keeping the current deep enough for the boats to navigate. As a result, 2.5 million acres of land that so far are left unused due to alum, drought, and flood would be rendered arable. In this way, the water level in the Tonle Sap Lake would be maintained at a level of one meter higher than normal during the dry season helping to increase the declining fish and shrimp population.

The Tonle Sap Project was favorably received by Vietnam and again discussed during the 1988 Mekong River Committee meeting in Saigon. Unfortunately, Cambodia held to a totally different position. It maintained that this project only benefited Vietnam while working to its own detriments. In the face of this staunch opposition from Cambodia, the Mekong River Committee had shown admirable patience in its attempt to persuade this nation to change its mind. This

is not an easy task considering the long running animosity between the Khmer and Vietnamese over the last three centuries. Instead of abating, this animosity has seriously deepened throughout the duration of the Vietnam War.

To get the Mekong projects enmeshed in the region's short sighted political rivalries, could very well eliminate all prospects for a harmonious cooperation and development for the whole of Southeast Asia. The "Spirit of the Mekong" must command the inspiration, initiative, and enthusiasm of all the countries in the region and should not fall under the control of a few countries like China and Thailand or the influence of international consortiums, the Asian Development Bank, or World Bank headquartered in faraway New York City.

From Funan to the Water Chenla

Cambodia's written history contains many gaps pertaining to the origin of this nation. Historians in the West also hold differing views on the topic. As for me, I have my own understanding of it.

In the first century AD, a group of Hmong Indo-Melanesians inhabiting the Lower Mekong under the deep cultural influence of India founded a kingdom named Funan. They carried out robust maritime trade from their port city of Óc Eo extending westward to India and eastward to China. To obtain more goods for their trade, the Funanese ventured inland to exploit and plunder their neighbors. The cultural influence of Funan has made its presence felt as far away as the Malaysian peninsula or at least U Thong, 60 miles to the northwest of Bangkok. In 1964, Jean Boisselet of the Sorbonne in Paris discovered many vestiges of Funan in that region.

No longer able to bear the oppressive yoke of Funan's rule, the "children of Kambu" (Khmer) living in the Middle Mekong, rose up against the Funanese in the 7th century. They annihilated their oppressors

and founded the country of Chenla. Constant rivalries within the royal family led Chenla to split into Land Chenla – today’s southern Laos, and Water Chenla – present day Tonle Sap Lake and Lower Mekong.

Going into the 8th century, they were further divided into five realms that fell under Malaysian rule. It was not until the 9th century that a member of the Khmer royal house succeeded in rallying the population to defeat the Malaysians and regain their independence. He founded the Angkor Jayavarman II Dynasty, named Brahmanism as the national religion, and chose a capital located far away from the Mekong in order to avoid naval attacks from his neighbors. Nevertheless, armed conflicts still occurred between Angkor Khmer and her neighbors Champa, Siam or even Vietnam.

In the 12th century, a powerful fleet from Champa, sailed on the Mekong into the Tonle Sap Lake then upstream the Siem Rap River to lay waste to Angkor Khmer. Many royal successions had to pass, more precisely until Jayavarman VII, before Angkor Khmer was able to get back on its feet. The reliefs in the Bayon Temple recorded the battles between Angkor Khmer and the Kingdom of Champa. The Khmer called both the Chă̄m and Vietnamese “Yavana” meaning foreign barbarians in Sanskrit.

Upon his return to his homeland in the 13th century, a Chinese explorer named Chou Ta-Kuan wrote about his travel as he sailed upstream the Mekong River starting from the East Sea all the way to the Tonle Sap Lake to visit Angkor Wat.

Throughout their reigns, Khmer kings always kept a large number of slaves and Khmer laborers to build monuments that continued to surpass each other in size and magnificence. Even the Thai of the Yunnan High Plateaus who fled the Mongols and resettled in the Menam-Chao Phraya Delta were conscripted to work as hard labors in those construction projects. Angkor Wat was turned into a huge

labor camp for both the slaves and the Khmer population. Their living conditions were so harsh that many fled at the risk of their lives. In the parlance of Western historians it could be said that “they voted with their feet”.

During the 14th century, a number of Khmer noblemen became disillusioned with the austerity of Brahmanism and converted to the more benevolent teachings of the Buddha. Religious struggles ensued ending in the predominance of Buddhism that was then named the national religion. However, this religion’s influence was confined mostly to the ruling classes. Cambodian history in the following years was plagued with violence and divisions. Buddhism together with patriotism failed to play a unifying role to put an end to the enmity and suspicions that divided the “children of Kambu”.

Capitalizing on their neighbor’s internal division and the unpopularity of the Khmer rulers, the Siamese kings launched frequent military forays into Cambodian territories. This campaign lasted for almost a century and culminated in the victory of Siam. The Khmer capital was put to the torch and the people deported to Siam as slaves. The ruthlessness and thoroughness displayed by the Siamese were such that the entire northwest area of the Tonle Sap Lake was turned into a no man’s land. During the many centuries that followed, the resplendent and ill-fated Angkor civilization was completely erased from the consciousness and memory of the Khmer who were fortunate enough to escape the pogrom.

In the 15th century, more than half of the western territory of Cambodia was swallowed up by Siam. Two centuries later, the Khmer king Chey Chetta II sought assistance from the Nguyễn shoguns ushering in an era of Vietnamese intervention into Cambodian politics and putting an end to Siamese freedom of action in the land of Angkor.

The surprising thing was that such momentous event as the

decline of the Angkor Khmer Empire had gone unnoticed to Western tradesmen and missionaries for quite a long time. They knew about the small commercial cities of Phnom Penh and Vientiane on the mighty Mekong's bank further north but were completely uninformed about this river's source. France only began to get actively involved in the Far East and compete with the British Empire when the French emperor Louis Napoleon III, a nephew of the famous Napoleon Bonaparte, ascended to the throne. Under the pretext of protecting the French missionaries, France attacked Vietnam in 1858. However, the real objective proved less noble than that: it was to establish more colonies and bring glory and power to France.

The first Westerner who "rediscovered" the Angkor temples was probably the French missionary, father Charles-Emile Bouillevaux, in 1857. But the outside world had to wait until the day the French naturalist and explorer Henri Mouhot stumbled upon the Angkor ruins during one of his expeditions to learn of their existence in the deep jungle. Mouhot himself found it hard to reconcile to the fact that such a splendid civilization could have co-existed with the primitive society he was living in at the time.

The Legacy of Animosity between the Khmer and Vietnamese

For a very long time, the Khmer people have nurtured an obsessive sense of insecurity and fear of expansion vis à vis the Vietnamese. Therefore, any anti-Vietnamese campaign conducted under any circumstances would to some degree respond to the Cambodian psyche. For the Khmer politicians, demagogic or not, any accusation leveled at the Vietnamese would show proof of patriotism.

It is thus not surprising that every now and then a terrifying incident of "cáp duòn" or decapitation of Vietnamese in the land of Angkor would make the news and shock world opinion. Hundreds of headless and disemboweled corpses of women and children would

be seen floating down the Mekong River. On the streets of Phnom Penh, slogans in French and English, the like of “We must kill all Vietnamese in Cambodia”, were scrawled on walls for the eyes of foreign correspondents.

Under the Khmer Rouge, Pol Pot ordered the killing of not only the “Yvon” meaning “those from the north”, the derogatory name reserved for Vietnamese, but also the torture and execution of Khmer suspected of being Vietnamese sympathizers. They were being vilified as “Khmer bodies with Viet souls.” and looked upon as wild weeds that need to be eradicated. Going one step further, Pol Pot pointed the finger at the Vietnamese accusing them of being the real perpetrators of the Killing Fields. Not a few of his compatriots believed it.

While in Cambodia, one often hears the story about tens of thousands of Khmers being conscripted by proconsul Thoại Ngọc Hầu into forced labor to dig the Vĩnh Tế Canal running between Châu Đốc and Hà Tiên at the start of the 19th century resulting in so many of their deaths. Then there was another story circulated by the French about a mandarin of the Nguyễn court named Trương Minh Giảng who had three Khmers buried to their necks and used their heads as a tripod to cook rice. True or not, these stories are being used by Khmers who dislike the Vietnamese as proofs of the cruel treatments they meted out to the Khmers.

How many Vietnamese are now living in Cambodia? Is it 200,000, 400,000 or even one million? It’s anybody’s guess. How many Cambodians have survived Pol Pot’s rule? Five million? Seven million? Or has the number grown to 9 million due to the baby boom that followed his demise? It’s hard to tell.

The majority of the Vietnamese expatriates live along the Mekong’s banks or around the Tonle Sap Lake. Those affluent enough dwell in floating houses. On the other hand, the less fortunate have to be content

with shacks built on stilts that can be dismantled and put on boats to be reassembled at different locations depending on the water levels in the lake. Most of them earn their living as fishermen or hired hands at fish farms. They lead a hard life but have settled in a land that is easy to come yet difficult to leave. A popular saying has it:

*Nam Vang lên dễ khó về
Trai vô bạn biển, gái về tào kê*

Phnom Penh is a place you come to easily
Young men come to become fishermen while
Young girls go home as ladies of the night

The rest of them earn their keep as craftsmen such as carpenters, tailors, electricians or small convenient store owners. A significant number of Vietnamese girls work among the estimated 20,000 prostitutes who pry their trade all over Cambodia.

Life for the Vietnamese is not much better than that of the average Cambodian. In this land of Angkor, the economy is controlled by wealthy Chinese businessmen while the forests as well as precious stone mines are being irresponsibly exploited by Thai entrepreneurs whose country had once occupied more than half of Cambodia's territory. Only the Vietnamese fall victim to a campaign of ostracism and brutal suppression. It is rare for the Cambodians to agree on anything but they are always of one mind in their opposition to the Vietnamese.

China remains an eternal enigma. About seven centuries ago, Marco Polo followed the ancient Silk Road in his journey from India to China to trade. Lately, this former trade road appears to regain its vitality when China is set on its path to become an emerging political, military, and economic superpower. It again reasserts its right to behave like the celestial court it once was. Arrogant, it unilaterally proceeds with its plan to exploit the Mekong, an international river, showing no need

to arrive at an understanding with its neighbors in order to work for a common and harmonious development of the region.

As the opportunistic politicians of the four small regional nations continue to fight and outguess each other, China quietly goes on its way to exploit the Mekong as it sees fit. Five years ago (1993), it was not until the water level in the Mekong suddenly dropped to a record low even during the Rainy Season that people in the region realized that something was amiss in Yunnan. Unbeknownst to them, China had completed the construction of Manwan, the first big hydroelectric dam, on the Mekong, and was diverting the river's water into its reservoir. The project calls for eight more to be built in the series of hydroelectric dams of the Mekong Cascades in Yunnan.

Lower Mekong in the Down Under

A recent symposium on the "Development of the Lower Mekong" was held in Melbourne, Australia. It attracted a surprisingly large number of participants from political, diplomatic, business and environmental circles.

In her capacity as visiting scholar at the University of Melbourne and member of the Mekong River Commission of Vietnam, Bé Tu observed:

– Being a country located upstream the Mekong, China indisputably has the upper hand. Nobody can tell that country what to do or not to do. Whether we agree with it or not, we are not in the position to go to Tiananmen Square and demonstrate. (laughter from the audience) But there is one thing we can require from the Mekong River Commission of China whose representatives are here with us today. It is: Beijing should give due consideration to the chain reaction impacts on the ecology of the Lower Mekong each time it embarks on the building of hydroelectric dams in Yunnan.

This statement from Bé Tu opened the way for a salvo of, at times critical, questions addressed to the Chinese delegation. The chairman of the Yunnan Provincial Hydroelectric Power Bureau, professor Wang, spoke on behalf of his delegation. In a self-assured tone he diplomatically replied through an interpreter:

– Naturally, before starting our works we always perform a thorough assessment of the potential impacts from the dams in Yunnan on the nations downstream the Mekong.

When asked what those impacts were, the professor only gave a general answer:

– First, the dams in Yunnan will retain water to discharge it during the Dry Season. Secondly, it helps limit the risks of flooding during the Rainy Season. Third, it improves transportation on the Mekong River.

With her extensive knowledge and fluent English, Bé Tu left a favorable impression on the audience. Her charming good look also helped. She confidently asked:

– Has China ever shared the findings of those assessments for instance the river's current flow with the member states of the Mekong River Commission?

Professor Wang lost his calm and shot back:

– China cannot be held accountable for that river's current flow because in addition to the seasonal rain water, there are tributaries all along its course that feed water into it. As far as the exploitation of the stretch of the Mekong that lies within the boundaries of Yunnan Province is concerned, China considers it an internal issue to be handled according to her own laws and regulations.

The Thai ambassador to Australia was invited to the podium next. A true diplomat, she turned to where the Australian businessmen sat and said:

– Australia is a developed country that possesses a wealth of knowledge and technology much sought after by the nations in Southeast Asia. This represents a golden opportunity for the Australian companies not to miss even though they will be treading on unfamiliar territories. On the other hand, Thailand occupies a central position with close geographical and political ties to the other nations of the region. My country has always played an “anchor role” in the development projects of the Lower Mekong. Isn’t it now the perfect time for our two nations, Australia and Thailand, to enter into joint ventures and start development projects working for the betterment of the entire region?

The ambassador’s speech was enthusiastically received by the Australian business participants while it was met with some reservation from the environmental groups.

Sitting next to the Thai ambassador was Princess Simone Norodom of Cambodia. Like all Khmers of mixed blood, she looked tall and had a fair complexion. She kept her black hair in a chignon and showed an aristocratic demeanor that reflected her royal root. Though in her 40’s, the princess still looked svelte in a beige silk blouse and a scarf called “krama” hanging around her neck. To complete it all, she wore a thick skirt woven in the traditional way of the land of Angkor. The princess attended the symposium, not as a representative of her country, but as the chairwoman of UNESCO’s Environment Office in Phnom Penh. She was given credits for making the initial efforts to convince UNESCO to recognize the Tonle Sap Lake as an international biosphere reserve. This is the dream that her father, Prince Sihanouk, was unable to achieve twenty years ago.

I was captivated by the “krama” worn by the princess. It is a piece

of garment favored by the common people of Cambodia but on her it took on a special air of “stylishness”. In a flashback, it reminded me of the years of happiness mixed with tragedy the six million Cambodians lived through in recent past. Not long ago, the Sidney Tribune showed a photograph taken at a military base in the jungle of an aged and frail Pol Pot clad in a black pajama and his inseparable “krama”.

This “krama” is very popular and closely associated with the life of the Khmer peasants as well as the Vietnamese of the Mekong Delta. It can be used in many ways: to protect from the burning heat in the fields, hold fruits and vegetable, carry babies on a long journey, cover the body while taking a bath in the river, wrap around the waist to protect the belly from a cool afternoon breeze... you name it. When a young girl falls in love, she embroiders her name on a “krama” to give to her lover so that when they are apart he can give it a kiss or hold it next to his heart whenever he thinks about her.

Unfortunately, the “krama” was also put to other more sinister uses. Pol Pot’s rule is remembered for “the peal chur chat or grief and misery” he visited on his people. When they were desperate or at the end of the rope, they sometimes tied a “krama” around their neck in the hope that the hanging noose could deliver their wearers from the hellish circumstances they found themselves in.

Executioners at times blindfolded their victims with the “krama”. Among the multitude of human skulls lying around the trunks of sugar palm trees in the Killing Fields, one would occasionally find a few with their eye sockets still covered with “kramas” that survived the works of weather and time. In the cavities of the eye sockets, it seemed as if one could still see the horrified look of the victims before they breathed their last.

Nowadays, even the sugar palm trees, those inanimate plants, appear to be quivering with fright with each passing wind. In the temples at

Angkor Wat or in the Killing Fields, ageless sugar palm trees still give flowers and fruits and at the same time bear witness to centuries of blood and violence the Cambodian people had to endure. In my eyes, the “krama” stands for the fabric of Khmer society while the sugar palm trees represent the length of their history that is short in happiness and laden with suffering.

When the time came for her to speak, Princess Simone Norodom began:

– At the present time, we are confronted with this general situation: Cambodia and Laos are under pressure to exhaust their natural resources to meet the electricity needs of Thailand, their neighbor to the west. In Yunnan Province, China is relentlessly building hydroelectric dams. Further south, Thailand is diverting the Mekong’s water flowing down from China. The main challenge facing the countries downstream like Cambodia, Laos, and South Vietnam is to figure out ways to cope with the chain reaction impacts emanating from up North. Clearly, there exists a disparity in the freedom of action when the exploitation of the Mekong comes into play. China and Thailand act as they please in the face of the helplessness and passivity displayed by Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam. As for our neighbor and friend Laos, we understand that she now serves as the experimental ground on a grand scale for a 60 dam project financed by the World Bank, Asian Development Bank, and international consortiums coming mostly from Australia.

The representative of the Asian Development Agency in Australia commented:

– As you all know, faced with widespread criticism, the World Bank decided to stay clear of direct funding of big dam projects. Instead of financing those projects, it now acts as a go-between for the international consortiums. As a result, the BOOT (build, own, operate, and transfer) formula for financing is now being introduced into Laos.

With risk insurance made available by the World Bank, the private companies rush in to sign contracts to construct, own, operate the dams in order to recuperate their investments and make a profit over a period of twenty to thirty years before transferring their ownership to the Lao government. It must be said that the leaders in Vientiane are very eager to close such deals as fast as they can.

Dr. Chamsak, professor of economics at the Thammasat University, and I became good friends when we met in Laos two years ago. He was a well-regarded Thai environmental activist so it suits him well to voice his disagreement:

– The Australians have sold Laos a myth that it has no other alternative than turning its rivers into power generators to become the “Kuwait of hydropower of Southeast Asia” in order to garner foreign exchange and enrich its national coffer. In my opinion, to burden Laos with 60 hydroelectric dams is the most deplorable decision ever. Only foreign investors and dam construction companies benefit from these projects. These projects came to them at an opportune time because considering that the derived economic benefits cannot compensate for the detrimental and long run impacts on the ecology, no developed countries like the United States and Australia are willing to embark in building big dams any longer.

At this point, I felt I had to express my opinion as an engineer in ecology:

– With his vast experience, nobody is in a better position than Dr. Chamsak to know about the economic benefits and the devastating impacts emanating from the dams in Thailand and the Nam Ngum Dam in Laos. Far from the rosy picture painted at the start, dam constructions did not bring prosperity to the vast majority of the population except to a limited number of entrepreneurs at the expense of the ecology. Granted that Laos is a poor country, but is it equally true that she has

no other alternative than building hydroelectric dams? At first glance, the BOOT formula appears straightforward and attractive. All that is required of Laos is for her to offer the use of her pristine rivers and natural resources in exchange for free infrastructures. But things are not really what they appear at first sight. Will those worn out assets still hold any real value after thirty years of use? Just consider the dams with their outdated turbines and dried out reservoirs, not to mention, the devastated ecosystem and the wretched existence of the local inhabitants.... Such is the vast ocean that separates the stark reality from the enticing promises of the BOOT projects. What about the national sovereignty and economic autonomy of Laos? What about the impacts on the ecology? Are the Lao people any better off? Nobody could venture an answer. The problem still remains unresolved.

The impassioned and persuasive speech of the young Vietnamese engineer from North America plunged the whole room into a dead silence. During the three days of the symposium many opinions were voiced but no concrete results reached. However, the vast majority of the participants agreed to this common conclusion: the fundamental problem was the absence of an efficient and reliable coordination in the inter-nation efforts to exploit and utilize the Mekong.

After that meeting, a professor of Chinese Studies at the University of Melbourne took me aside and said:

– For experts who are old hands of Asia, it is common knowledge that the Chinese do not have a good track record about maintaining multilateral cooperation with other countries. Their projects for the exploitation of the Mekong are good examples of it.

Looking at the discussion panel I made an interesting observation that more than half of its members were women. I wondered whether this is a trend showing that the coming century would belong to women.

Until recently, to talk about the Mekong is to think of river currents and wharfs, paddies scented by the ripening rice stalks, white rice grains cooking in crystal clear water, verdant orchards and sweet fruits, rice fields swarming with shrimps and fish...

Nowadays, to watch the Vietnamese and Khmers strive so hard to eke out a living, one has to confess that the rosy promise of a prosperous Mekong Delta for all is nothing but a cruel hoax.

Is this “paradise lost” the real motive that induces me to keep alive an unending wish that the Great Lake will always have a healthy heart pulsating all year round to bring fresh water to both Cambodia and the Mekong Delta? Hopefully, the Tonle Sap Lake’s classification as an international biosphere reserve, will help start in depth studies about the changes and developments that are taking place so that efficient measures can be taken to preserve the wellbeing of this huge natural reservoir of fish and fresh water. It is unconscionable to think that, each year, almost 500 billion cubic meters of this lake’s water are being wasted into the sea while the Cambodian people and inhabitants of the Mekong Delta do not have enough water to till their fields or assuage their thirst under the scorching sun or during a drought.

To conserve and develop the Tonle Sap Lake are not two mutually exclusive goals. Honest and responsible cooperation in the efforts to develop the Tonle Sap Lake does not solely serve economic goals. It also offers a humanistic path to work toward a gradual improvement of the perennial animosity that has plagued the relationship between the Cambodian and Vietnamese peoples.

There are peoples in the world whose mutual hatred based on religious faiths appear to be irreconcilable like in the case of the Indians and Pakistanis. However, it was observed that those same peoples have become good friends when they meet and live outside of their native lands like in the United States. This fact shows that deep-seated

hatred can be overcome. I feel the same way with the Cambodians and Vietnamese and believe that the needed catalyst must come from a third party or parties.

That night Bé Tu and I attended a reception hosted by Princess Simone Norodom. We came as special guests of the princess thanks to the introduction of Dr. Duy who was the professor of the princess' only daughter at Stanford University. The Royal Dance Group of the land of Angkor made a real hit with the guests that night. Bé Tu and I had the special privilege of sharing with the princess our hopes for a better relationship between our two peoples.

The next day, a flight from Australia took Khmer and Vietnamese expatriates back to their homelands. They travelled with their adoptive country's passports bringing back to their homelands new thoughts and knowledge in their hearts or minds and money in their pockets. They went back to partake in the economic life that was unfolding in their lands of birth. Being all victims and survivors of war and hatred, they should be able to share the same dream, look forward to a common future, and enjoy together the harmonic duet played by the Mekong current and the violin of the Tonle Sap Lake.

CHAPTER XIII

RISING WITH DAWN - A MEA CULPA FOR THE RUINS OF CHAMPA

*For millenniums, I pray to the Goddess of Mercy
I cry over your mistakes – Oh! Wandering souls!
Drop by drop, on the stone, tears of love fall.*

Vô Ngã Phạm Khắc Hàm

The Chẵm of Châu Giang

The Chẵm live in houses built on stilts with wooden walls and brick roofs that jostle for space along the banks of the Hậu River. However, due to the fact that they maintain close contacts with the Muslims of Malaysia, the Vietnamese become confused and called them “Chà”.

Thumbing through the pages of history, it could be said that there are two waves of Chẵm who settled in this area. In 1755, after he succeeded in repulsing attacks by the Khmers, the court mandarin Nguyễn Cư Trinh submitted to the Nguyễn Shogun the “silk worm strategy – tằm ăn dâu” recommending the use of the Chẵm to hold the Khmer in check. It was approved by the Shogun and Nguyễn Cư Trinh succeeded in recruiting a number of Chẵm who had sought asylum in Cambodia

to return to Vietnam and be inducted into the “Côn Man” forces. They were entrusted with the defense of the regions of Tân Châu, Hồng Ngự, and Châu Giang and were given the right to settle in the land.

In 1833, the Chăms threw their support behind a failed rebellion led by Lê Văn Khôi, the adopted son of General Lê Văn Duyệt, against the Huế Imperial Court causing Emperor Minh Mạng to order a bloody massacre of the Chăms throughout Central Vietnam. Those who survived either fled to the Central Highlands or made their way to Kompong Cham, Cambodia. A third group sought refuge among their compatriots living in Châu Đốc, southern Vietnam. Under the reign of Emperor Thiệu Trị, a more conciliatory policy towards the Chăms failed to convince them to move back except for those in the highlands who relocated to Ninh Thuận and Bình Thuận. They have been living there to this day.

Mr. Như Phong, Xuân and their Chăms friend Ro-Hiêm navigated through the Mekong’s large canal network to finally board a motorboat at Châu Đốc and travel down the Vĩnh Tế Canal to Hà Tiên. Looking from the canal in the direction of Châu Đốc, they saw, against the crystal clear sky, the verdant Sam Mountain Range, one of the Seven Mountains in the Thất Sơn region. Local residents explained that this mountain got the name “*Sam*” because from a distance it resembled the shell of a horseshoe crab. If one looked more carefully, one would also see, behind it, a small mountain range resembling the shape of a protruding tail. Emperor Minh Mạng named it the Vĩnh Tế Mountain. However the local people were used to naming the mounts and hills of their region by their shape. Consequently, we now have names like the Horseshoe Crab Mountain, Parrot Mountain, the Long Mountain, the Elephant Range, the Cô Tô Mountain... As for the Núi Cấm or Forbidden Mountain, it is so called because the people are not allowed to come to the place. According to Mr. Như Phong, during French colonial times, this mountain was also used as a base by the elders and patriots in Hậu Giang to carry out their resistance against the foreign

occupiers.

The craft glided effortlessly on this historical canal that ran straight like a rod toward the distant horizon. Fresh water colored red by alluvium flowed in between two walls of luxuriant trees. We were not in the High Water Season but water from the Hậu River still flowed into the canal bringing with it lumps of purple hyacinths blooming amidst their green leaves.

Historical Background

Since the time of the Funan Kingdom (circa 5th century) there already existed a system of man-made canals in the western part of the Mekong Delta to connect its ancient capital to cities like Angkor Borei (South of Phnom Penh), Óc Eo (the Sập and Ba Thê Mountains in Long Xuyên), and the City of Trăm Đường (south-west of Kiên Giang).

During the Vietnamese Nguyễn Dynasty, to keep the “*Nam Tiến*”/Southern March going and relentlessly expand the boundary southward, the Nguyễn emperors found it expedient to adhere to the “silk worm strategy” previously advocated by mandarin Nguyễn Cư Trinh. However, this time, the conquest and settlement of new lands by the Vietnamese pioneers also went hand in hand with canal digging and road construction.

The first canal named Tam Khê was built under the reign of Emperor Gia Long. Nevertheless, it was not until the Vĩnh Tế Canal was completed that the Vietnamese inherit from their forefathers a truly monumental construction work. It would be unforgivable to omit the name of Thoại Ngọc Hầu in any reference to the pacification of the Hậu Giang region and the building of the almost 100 kilometer long Vĩnh Tế Canal.

Research done by scholar Nguyễn Văn Hầu showed that Thoại

Ngọc Hầu was born in Quảng Nam. He was intelligent but short tempered. Unfortunately, the rival Trịnh and Nguyễn Shoguns and later the Nguyễn and Tây Sơn often chose his birthplace as their battleground. The ensuing devastation forced his family to seek refuge on the island Cù Lao Dài on the Cổ Chiên River in the South. Thoại Ngọc Hầu enlisted at a very young age to serve under the banner of “Shogun” Nguyễn Ánh. At first, he had to endure long days of hardship and deprivation as well as the perils of warfare. After the dark clouds of war had dissipated, he ended up an esteemed court official and keeper of the “pro-consul” seal of Chenla cum defender of the Vĩnh Thanh region extending from the cities of Châu Đốc to Hà Tiên. His reputation as a strict but fair official earned him the love and respect of the military and civilians who served under him.

In 1818 upon completion of the Tam Khê canal, the emperor bestowed on him the title “Thoại Hà” and the nearby Sập Mountain was renamed “Thoại Sơn” in his honor. Immediately afterward, he received the order from the court to lead the citizen-soldiers under his command from Gia Định Thành to Châu Đốc and dig a long canal connecting Châu Đốc to the river estuary at Hà Tiên. Realizing that it was a massive and demanding project Emperor Gia Long sent him these encouraging words: *“The construction of this canal is extremely arduous but indispensable to the defense of the country. Its importance cannot be overstressed. You, my subjects, presently have to endure hardship but your sacrifice will benefit countless generations to come.”*

This canal built in the new territory began on the left bank of the Hậu River in Châu Đốc and continued on to Hà Tiên where it connected with the Giang Thành River before running into the Gulf of Siam. Right from the beginning Thoại Ngọc Hầu had to mobilize 5,000 Vietnamese citizen-soldiers along with a number of Chăm and an additional 5,000 Khmer hired hands to start the work. Soon afterward a drought followed by a flood and opposition from the workforce brought the whole effort to an abrupt stop.

To clear such a vast wilderness the workers had to rely on sheer human power and primitive self-made tools like hoes, spades, pestles, and mallets... All measurements were done by hand. So that the digging could be done in a straight line, the workers must first clear the reeds and bushes. At nighttime, a monitor standing on high grounds would use flags to position workers holding burning poles in a straight line for the digging to proceed. For that reason there is this lullaby:

*“What lantern could be as tall as those in Châu Đốc,
What wind could be as lethal as that in Gò Công.”*

Living conditions were extremely spartan: the workers toiled around the clock and subsisted only on rice and salt while water was scarce and medicine lacking. Besides, they have to deal with an inhospitable environment and a harsh climate of freezing cold at nights and scorching heat during the days. Under such circumstances, many had succumbed to diseases and death. The project had to be interrupted on numerous occasions on account of seemingly insurmountable obstacles.

After three years of arduous work, the project did not make much headway. Emperor Minh Mạng had to order Marshal Lê Văn Duyệt to bring in a reinforcement of 39,000 Vietnamese citizen-soldiers and 16,000 Khmer hired hands. This labor force was organized into three shifts and worked through the night in the deep jungle teeming with mosquitoes, leeches, venomous snakes and wild beasts.

Workers or soldiers who found the hardship unbearable and wanted to flee could hardly find a safe escape route. Those who made it to the jungle would face starvation or fall easy prey to tigers and panthers. Should they choose to swim across the Vàm Nao River, crocodiles would be lying in wait for them. The Vàm Nao connects the Tiền to the Hậu Rivers forming the boundary between Châu Đốc and Long Xuyên. It was at this location that many a fierce and bloody battle unfolded during the wars the Siamese, Vietnamese and Cambodians fought

against each other.

The project lasted five years (1819-1824) under the strict supervision of “pro-consul” Thoại. He totally devoted himself to the task at hand and usually achieved the desired goals. Nonetheless his autocratic and single-minded style of leadership did not endear him to the population and caused heavy losses of life including those of the soldiers who loyally took part in his numerous expeditionary campaigns. To this day, the elders in Hậu Giang still recall and talk about the tribulations their forefathers had to face and endure.

Mr. Như Phong thinks that great or small, all monuments on this earth, be it the pyramids, the Great Wall of China, Angkor Wat, the Vĩnh Tế Canal... unfailingly bear a hefty price tag paid for with the lives and miseries of the masses.

The canal project was eventually completed to the great satisfaction of the entire court in Huế. Thoại Ngọc Hầu had a wife who was reputed to be an upright person and devoted to as well as supportive of him throughout the time he served the court. Unfortunately, she passed away two years before the works on the canal ended. In her memory, the emperor named the canal and the Sam Mountain that runs along its banks after her.

To show his appreciation for the Chăm’s contribution to the project, the emperor allotted them lands to set up seven villages known as “Puk” in the Chăm language. Nowadays, the inhabitants of those villages are called Chăm Châu Giang.

In honor of those who lost their lives while working on the project, Emperor Minh Mạng decreed that a fleet be organized to retrieve their bones for reburial.

They were granted the status of soldiers who gave their life in

combat. Thoại Ngọc Hầu presided over the mass burial ceremony to erect a commemorative stele on the Sam Mountain (renamed Vĩnh Tế Sơn) and read in person the “*Odes to the Lost Souls of Vĩnh Tế*”

*Trời xanh thăm mờ hoang lợp lợp
Trăng soi nhòa máy lợp bia tàn*

The deep blue sky, rows and rows of abandoned tombs
The moon shed her hazy light on the stele of old...

The Vietnamese history book Đại Nam Nhất Thống Chí noted that in the 17th year of Minh Mạng’s reign (1836), the emperor ordered the casting of “*Cửu Đỉnh*” /Nine Gigantic Incense Burners weighing 4,000 Vietnamese pounds each to record the memorable deeds of his nine predecessors.

Those burners were considered national treasures and displayed in front of the Thế Miếu in the Đại Nội of the old imperial city of Huế. At that place, all the Nguyễn emperors from Gia Long, the founder of the dynasty, down were worshiped. Smaller shrines erected on the left and right sides of the main courtyard were reserved for the commemoration of deserving high court officials. Each burner bears a specific name of the Nguyễn monarchs: Cao, Nhơn, Chương, Anh, Nghị, Thuận, Tuyên, Dụ, Huyền. Eight burners were arranged in a straight row. The burner called “Cao” bearing Gia Long’s name commemorated the digging of the Vĩnh Tế Canal. It is placed all by itself in front of the other burners. The characters denoting the name of the Vĩnh Tế Canal were engraved on the side of the burner next to a carving showing the canal flowing at the foot of the Sam River. The whole thing was artistically done to record one of the most significant achievements of the Nguyễn dynasty.

Mr. Như Phong promises to himself that on this visit to Huế, he will take photographs of the incense burner named “Cao” and give it to his young Friends of the Mekong Group.

Xuân comments:

– This canal runs along the Vietnamese and Cambodian border for almost 100 kilometers. Besides its strategic importance, it also serves as a useful waterway for the transportation of goods and people. On top of that, the canal plays a vital ecological role by bringing fresh water from the Mekong to an immense region washing away its salt and pyrite thus rendering the soil more arable and productive. With the passing of time, an intricate system of canals was developed around the Vĩnh Tế Canal. In total they measure more than 2,000 kilometer long—almost equal to half the length of the main current of the Mekong itself.

Xuân then goes on:

– During a visit to Vietnam, Dutch hydrology experts expressed their admiration for the building of the Vĩnh Tế Canal by the Vietnamese of old, especially for the efficient conduit of freshets from the Delta into the Gulf of Siam at a flow rate of 8,000 m³ per second. The total volume of water thus discharged into the sea almost equals the total rainfall of the Rainy Season. They also suggested digging a new canal running from the Hậu River south of Long Xuyên to Rạch Giá and another section linking the Tiền and Hậu Rivers similar to the present day Vàm Nao River.

They observed that except for the canals flowing in an east-west axis that do not contribute much to flood prevention, regular dredging of the river beds and widening of the canals in the Long Xuyên Quadrangle would significantly help reduce annual flooding. An additional advantage of this proposed project is that the waters from these canals will prevent brackish water from invading the land along the seacoast like it is now the case with the Châu Thành District in the province of Rạch Giá.

Being a journalist, Mr. Như Phong always has at the ready a question to ask. He turns to Xuân to inquire:

– Holland is a country lying below the sea level. The Dutch are known for building dikes. Are they also good at digging canals?

Xuân replies:

– They were invited to Vietnam in 1991 to make a study. At the end of their stay, they proposed to build a network of dikes high enough to partially control flood up to the end of August. After that, the canals will take over to channel the water to the Gulf of Siam.

After bidding farewell to Xuân and Ro-Hiêm, Mr. Như Phong leaves Hà Tiên to return to Saigon before departing for Huế.

On the Mandarin Route to the Old Citadel Huế

Mr. Như Phong cannot recall how many times he has visited Huế in the past. This city is still permeated with the colors and influence of the Chăm culture which is clearly recognizable in “*màu tím Huế*” the Chăm color of purple, the heartfelt tune named “*Mái Đầy*” or Huế barcarole, and the sorrowful ‘*Nam Ai*’ or Huế lamentation songs sung at night under a full moon by a boatwoman on the river.

This city has seduced his heart with her Perfume River and Ngũ Bình Mountain. A famous poet found this river so charming that he penned this line in her praise:

*Hương Giang nhất phiến nguyệt,
Kim cổ hứa đa sầu*

A visit of one day to the Perfume River
Never fails to make you a mournful lover.

Mr. Như Phong’s youth was serene and marked by a platonic, unfulfilled first love. So for the next 60 years of his life Mr. Như Phong

remains a bachelor to stay faithful to his one and only love. In a similar way, he has been single-mindedly committed to his profession of journalist.

Then, there was the times Mr. Nhu Phong returned to a Huế that was in the eye of the storm, a Huế that made constant newspapers headlines, a Huế that was caught up in political turmoil, a Huế that was opposed to the government and brought altars out into the city's streets, a Huế where students occupied the government's radio station, a Huế swarming with special police and suffocating in tear gas, a Huế mourning its mass graves during the 1968 Tết offensive known as the "Mậu Thân Massacre", a Huế with American bombs raining down on the old imperial city, and also a Huế after the fall of Saigon in 1975. In that last year, Huế became a dead and joyless city with its unattended graves when the communists returned, this time, for an extended stay. Just like it was with Hanoi in 1954, after 1975, many residents of Huế were not born in that city. For the natives who decided to stay or were unable to leave, their only choice was to make the best of it and go on with their life. They had only one life and could not afford to live merely with the expectation of striving for an uncertain Shangri la or elusive utopia.

Mr. Nhu Phong goes on this train trip from Saigon to Huế with the feeling he is embarking on a pilgrimage. Years have gone by yet time seems to be at a standstill. Nothing has changed: the same eight-inch wide rail tracks christened the Trans Indochina Railway that dates back to the time of the French Governor-General Paul Doumer almost a century ago, the same rickety railcars now remodeled and given the new name Unification Railroad. After he has made himself comfortable in his seat, Mr. Nhu Phong just leaves it to the iron horse to transport him back to the familiar scenes of the past.

To leave Saigon, the train has to negotiate its way through a labyrinth of houses with a jumble of TV antennas of different heights perching

perilously on roofs made of corrugated tiles. At times, they seem to encroach into the rail tracks as the train rolls past the Military Cemetery at Biên Hòa. A sculpture named “*Thương Tiếc*” /Mourning Soldier by the artist Nguyễn Thanh Thu depicting a soldier sitting forlorn on a stone with a rifle across his laps to mourn for his fallen comrades in arm has been removed from its pedestal by the Vietcong after the fall of Saigon in 1975. The graves were dug up, photographs of the dead disfigured by rifle shots attesting to the pusillanimity of the communist victors.

As the train crosses the provincial boundary of Bình Tuy Province, Mr. Như Phong knows he has entered the ancient Champa Kingdom of several centuries back. The Chăms chose “*bông sú*” an exquisite and fragrant white Plumeria Rubra named Champaka to be the symbol of their nation.

Now, the train progresses along Mandarin Route No.1 sandwiched between the East Sea and the Trường Sơn mountain range. It runs across green paddies in narrow valleys dotted with sparsely populated villages surrounded by green bamboo hedges. Leaving Tuy Hòa behind, it enters the tiny ancient kingdom of Panduranga where the “valley” Chăms congregate. Nowadays, their number cannot be more than eighty thousand living in the provinces of Phan Rí, Bình Thuận, Phan Rang, and Ninh Thuận. The “valley” Chăms practice Brahmanism while their brothers, the Chăms of Châu Giang, are Muslims. They still live in a matriarchal society and during their annual festivals they wear shiny traditional white dresses that look quite attractive to the camera lenses of the tourists. Amidst the ancient temples that are falling into ruins on their ancestral land, the “valley” Chăms lead an isolated and closed existence.

The highly creative works of art in sculpture and architecture of the Chăms Kingdom in the north, sadly enough, can only remind us of a golden age that is long gone.

The Chẵm temples that are still standing nowadays were built between the 4th and 17th centuries. Constant warfare during that period brought about the total collapse of the Champa Kingdom. After that, its area was reduced to the stretch of land between the Dinh River in Phan Rang and Bình Thuận Provinces, the territory of the small Panduranga Kingdom which was one of its former five constituent kingdoms.

The Pôrômê Temple counts among one of the last construction projects of the Champa Kingdom. Its hurriedly arranged stones and crude mortar attest to a poverty of human creativity and penury of building materials. The superb architectural style so well represented in the Mỹ Sơn Temple of the 4th century, sixteen centuries ago, was nowhere to be found in later periods.

The first Chẵm temples stood out as outstanding architectural achievements of the Chẵm people. However, after the mediocre construction of the Pôrômê Temple in the 17th century, the Chẵm appeared to have lost the ability and resources to build temples in the splendid and traditional way they were famous for. They seemed content with erecting modest structures to commemorate their last monarchs like Pôklong Mohnai, Pônít, Pôklong Gahul...

A case in point is the Pôklong Mohnai Temple built on the top of a high hill in the Lương Sơn Village, Vĩnh An Canton, Hòa Đa District. It looks like a pagoda constructed with mortar in the Vietnamese style with not a single trace of the magnificence and massiveness of the traditional Chẵm temples. Only within the temple walls can one find the habitual Chẵm objects of worship like the statues of the Chẵm king, queen, and his Vietnamese concubine. The statues were beautifully done displaying their intricate curves and suggestive attributes. But that's the end of it. The Chẵm traditional architecture and sculpture came to an abrupt end with the demise of the kingdom of Champa even though the Chẵm people still continue to live on their land.

Of the ethnic groups living in Vietnam's highlands, probably several of them are of Chăm origin. The constant warfare they had to endure sent them to the far corners of the highlands where, in isolation, they followed their separate paths of evolution.

Under the bright sky adorned with drifting white clouds and the parched landscape of Central Vietnam, the train continues to take Mr. Nhu Phong on a time journey into the past. It arrives at Binh Định, the homeland of the Tây Sơn Dynasty. Up to the 15th century, this land was part of the Vijaya Kingdom with its fabulous capital named Champapura/ Đồ Bàn when this kingdom was at its zenith. The prowess of its mighty army and powerful fleet was much feared in the region. They repeatedly attacked the land of Đại Việt, present time Vietnam, advancing as far as its capital Thăng Long in the north. At the same time, they invaded the Funan Empire and the land of Angkor to the south.

Once the train leaves Quảng Ngãi behind, it enters the territory of the ancient Amavarati Kingdom where not a single Chăm could be found. This region has been so devastated by wars that its landscape consists of a single large green field with a few bare laterite mounds and several moss covered rundown brick walls.

Where have the Palaces of old gone?

The only vestiges left of this civilization are the few superb asparas with their supple bodies and graceful arms displayed at the Museum of Cham Sculpture of Đà Nẵng, located by the Hàn River. Originally founded in 1915 as the *Musée Henri Parmentier* during the colonial French era, it is the only museum in the world dedicated solely to preserve the finds of the ancient Champa kingdom. Somewhere in the air, still resounds the music played by the court's band composed of drums, lutes, and flutes performing for the Vietnamese Princess Huyền Trân.

Mr. Như Phong knows full well that the influence of the Chăm civilization does not stop at the northernmost boundary of the small member kingdom of Indrapura in the larger Champa Kingdom which is now Quảng Bình near the Hoành Sơn Mountain Range. It actually reaches all the way to the north when the Vietnamese Lý emperors brought Chăm artists to their capital Thăng Long to build palaces and pagodas.

History books recorded that in the Year of the Monkey (Giáp Thân, 1044), Emperor Lý Thái Tông led an expeditionary force to attack Champa. A bloody battle ensued causing the Ngũ Bồ River to turn red with blood. The Chăm were defeated and the Vietnamese captured their capital. On his return home, Lý Thái Tông took with him the entire Chăm royal dance group and harem including the concubine My Ê. When they stopped at Lý Nhân, Lý Thái Tông called for My Ê to attend to him on the royal boat. Determined to keep her chastity, she jumped into the Châu Giang River and drowned.

When the Vietnamese poet Tản Đà Nguyễn Khắc Hiếu (1889 – 1939) visited Lý Nhân in the early 20th century, he was so moved by the story that he composed this poem:

*Châu giang một dải sông dài
Thuyền ai than thở một người cung phi
Đồ Bàn thành phá hủy
Ngọa Phật tháp thiên di
Thành tan tháp đổ
Chàng tử biệt thiếp sinh ly...*

The Châu Giang River has a long current
Who on the boat was lamenting a courtesan?
The capital Đồ Bàn was plundered
The Reclining Buddha stupa moved
The city razed, the stupa in ruins

The king has died
The courtesan took her life...

The first lines in the preface of the book caught Mr. Nhu Phong's eyes: *"Like any other people, the Chăm have an origin, a civilization steeped in struggles. In the short span of several hundred years, the splendor that once was Champa has now been reduced to a nonentity. The Kingdom itself has slipped into oblivion. A succession of disasters has wiped out everything. Even the Chăm people have lost their identity."*

Those few words written by Ro-Hiêm, his Chăm friend from the days they both were contributors to the *Bách Khoa Magazine*, were like flying arrows that numbed Mr. Nhu Phong's mind and pierced his heart. Probably, thinking that he has found in Mr. Nhu Phong a sympathetic Vietnamese soul, Ro-Hiêm asked him to write the introduction to his voluminous book *"A History of the Chăm People – A Defunct Kingdom"*, the fruit of labor of a great mind that has been many years in the making. It took Mr. Nhu Phong long agonizing moments before he could write about the fall of the Champa Kingdom described in those pages drenched in blood and tears.

Since the very first day he started working as a journalist, Mr. Nhu Phong had thought of bringing justice to the ethnic minorities not only in the geographical and political context of Vietnam but also in the wider perspective of the entire planet. This is also one of the main themes of the book *"Cahier d'Asie du Sud-Est"* or Dossier on Southeast-Asia that he is on the last leg of writing.

Long before he reached maturity, Mr. Nhu Phong was intimately associated with the business of death. As a hot-headed youth who could barely handle a firearm he joined an assassination squad at the instigation of his uncle who was a revolutionary. Those eventful and idealistic years came to an abrupt end when his uncle was abducted by

the Viet Minh on his way to Kunming to be never heard from again. While searching for a direction in his life, by chance, Mr. Nhu Phong stumbled on the profession of a war correspondent. Over the years, he had seen civilians, soldiers as well as several of his close colleagues die on both sides of the conflict.

Mr. Nhu Phong fully agrees with J.Y. Cousteau, the French oceanographer, who once wrote: *"If one does not face death, one would not be able to appreciate the full meaning of life"*. The death of a human leads him to think of the death of a nation and its civilization like the case of the mighty Champa Kingdom that fell and disappeared from the map of the world.

It is not by inadvertence that Mr. Nhu Phong reminds the members of the Friends of the Mekong Group that the river they hold so close to their heart flows through seven not six nations. He points out that they should not forget the tiny country of Tibet which is on the brink of disaster and facing the threat of annihilation.

Mr. Nhu Phong fervently hopes that one day when the Vietnamese are blessed with a government firmly rooted in the soil of democracy and observant of humanistic values, their head of state would be brave enough to step forward and openly apologize to the Chăms as well as all the other minorities for the pain and loss the Vietnamese visited upon them during their *"Nam Tiến"*/Southern March. Such an act of contrition does not mean that one wishes to step back and start a revision of history for it is not in anybody's ability to change the past. It is rather an attempt to look forward into the future so that we can learn from the lessons of the past and prevent those tragedies of history from repeating themselves under different names and shapes.

In Mr. Nhu Phong's opinion, from its inception, the Vietnamese territorial expansion has progressed through the successive stages of the country's Southern March. Though it is already a 'fait accompli' it

must be looked at as an evolving historic process and it is imperative that we view this geographical expansion from the contemporary standpoint of a new world order where “fairness to the minorities” implies respect for their sacred rights to life, growth and happiness. The tears and hopelessness of the Chăm and Montagnards should be more than enough to awaken our conscience and move our heart to contemplate a future when all the children of Vietnam can march with one mind toward a common tomorrow.

The Tết Offensive and the Mỹ Lai Massacres

“*Con Tàu Thống Nhất*”/the Unification Train also takes Mr. Nhu Phong back to Mỹ Lai and Huế. Thirty years have passed yet the events that unfolded in the Year of the Monkey (1968) are still fresh in his memory.

Less than two years after the massacre at the old Huế Citadel during the Tết Offensive, the 1st Platoon of the 23rd Infantry Division led by 2nd lieutenant William Calley was airlifted by helicopters to the Mỹ Lai village in the Quảng Ngãi Province which was under Vietcong control. For that reason the GIs called Mỹ Lai “Pinkville”.

Two weeks prior to that search mission, six American soldiers were killed by booby traps. In the village, on Calley’s order, 506 villagers including women and children were slaughtered. This incident was exhaustively exploited by the American media for a long time. It was considered the most atrocious crime against civilians committed by the U.S. Military and the turning point in the public image of the Vietnam War. The ironic thing is that the same news media turned a blind eye to the massacre of more than 3,000 civilians in Huế at the hand of the Viet Cong during the just mentioned Tết Offensive.

Before reaching Huế, Mr. Nhu Phong disembarked from the train at Quảng Ngãi to pay a visit to Mỹ Lai Village the following day. Though

the nation's public transportation system is still poorly developed, he does not have any problem going to Mỹ Lai because "The Memorial Monument of Mỹ Lai" erected in that village has become a tourist attraction to people who hail from all over the world. Coincidentally, it has also turned into a foreign exchange earner for the communist government.

Only 13 miles north of Quảng Ngãi, not very long after he crosses the bridge spanning the Trà Khúc River famous for its white sand and crystal clear water, Mr. Nhu Phong is greeted by "water wheels" rhythmically turning in the river and scooping up water to irrigate the far away green fields. The French were much impressed by this sign of "ingenuity of Annam's farmers".

Central Vietnam, the land of parched earth and crushing poverty

Over three decades ago, Mr. Nhu Phong had set foot in a Quảng Ngãi that was blanketed by a sea of white mourning head bands. Twenty years after the advent of peace, not much has changed here. The region has been insulated against any intrusion of progress making sure that the land remains mired in abject poverty with its parched earth, emaciated water buffaloes and ploughs, and the people cursed with year-round starvation and obliged to eat cactuses instead of rice.

The Mỹ Lai Monument stands at the center of the village - not far from "*Nghĩa Trang Liệt Sĩ*"/the cemetery for war heroes. To add more poignancy to the propaganda efforts, a bomb tunnel was reconstructed near the canal where the bodies of the victims were thrown into. Ironically, the numerous blown up photographs of the atrocity displayed at the exhibition were provided by the American newsmen and TVs. Throughout the pre and post-Vietnam War periods, only the brutality and crime committed by one side of the conflict were being shown.

Standing in front of those photographs in the Mỹ Lai Village, Mr. Nhu Phong is reminded of the Institute for the Study of American Wars (ISAW)'s collection of photographs covering the six wars the United States fought. It could be said that of the six, the Vietnam War is the only one that this country had lost.

When faced with something that is beyond our comprehension, we always try to explain it one way or another. In his book "A Bright Shining Lie" author Neil Sheehan argued that such massacres are not rare in times of armed conflict. They usually take place in isolated places and the victims are more often than not unarmed civilians. In the mind of the American soldiers whose friends had been killed in Mỹ Lai the previous days, any Vietnamese they met in the village that day would be their enemy, the cruel "Reds". With such a frame of mind, it did not take much for those civilians to become targets for the gun barrels of hatred and fear.

As a journalist, Mr. Nhu Phong fully realizes that there still are many more Mỹ Lai and Huế massacres that went unreported during the Vietnam War. For instance, how can people forget the drama that unfolded at Phú Hiệp Village, Province of Phú Yên two years before the Tết Offensive (May, 1966) when South Korean soldiers murdered hundreds of innocent villagers; mostly old people, women and children to avenge the death of their second lieutenant who was killed by a grenade in an ambush. They blamed the villagers for harboring the Viet Cong in their midst. Numerous acts of revenge against harmless civilians like that had occurred at the hands of the South Koreans. Only conscious cover-ups and tenacious censorship had thwarted them from being exposed. But they cannot be kept under wraps forever when there still exist testimonies of the Vietnamese survivors or confessions, albeit late, of repentant South Korean veterans of the War.

During "*Đổi Mới*/ the Renovation Era, South Korea led the list of foreign investors in Vietnam. Understandably, the communist leaders

in Hanoi wasted no time to declare that they wish to turn their back to the past and maintain friendly relations with all nations. Only the offspring of the victims are still living with their pain and find it hard to forget...

Leaving behind the Hải Vân Pass, the American novelist and travel writer Paul Theroux ranked as the most scenic one in the world, the train ventures into a sea of clouds hovering over the tiny fishing villages that nestle along the Lăng Cô Beach. The blue ocean below reflects the warm sunrays while foamy waves run along long stretches of the beach covered with fine white sands. That pristine and placid panorama cannot prevent Mr. Như Phong from having a nightmarish flashback to the horrific war years that he personally lived through.

A Requiem for the Tết Offensive

The horrors of the Tết Offensive: the mass graves, the number of people buried alive including professor and scout leader Trần Đình of the Quốc Học School Mr. Như Phong knew so well. There was also a prominent family in Huế he heard of that lost five members, young and old, being shot or buried alive. Then one cannot forget the mass execution on Huế's outskirts with the bodies of the victims thrown into a crevice of the Đá Mài Stream. It took the authorities a long time to locate their corpses. Not much different from the mass graves in the southwest of Phnom Penh! The primary school of Gia Hội is only the precursor of the lycée Tuol Sleng now renamed Museum of Genocidal Crime that displays the atrocities committed under Pol Pot's time.

The Khmer Rouge had more than four years to perpetrate their crime. The North Vietnamese Communists only needed 25 days in Huế to murder more than 3,000 of their victims. What could motivate people to act with such barbarism? At this stage in his life, Mr. Như Phong believes he needs to find an explanation to this question. The answers he comes up with are no better than suppositions.

Out of fear and hatred

A group of Western newsmen claimed that the non-stop and terrifying American aerial bombing of Huế forced the Vietcong fighters to live in a state of constant terror and fright creating a “situational trigger” that drove them to act with such cruelty. Those Viet Cong resented the city dwellers for being ungrateful to their sacrifice or deprivation and for “fleeing” from them instead of taking part in the “popular uprising” they were told to expect. Furthermore, they also believed that many of their victims belong to the “criminal” class deserving to be punished or exterminated. The denigration of “human nature”, pent up “hatred”, and creation of a “faceless and non-human enemy” – all those factors combined led people to commit cold blooded murders without any sense of guilt or remorse.

Bùi Tín, a former colonel in the People’s Army of Vietnam, now lives in exile as a dissident in France. In his book “*Mặt Thật*”/The True Face [43] he espoused that line of thinking to exculpate the massacre at Huế during the Tết Offensive. Before him, the American political analyst Wayne Bert used the same argument to explain the mass killing done by the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia.

To commemorate those helpless war victims we already have the Museum of Genocidal Crime at the lycée Tuol Sleng in Cambodia and the Monument at Mỹ Lai. Why then, don’t we erect a shrine at the Gia Hội School in memory of those 3,000 or so victims of the Huế massacre during the Tết Offensive?

War cannot be used to explain away the crime of killing innocent civilians. We, the living, owe those unfortunate dead the duty to hold the perpetrators accountable before the tribunal of history. We should not do so in a spirit of revenge but rather out of respect that the truth be told so that this and future generations of Vietnamese can have full memory of the tragedies that befell the country and avoid repeating the

same mistakes in the future.

Rising with the Dawn

In the early hours of dawn, nature is still dozing in a thick blanket of fog. It is dark outside but in the winding alleys of the Nam Giao neighborhood, mothers or sisters are silently struggling up steep streets with their young charges in tow. They are taking their offspring or siblings to the elementary school named after the revolutionary Phan Bội Châu.

Phan Bội Châu is a dedicated pioneer of Vietnam's 20th century nationalism. In 1903, he founded the "*Duy Tân Hội*" Reformation Society, then led the "Đông Du Movement" to send Vietnamese students to study in Japan. The Movement's main objective was to form a young elite class (nhân tài) well versed in modern technology, science and the humanities who would in turn help develop the common people's knowledge (dân trí) so that together they could contribute to the "civilizing mission" (khai hóa) and renovation (duy tân) of society. The ultimate goal was to overthrow French colonial rule and gain independence for the country. Even though it was short lived (1905-1908) and failed to achieve its objectives, the Đông Du Movement has marked a turning point in Vietnam's struggle for independence. Phan Bội Châu was arrested by French agents in Shanghai, convicted of treason, and placed under house arrest in the old capital Huế until his last days.

As usual, the children take their breakfast at the school. Their parents may not be well off but with a spirit of self-reliance, they all agree to work in partnership with the school to serve their children a nutritious first meal of the day. The money they put up depends on each person's ability to pay but all the students will share the same food. So, depending on the day, the kids will either have sweet young corns, sweet potatoes, or better yet fried rice. Clearly, as a Vietnamese proverb

has it, this is a case of “*ăn vóc học hay*” or good food, good health, good study. With a full stomach, those young students find it easier to concentrate in their study and earn better grades. After more than half a century of bloody wars and revolutions, at the threshold of the new millennium, the people cannot aspire for anything more basic than to be well fed and clothed.

This morning, teacher Nguyễn Châu and his former student Đinh Quang Bảo Toàn, recipient of last year International Mathematics Award in Rome, arrive from the Quốc Học School to accompany the students on a school trip to Đồi Vọng Cảnh – Sightseeing Hill. Guests joining from out of town include Mr. Như Phong and Dr. Duy who just finished a brief series of lecture as a visiting professor at the Medical School in Huế. So it was by pure coincidence that these two friends run into each other that day. They became acquainted through the Friends of the Mekong Group and Duy impressed Mr. Như Phong with his uncommon belief that the Mekong Delta will replace the Red River Delta as the cradle of Vietnam’s civilization in the coming millennium.

On this trip, the students are given a brief history of the hill they are standing on. It is located in the Phú Xuân Province where almost three centuries ago, Emperor Nguyễn Huệ ascended to the throne. Dressed in his imperial regalia, he gave the order to the troops to start on a forced march to the capital Thăng Long and defeat 20,000 soldiers of the Qing Dynasty at the Đống Đa mound in the Year of the Rooster (Kỷ Dậu, 1789), the same year the French Revolution took place in France. The objective of that trip is to teach the students the lesson of Duty, Honor, and Responsibility instead of pure materialism that focuses only on revenues or profits and serving nothing more than the selfish gratification of the individual.

It is apparent to Mr. Như Phong that everything must have a beginning and an end. Likewise, the education of a person cannot be completed overnight. How can we have good as well as dedicated teachers? It is

absolutely not admissible to have teachers, those admirable “engineers of the soul”, hold a second job after school in order to make ends meet. To subject the teachers to such ingrate treatment is tantamount to indirectly maltreating our own children. Honor the teachers, respect their profession, remunerate them well – that’s the way to attract bright and dedicated candidates to the academic field.

The twenty eight young “stars” with their bright eyes, intelligent faces but pale lips and frail bodies Mr. Nhu Phong sees standing around him look so different from the well fed, rosy cheeked Vietnamese kids in the United States. Malnutrition still is a problem plaguing this generation of Vietnamese youth.

Duy joyfully walks alongside the kids while talking with Mr. Nhu Phong at the same time:

– Unbelievably, after more than a decade of Renovation, according to an UNICEF study, the number of malnourished children is on the upsurge – particularly in the countryside. However, the paradox here is that for the first time people have noticed the appearance of obese youngsters in urban areas.

He continues with a concerned voice:

– In their early years, malnourished kids are not only physically less developed but their brain size is on the average also smaller. Consequently, their brain has less young neurons resulting in a deficient ability to concentrate and a lower IQ. On the other hand, those who are obese do not fare any better since their condition is also diagnosed as a disease.

Mr. Nhu Phong offers a brief comment:

– It’s not difficult at all to explain that paradox. It’s just a natural

outcome of a severe unequal distribution of wealth in a society undergoing a stage of unchecked capitalist expansion.

Duy reacts in a judgmental tone:

– I find it inconceivable that the government of a country reputed to be the “granary” of Southeast Asia can watch 70% of its children suffer from malnutrition. I find it repulsive that these leaders can accept the sight of overfed - to the point of becoming obese - children of the privileged communist cadres living alongside their undernourished and underdeveloped brothers. Those leaders are to be condemned. What’s more, I also find them callous and undeserving.

Those heartfelt words reveal to Mr. Nhu Phong the contradictory traits in Duy’s personality. The latter can be blatant and uncompromising or even harsh in his criticism of the current leadership yet whenever the need arises he would not hesitate to extend a helping hand. In his mind, Duy makes a clear distinction between the regime and the common people.

Indignant, he continues:

– Obese or undernourished, those children are unfit to represent the next generation of youth that will inherit our Vietnam in the next century.

Even though Mr. Nhu Phong is well past the seventies, the famous “omniscient age”, he does not feel old at all. The astonishing thing is that he has young friends like Duy, Đạt, Xuân... who are at least two generations younger than him. However, this wide generation gap does not keep them from having a genuine and close relationship with each other. In fact, Mr. Nhu Phong finds it easier to discuss with them about Vietnam’s prospects for the future than with his old friends whose minds are petrified and anchored in the past.

That's how things stand inside the country. The way Mr. Nhu Phong sees it the situation is not any brighter abroad. In his opinion, when one talks about the human rights of children, the first thing that comes to mind is their right to live with human dignity before thinking of higher minded things.

The children shout with joy and elation as the sun appears in the East Sea announcing the start of a new day. Still cloaked in the freshness of the early dawn, the huge red disc slowly rises out of the fogs hovering over the vast sea. It will turn warmer, and brighter as it ascends into the sky.

Good bye, darkness! It always feels warm and good when one greets the dawn or welcomes the future.

CHAPTER XIV

THE MISSING BOAT ON THE MEKONG AND A SELACHIAN FISH IN THE PLAIN OF REEDS

*Peace had returned to this
beautiful land at the expense of
its very raison d'être...*

Tim Page's Nam [1983]

The Missing Boat on the Mekong

The boat Calypso represents another opportunity the Vietnamese communist leaders failed to capitalize on because they are accustomed to look at the world through a tunnel vision. For more than half a century the boat named Calypso has been closely associated with its famous owner Jacques-Yves Cousteau (JYC). He is renowned the world over not only as a deep-sea explorer but also as a champion of the ecology. After his death in June of 1997, the Calypso was berthed and rusting at the French port of Marseille at the mercy of time and weather. A number of people wanted to move it to the Seine River in Paris and put it on display as a national monument to save its hull from total decay at the hand of borers and seawater.

A former much decorated officer of the French Navy, JYC had designed the open-circuit deep-sea scuba gears known as the Aqualung. After World War II, he successfully converted a U.S. Navy mine sweeper into the oceanographic research vessel named Calypso he used during countless underwater explorations. In addition, JYC invented the “Diving Saucer” SP-350, a two person mini-sub that can dive to a depth of 300 meters allowing him to take rare and spectacular photographs for the world to see.

He is a pioneer in the exploration of the ravines in the Mediterranean Sea and the submerged caves of the Bahamas. The pictures he captured through the lenses of his camera of the magnificent “parks” lying at the bottom of the sea have never ceased to captivate us.

Many a quintessentially Gallic anecdote has been told about him. A correspondent of the National Geographic reported that the Calypso departed from the port of Toulon with 2 tons of wine, 20 tons of fresh water and this order of the day issued by the captain: “*Water will be strictly rationed not wine!*”

The Calypso merely carried on an ancient tradition of the Gaul. One hundred thirty years ago, the French exploration group led by Doudart de Lagrée and Francis Garnier weighed anchor from Saigon on a man-of-war to sail up the Mekong River. On that day (June 5, 1866) the kitchen staff saw to it that they were amply supplied with wine. The food? They would take care of it along the way! So, for a crew of six, the “libation” list included “700 liters of wine plus 300 liters of liquors” and a single crate of instruments for scientific research.

In addition to the fascinating movies he made of the deep-sea landscapes with their up to then unknown plants and fauna, Cousteau also wrote “The Silent World” which became an instant best seller with 5 million copies sold the moment it hit the bookstores. It has been translated into 22 languages. Cousteau was honored with the

National Geographic Society's Centennial Award in 1988 along with this acclamation: "the man of the continent who opens the door to the silent world of the oceans". This prestigious magazine also sponsored him to carry on with his works in the Red Sea and Indian Ocean.

Unfortunately, the wonderful and beautiful days he spent under the water came to an abrupt end. The warm and crystal clear water of the Mediterranean Sea turned opaque and mucky and its bottom once thriving with plants and fauna now lay denuded. Alarmed, Cousteau jumped at once into action. He took samples of the seawater and sediments for analysis which led him to the undisputable conclusion that the root of the problem was pollution caused by industrial and civilian waste that had been daily discharged into the water. He became even more distraught at the realization that it was not only in the Mediterranean Sea that he found such degradation of the ecology. The same situation prevailed in all the other vast bodies of water he visited with the *Calypso* be it the oceans or rivers of America, Africa, Asia and the Pacific.

Probably it was about that time that "*Cousteau wanted to sail the Calypso upstream the Mekong but failed to obtain the approval from the Vietnamese. It was a big loss to Vietnam and to France.*" [11] The preceding sentence is a free translation of the following quote from a French book about the Mekong: "*Cousteau voulait remonter le Mékong avec son Calypso, mais les Vietnamiens n'ont pas donné l'autorisation.*" *C'était une grande perte pour le Vietnam et pour la France.*" (*Mékong, Après le Dégel, Guido Franco, 1992*)

It is Vietnam not France that lost a golden opportunity to enrich its limited knowledge about the eco-system of the Mekong. No matter how well the country can fund a study of that river in the future, it will never be able to find again the dedicated brain and heart of Cousteau.

Starting as an explorer of the marine world, Cousteau later put on

the hat of a de facto champion of the ecology of the sea, river and land, the constituent elements of our earth. He has correctly identified the cause to the problem: overpopulation – a fact that has evaded the more than 100 national leaders who attended the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development at Rio de Janeiro in June 1992. While the resources of our earth can only adequately meet the needs of two billion persons, the earth's inhabitants presently are reported at almost triple that number. Though two third of the 80 million people in Vietnam are living in poverty and hunger, this population is expected to double by the middle of the 21st century.

Cousteau's death left an irreplaceable void as his name has been so closely associated with water - water of rivers on the continents, water in oceans - covering three quarter of this globe's surface. However, on account of the photographs he took showing us the diverse beauty of a vanishing marine world, the message he left us becomes more pressing than ever. Sadly enough, we are the ones who are throwing stones at the glass houses we live in.

The Selachian fish in the Plain of Reeds

There are many explanations offered pertaining to the origin of the name Đòng Tháp Mười. Some say “Mười” or “Ten” means the tenth temple built by Thiên Hộ Dương, a 19th century warlord and leader of an anti-French fighting force, counting from the mouth of the Sông Lớn River (Vàm Ba Sao) during the resistance against the French or because there are ten steps to that temple's stairs.

Others believe that this is the tenth temple constructed by Jayavarman VII, the most dynamic and humane king in Khmer history. During his reign (1181-1218), this king deeply cared for the wellbeing of his subjects. He established numerous hospitals throughout the kingdom, and ordered the construction of a road network linking the capital Angkor with remote territories extending beyond the Menam basin in the west (Siam) and as far as the seacoast to the east (Champa).

Along these new roads, he erected new temples and hundreds of rest houses – a form of dispensaries providing health care to the poor. Jayavarman VII wanted to turn his kingdom into an earthly paradise and people attributed this meaningful message to the monarch himself: *“les souffrances des peuples sont les souffrances des rois / The sufferings of the peoples are the sufferings of the monarchs.”*

Time passes and constructions degrade rapidly in the tropical monsoon climate. In 1932, the French architect Henri Parmentier, later known as founder of the Museum of Cham Sculpture in Đà Nẵng, when doing archaeological exploration for the École Française d' Extrême Orient (EFEO) in the Plaines des Joncs by boat, found, among a few artifacts in the temple, a pedestal with the Sanskrit inscription indicating that it was the Tenth Temple built in circa Jayavarman VII era.

If the area between the Vàm Cỏ Đông and Vàm Cỏ Tây Rivers is included, then Đồng Tháp Mười would cover almost one million acres. A little more than half a century ago, this was still an immense wilderness and swampland where leeches swarmed in the water and hordes of mosquitoes hummed on dry land.

The Vietnamese scholar Nguyễn Hiến Lê, while still a young technician of public works, wrote the book “Seven Days in Đồng Tháp Mười” during a surveying trip in the region. In one of the passages he remarked: *“navigating the canals from Hồng Ngự down to Thủ Thừa, Cái Thia up to Mộc Hóa; at times walking for a whole week in a vast area overgrown with reeds for twenty or thirty kilometers without seeing a house or encountering a soul...”* [53]

Nowadays, Đồng Tháp Mười (Plain of Reeds or Plaine des Joncs in French) has completely changed. People are flocking to the place. The wilderness including the shrinking forests of cajuput trees are giving way to houses and rice paddies. As the lands are getting scarce and overpopulated, Mother Nature becomes less bountiful and the time when “the living is easy” is no longer around the corner.

*Đồng Tháp Mười cò bay thẳng cánh
Nước Tháp Mười lóng lánh cá tôm*

The egrets can fly at will over the Plain of Reeds' sky
Schools of fish and shrimps sparkle in the Plain of
Reeds' water

Where can we find, these days, the idyllic Đồng Tháp Mười also known as the “Nam Kỳ Lục Tỉnh (The six provinces of South Vietnam)” described in the Nam Phong Magazine of the scholar Phạm Quỳnh or in the Đông Pháp Thời Báo Newspaper of the poet Tấn Đà? The latter paid a visit to the South and did not mince his words in his praise for the dreamlike lifestyle of the land that he found: easygoing; joyful; blessed with aromatic rice, boundless fish or shrimps. These days, the kindhearted and hospitable peasants of the South have to toil and moil without any assurance that they would be able to make ends meet.

An article in the Tuổi Trẻ Daily in Saigon reported that ten days before Christmas, a fisherman named Nguyễn Văn Chon in the Lấp Vò District, Đồng Tháp Mười Province caught a giant selachian fish in the Tiền River's section between the Tân Mỹ and Tân Khánh Trung Cantons. The creature measured over 4 meters long, 2 meters wide and weighed in at 270 kilograms.

The selachian fish has the scientific name “chondrichthyes” and belongs to the cartilaginous species. They are seawater creatures that include among others sharks, and ray fish. That was the first time such a huge seawater fish was caught in the Mekong Delta so far from the sea and so deep inland.

Chon came from a landless family of farmers in the deep South of the Mekong Delta. He earned his living as a hired hand or sometimes traveled with friends to look for employment as itinerant workers during the harvest. When his parents could no longer afford to send him

to school at the age of fifteen, he joined a group of friends and boarded a boat for Đồng Tháp Mười in search of a job. He was willing to bid goodbye to the love of his life and work very hard for a long stretch of time in order to save enough money for them to tie the knot:

*The green land, red canals, blue sky
The leeches suck my blood, mosquitoes bite...
I think of you
When the rice stalks become ripe and look golden
I'll harvest them then return to the village...
I'll be looking for you!*

The girl next door named Bé Bẩy has captivated Chơn's heart. He loved her with a passion and counted the days he could go back to the village not to look for her but to marry her. He did not want to waste any time – that's why.

Still single and quite a handsome lad, Chơn was frequently teased by the many young girls in the group who found in him a good prospect for marriage. Yet, Chơn remained steadfast in his love and found in the letter he asked a friend to write to Bé Bẩy for him these lines that pleased him the most:

*The Mekong has two branches and nine estuaries
Countless are those who have an eye for me
But my heart only beats for you – My Honey.*

In the end, Chơn was able to realize his dream. Two years later he married nobody else but Bé Bẩy and they had their first baby in the following year. Unable to subsist on the earning of a hired hand, they decided to gather their meager belongings like mosquito nets, blankets, saucers, pans, even a few chickens and ducks then boarded a boat to sail to Đồng Cổ Lát. They found a piece of unoccupied land by the bank of a canal in the Tam Nông District under the administration of

comrade Mười Nhe, the District committee secretary.

Uncle Tư Trung, a retired soldier from far away Chợ Lách, Bến Tre, also moved to this area penniless. In just three years, he managed to lead a comfortable life and build for himself a brick house with a bright red tiled roof. Armed with their own determination to build a “new life” and the encouragement from Uncle Tư Trung, Chon and his wife staked their claim to a bare lot and began to cut down the mangrove trees to use them as the frame for their new home. The roof and walls were made of leaves from the water coconut trees. In this way, it only took several days for them to finish building a simple hut to live in. Bé Bậy stayed home to take care of the kids and the chickens and ducks. As for Chon, he started to till the land.

Too poor to own a water buffalo, he used a machete to cut down the grass then made holes in the land with a pointed wooden stick to sow the rice seeds. Thanks to the benevolent Heaven and Earth, with the five to seven bushels he harvested at the end of a year’s work, his family managed to get by. But Chon was, above all, a fisherman by trade, a profession he had been practicing for the last ten years.

In the beginning, he did quite well. So well that he could save enough money to build a new house with wooden walls and a roof covered with corrugated tiles. The interior of the house was furnished with the usual furniture and even a radio for them to listen to “*Cải Lương*” the Southern Vietnamese opera during the weekends. Their favorite idol was actress Út Bạch Lan whose sweet voice delighted them.

Every year, the couple was blessed with a new child who made Chon especially pleased because he loved children. The more the merrier! He firmly believed in the motto that what nature gives, nature will nurture. The proof is though he came from a poor and uneducated background, he still was blessed with a beautiful wife and bright kids.

But, as the saying goes: good days do not last forever. He could not understand why, in later years, his luck utterly ran out on him. The crops he planted were destroyed by rats, pests and yellow snails while the fish became rarer. He was forced to keep all the fish he caught irrespective of their size and could no longer afford to spare the smaller ones. Even so they did not have enough to eat while the number of mouths to feed kept on growing.

His problem was he found his wife Bé Báy utterly irresistible. As a young girl, she was the apple of his eyes. After they married, the apple grew sweeter and more succulent. No wonder he felt more and more infatuated with her. Báy was a healthy woman and gave him adorable children who looked so much like their father. Chon had to work very hard to provide for his large family but you would not hear a single word of complaint coming out from his lips.

Probably, Mr. Nhu Phong, the journalist par excellence, saw in this couple the true image of Vietnam when he answered a year-end interview with Radio Free Asia (RFA) in this way: *"I personally believe that the most important event for Vietnam in 1999 was the forthcoming birth of its eightieth million citizen."* In the same measured voice he added "From now on, regardless of what one may think, write or say about any of Vietnam's problems be it economics, education, ecology... one must not lose sight of the population size that will constantly exert a considerable drag on any efforts to free the country from its backwardness. What's more, it is expected to go past the 100 million mark in the year 2015. Those figures speak volume about the different aspects of the problems facing the country."

Mr. Nhu Phong understood full well that the 80 million milestone would have been reached a long time ago were it not for the millions killed during the wars and the countless abortions being constantly and legally performed in the clinics and hospitals all over the country.

Come what may, Chon stubbornly stuck to his intention of letting his wife give birth to as many babies as she could in the hope that their next to last child would be the 80th million citizen. As for their hoped for last child, he planned to have it in the year 2000 to welcome the new millennium.

Right in the middle of that streak of bad luck, his pregnant wife was again expected to deliver at around the close of the year. It was right at that time that Lady Luck surprisingly smiled on Chon. As he retold it, his fishing boat was moving steadily on the water when it suddenly came to a dead stop. Fearing that the net might be torn by tree branches, Chon started to pull it aboard. The more he pulled the heavier it felt. Then Chon got the scare of his life when he saw a humongous and shiny selachian fish writhing furiously in the net. He had to summon three more fellow fishermen to give him a hand to bring in the animal. The fish could have easily torn the net to pieces were it not for the fact that it was expecting. When his boat arrived at the port, it gave birth to three baby fish weighing more than 2 kilograms each. Chon cut it up right on the spot and sold it for almost two million Đồng or the equivalent of about 140 U.S. Dollars. The couple was really grateful for this heaven-sent Christmas gift.

But who knows if this is not actually a case of “*a boon that is a harbinger of a bane*” as the Vietnamese poet Nguyễn Đình Toàn once put it. When the Mekong’s water level dipped to its record low of the last 73 years - at some sections it was less than 2-meter deep - the river banks started to cave in causing great losses to buildings and human lives. Countless Vietnamese experts living inside the country and abroad had sounded the alarm about the threat of droughts and the drying up of the Mekong resulting from the construction of dams upstream in Thailand and particularly in the series of dams in the Mekong Cascades in Yunnan, China with the tacit acquiescence of the Hanoi government. The fact that a seawater fish like the selachian could migrate to Đồng

Tháp Mười did not bode well for the wellbeing of the land of “honey and milk” or more accurately “the land of alluvium, rice, fruits, fish, and shrimps...” It could only indicate that “salt intrusion” had extended its reach deep inside the Mekong Delta.

Dual Tides in the Mekong Delta

Unlike in the Red River Delta, the Mekong Delta is closer to the equator and subject to the pull of both the sun and moon causing it to have two tides a day. Life of the inhabitants of the south is thus regulated by the 60 pulse rate per month of the Tiền and Hậu Rivers as well as of the waterways in the Delta including its vast canal networks.

We begin with the high tide at moonrise. On the fifteen of each month, the moon rises at 6:00 PM and the water does likewise reaching its peak at midnight marking the start of the low tide which ends six hours thereafter. The second tide of the day takes over from that time on. However, it is now the turn of the sun that does the pulling instead.

The people would depend on the movements of the tides to navigate on the waterways. This daily ritual of the dual tides remains unchanged during both the Dry and Rainy Seasons. The difference is that during the Rainy Season the tide only reaches the city of Cần Thơ, while in the Dry Season it goes all the way up to Phnom Penh, more than 300 kilometers inland counting from the river mouth. Thanks to the robust flow rate of the river in the Rainy Season, the tide was kept relatively in check resulting in a low level of salt intrusion into the Delta.

The Floating House in the Mekong Delta

Faced with the double pressure of land scarcity and overpopulation, people find it expedient to dwell on the water surface. For that very reason, while attending the School of Architecture in San Luis Obispo Đat came up with the idea of designing a model floating house for the

peasants of the Mekong Delta. Basically, it is a stilt house that can ordinarily rest on its foundation during the Dry Season but can float safely as the water rises up to a height of 3 meters in the Rainy one.

The house consists of a system of floating compartments that rests on a foundation made of reinforced cement. The compartments are non-connecting to ensure that should one of them become defective the whole structure can still stay afloat. Light materials are used to build the house frame and roof while the walls consist of prefabricated panels of coconut fibers mixed with clay and chemicals rendering them waterproof. The house is meant to withstand the dry and humid climate of a region affected by alum.

Tests performed during two consecutive seasons show that this pilot house is suitable to its intended use. It can adjust to the changing water levels and weather the storms and heavy rains. With a surface area of over 160 m², such attractive houses can serve as clinic stations or local administrative offices. Their price tag stays within reach of well-to-do peasants. Middle-income families can afford to purchase more modest units with a production cost of about 25 million Vietnamese Đồng or US\$ 1,500 through low interest mortgage loans arranged with the “Mekong Floating Bank”.

Plans to establish developments of 40 to 50 units each in deep water locations are being considered. Naturally, minimum amenities such as water and electricity will be made available. The Department of Natural Sciences at the University of Cần Thơ will be entrusted with the supply of clean water while the School of Electricity at the University of Polytechniques in Saigon will assume the installation of power lines. In order to avoid dependence on fuel oil required by thermal power plants, maximum priority will be given to solar or wind generated electricity.

Those development units will showcase the brightly lit dwellings of

the peasants in the South and allow them to lead a comfortable life in sync with the rhythm of the daily diurnal tides and annual cycle of Dry and Rainy Seasons in the Mekong Delta.

Looking down from the satellites in space, the Mekong Delta is dotted with cities and towns. Nevertheless, the lion's share of its land or water is still covered by rice paddies whose color changes with the seasons. Now the residential areas and orchards along the banks of the rivers or canals look dark grey. Interestingly enough, poring over the nighttime photographs taken after the year 2000, one can see brilliant dots emanating from the development units of brightly lit floating houses Đạt had a hand in building.

The sense of achievement Đạt felt about his works was somewhat mitigated by the fear that once all the dams in the series of the Mekong Cascades in Yunnan were built, one could reasonably expect a penury of water to occur downstream. In such a case, what would then become of his floating houses? In the event the saying "*Thượng nguồn tích thủy, hạ nguồn khan*" /water held upstream, drought occurs downstream" holds true, the future lies beyond the control of either the architect or peasants of the Mekong Delta.

Đạt is overwhelmed with a sense of doom when he learned of two ominous news. First of a dolphin that swam from the San Francisco Bay all the way to the Sacramento River in Northern California and unable to find its way back to the ocean then of a selachian fish caught by Chon deep inside the Delta instead of the usual Mekong's estuary. If his suspicion that those areas have now changed from a fresh to a seawater habitat bore out then we would have on our hands a real ecological disaster.

Gun Shot Wounds in the Mekong Delta

During the Vietnam War, the Mekong Delta was reputed to be a

most intractable combat area. Only 50 kilometers south of Saigon, it was under the protection of the IV Military Corps and consisted of 92 districts organized into 16 provinces. The land is flat and covered by a cobweb of canals linked together by the Tiền and Hậu Rivers. Its area is larger than that of Holland and the home for a population of over 18 million. Several new religions were born here and colorful shamans also found this land a propitious sanctuary for their activities.

It seemed like yesterday when 18 year-old Dave Deluca of Dearborn, Michigan was drafted into the U.S. Military and deployed to the muddy Delta of South Vietnam at the height of the war. Just fresh out of high school he did not even have a girl friend at the time.

The scenes he beheld in Vietnam reminded him of the devastations of war depicted in Pablo Picasso's painting Guernica – except that what he saw was more somber and tragic. Trees were denuded of leaves as a result of Agent Orange. From the airplane, the land looked like the moonscape pockmarked with craters left by B52's aerial bombing or heavy artillery.

Very early on, Dave came to the realization that the fighting was not done by the star bedecked generals in Saigon but by the black clad civil self-defense forces armed with World War II era carbines that should have been discarded a long time ago. During daytime they stood guard over bridges or roads. At dusk they went back to their homes in “*Ấp Chiến Lược*/the strategic hamlets” surrounded by concertinas to spend the night with their families.

It was with those forgotten soldiers that Dave spent part of his youth and shed his tears as well as blood. Rushed into the firefight without any prior combat experience as a machine gunner with the Mekong Delta Mobile Flotilla, he regularly went on perilous missions and could fall into the “VC traps” at any moment of the day. Their boats were constantly the targets of the enemy's rockets or B40s that were quite

effective in pulverizing their hulls.

Besides the coordinated surprise attacks his units undertook with the Vietnamese Marines inside the VC's secret bases, his Flotilla must patrol day and night the innumerable canals and rivers to intercept or interdict "Victor Charlie" from infiltrating men and weapons into the cities. It was no secret that his unit was well equipped with the state of the art weapons and electronic gadgetries like the ultraviolet Starlight Scopes that enabled them to spot the enemy's boats moving in the thick of the night with the magnification power of 50,000 times.

However, Dave often likened his unit's duty to look for the few VC who could blend in with the thousands of boats sailing the waterways at night to a mission of finding a needle in a haystack.

It did not take long for Dave to learn from the GI's who came before him that: "You can be sure that's a VC when it's a dead Vietnamese". That rule of engagement helped him keep his peace of mind for a while. Being young, Dave's mind and heart were still fired up with idealism and the wish to do good. Yet, each time he boarded and searched a boat, he only saw people staring at him with terrified expressions on their faces as if they thought he was the personification of terror or the messenger of death itself. This fact troubled him to no end and forced him to question the meaning of the war he was fighting.

Then, the inevitable day came for him to bleed from his wound and in turn shed the enemy's blood. It happened on a placid day on the flat land of the Plain of Reeds.

Out on a patrol, his gunboat sighted a sampan gliding quietly on a canal flowing into the Tiền River and signaled as well as called over the loudspeaker for it to stop. Dave's boat sped up along the canal whipping up powerful waves causing the small craft to sway violently as if it was about to flip over. As he boarded the sampan, he came face

to face with a woman he could not tell the age holding in her arms a tiny infant looking like a baby monkey. Through the interpreter, he learned that the woman was pleading with the men in his unit to: “...*please save my baby*”. Dave and the medic did their utmost to treat the child. After that, they had to leave the mother and infant to their own devices so that his unit could go on with its mission.

As fate had it, a short while later Dave was hit by a sniper fire. Needless to say, all boats that had the misfortune to cross his patrol craft’s path in the thick of the night became fair game to his friends’ retaliatory fire. Dave was critically wounded. Luckily, he was transported by helicopter to the Third Field hospital and survived a six-hour long operation to remove part of his large intestine and a shot up kidney. Up to the present day, Dave was convinced that the sampan with the woman and her monkey-looking infant did not escape the indiscriminate retaliatory fire on that night.

Soon after he received his honorable discharge from the military, Dave decided to return to Vietnam and visit the Mekong Delta. He made a long stop at the “Côn Phụng” or Phoenix Island in Mỹ Tho where he met “Ông Đạo Dừa” the Coconut Monk, his soon to be “Guru”.

The “Coconut Monk” in the Mekong Delta

The emergence of the Monks or Shamans goes back to the days of the “NamTiến” Southern March in Vietnam. The Shamans usually come from the mass but are different from the common people in certain things - mostly in their physiognomy, lifestyle and the way they think. In those “Wild West” days, they were the products of faith mixed with a large dose of superstition. When human knowledge was at a loss to explain the cause of every natural disaster or calamity, a belief in ghosts and supernatural powers or even groundless prophecies could at the least bring some sort of reassurance and comfort to the bewildered.

In his book “Thần, Người và Đất Việt” the author historian Tạ Chí Đại Trường wrote: “...Each Monk assumes the mantle of a ‘pope’, a religious leader in the making as long as he can demonstrate the ability to attract a group of followers...He takes on a greater than life persona as they attribute to him the undefined “consciousness” of their time.” [66]

In other words, the Monks, on occasion, merely acted as a reflection, a crystallization of the hopes and dreams of their contemporaries. As late as the mid-20th century, the age of advanced science, the Monks still acted as a pole of attraction for the people even though the influence of superstition and belief in supernatural powers have greatly diminished. What prevailed afterward was a religious sense mixed with worldly concerns occasionally intermingled with a touch of political ideology.

The Coconut Monk was truly a representative of this new generation of Monks as the Southern March drew to a close. He was born Nguyễn Thành Nam in 1909 in the city of Kiến Hòa, formerly Bến Tre, the land of coconuts. After he finished his training as a chemical engineer in France, he returned to Vietnam and forsook worldly life for a monastic one. As the war raged on, he turned anti-war and was able to attract a large group of followers clad in brown garments. The people called him “Ông Đạo Dừa” or the Coconut Monk because he lived in a hut built on a coconut tree and subsisted mainly on coconut pulp and milk.

In 1963 he built a floating pagoda on a large barge in the symbolic shape of a unified Vietnam minus the Bến Hải River which was at that time the political demarcation line separating the North from the South. By the same token, he expressed his wish for a harmonious coexistence between the two largest religions in the country: Buddhism and Christianity.

The floating pagoda was given the Buddhist name: “*Con Thuyền Bát Nhã*” or the Prajna Boat, a Sanskrit word signifying the “Noble

Eight Paths” believed to help mankind escape the Sea of Sorrow and attain Nirvana through enlightenment. His boat was not as large as the one named *Tàu Bà* the Shaman Ông Đạo Nổi envisioned. If built, its bow would be moored at Phnom Penh and stern at Vĩnh Long. This huge boat was supposed to embody the tenets of cargo-cult similar to the religious beliefs prevalent in the Melanesian islands of the South Pacific.

Of light build and stooped back, the Coconut Monk nevertheless possessed an extremely sharp mind. A huge and ever-present key dangled in front of his belly symbolizing the key of peace. Three times a day he climbed into his watchtower. From there he could look to all the four corners of the sky and pray for the peace of the land and the wellbeing of the people.

Though the war might be raging all across the country, the Phoenix Island on the Mekong, between the cities of Mỹ Tho and Bến Tre, remained an Island of Peace, an Oriental Disneyland. At that place, no weapons and curfews were allowed. While the laughter of children and the sound of prayers or chants resounded through the air, they were occasionally interrupted by the thumping of artillery shells or explosion of bombs in the distance. Only half a kilometer from the island, scenes of fighting and death still marred the Mekong’s banks.

During the Tết Offensive, the city of Bến Tre was ravaged by the Vietcong, as well as the Americans with their proclaimed strategy of “We destroy to save”! Throughout the fiercest years of the Vietnam War different tongues from the Tower of Babel have been used to name Phoenix Island. The American advisers called it a “Vietcong’s R & R/Rest and Recreation Centre”. The South Vietnamese government regarded the island as a “den of draft dodgers” because many of the Monk’s disciples grew long beards or hairs and refused to serve in the nation’s Armed Forces. In the Vietcong’s eyes it was a “CIA operation base” due the presence of American war protesters who joined the sect.

Clearly at that time, there was no room for the uncommitted who chose to stay out of the internecine free for all. They would either be treated as deserters and sent to hard labor at the correctional camps in Thất Sơn or forcibly thrown into the bloody carnage of that hopeless war.

Dave Deluca was among the American disciples of the “Coconut Monk”. Like everybody else, he wore the brown clothes of the sect and went barefoot. Ridden with remorse, he chose to lead that austere religious life in order to make up for the sins he believed he committed as a gunner with the Mekong Delta Mobile Flotilla. Still, he could not escape being labeled a CIA agent like all American civilians who lived there.

Appalled by the carnage of the Tết Offensive, the Coconut Monk grew even more convinced that he was divinely entrusted with the mission to bring peace to the nation. In a desperate effort, he sent a petition to the Saigon government to let him head a delegation to Hanoi and arrange for a Peace conference with the assurance that should he fail, he would volunteer to stand at the front line and be shot at by both sides. Nonetheless, the War Government headed by Prime Minister Nguyễn Cao Kỳ resolutely turned down the Coconut Monk’s request. The inevitable happened in April of 1975: the Americans left, South Vietnam fell, and Dave was forced to repatriate to the United States.

In a rare show of determination, instead of wasting his life away on drugs or self-pity like many of his GI friends, Dave pulled himself up and graduated from UC Berkeley with a doctorate in Southeast Asian history in 1984. With high expectation and trepidation, he went back to Vietnam believing that this country would be in a much better shape with the return of peace.

He took a “homecoming” trip to the Côn Phụng Island that he called “Island of the Coconut monk” in the hope he would meet his old Guru who had helped him regain his mental balance many years ago. But all

that he found was a desolate place. Gone were the Coconut Monk and his “Prajna Boat”. He inquired and learned that after “Liberation Day” the communists wasted no time in sending the Coconut Monk to the Càn Thơ prison. The Monk stayed there until his last day.

As for the “Prajna Boat” the local authorities had it towed not to the “Berth of Enlightenment” but to the “Berth of Enjoyment” instead. It was “prostituted” into a floating restaurant run by the city government’s Tourism Company for the organization of weddings, meetings, parties including nightly dancing and karaoke sing-along.

Dave stood at the riverbank gazing intently at the Mekong where he spent the most important years of his youth, lost his innocence and was transformed into a completely different person. With teardrops running down his cheeks, Dave gave a last glance at the “Prajna Boat” or now the “Floating Restaurant” all bedecked with bright lights and resounding with loud music. To his Vietnam he bid “Farewell”.

That night, alone in a room of the Hường Dương Hotel overlooking the Mỹ Tho River, Dave had a flashback. In a fleeting moment, he saw the distressed face of the woman he could not tell the age holding in her arms a tiny infant looking like a small monkey pleading to him “*please save my baby*” followed, in minute details, by the carnage the Mekong Delta Mobile Flotilla committed on that fateful night. Dave just could not sleep. Through the longest night of his life, he poured himself glasses after glasses of the bitter liquor he ordered through room service.

On his last day in Vietnam, Dave penned in his diary: “*Peace has returned to this beautiful land at the expense of its very raison d’être...*”
Tim Page’s Nam [1983]

CHAPTER XV

NINE DRAGONS DRAINED DRY
EAST SEA IN TURMOIL

*The Southern King reigns in the southern land
It had been so decided in the Heaven's plan
If you so dared as to invade our fatherland
Your ignominious fate is defeat at our hands*
Lý Thường Kiệt [1019–1105]

As the events in the Paracels (1974) and Spratlys (1988) were sowing rage and disquiet in every Vietnamese heart, I contacted Kham and arranged to meet him at the conference on the “Geography of the East Sea, the Paracel and Spratly Archipelagoes” in Berkeley. Recently I had been troubled by a host of disturbing news about the Mekong, the Delta, and the Mekong Cascades in Yunnan, China that were wreaking havoc on the ecology of the countries downstream. Vietnam was particularly affected and was at a loss on how to react to the situation. I became overly preoccupied by the news concerning this group of islands in the high sea.

I hoped that my trip to the Silicon Valley in San Jose, California, this time, would help me arrive at a better understanding of the overall situation involving the Mekong, the East Sea and the interactions

amongst the countries of the Pacific, particularly China, the largest but also the most belligerent country in the group.

The Pacific Ocean, the largest ocean which covers almost one third the area of our planet, was so named by the Spanish explorer Ferdinand Magellan in 1519. “Pacific” is the English equivalent of the Spanish word “Pacífico” meaning “peace”. Regretfully, as we ring in the 21st century, this ocean runs the risk of being turned into a “sea of fire” in an “*Armageddon of the East*”.

Throughout its history, it appears as if the evolution of Vietnamese society is characterized by two major traits which are both constructive and destructive at the same time: confronting China, the eternal enemy from the North and battling the vagaries of the elements. While doing research about Vietnam, SarDesai also came to the same conclusion.

The strategic importance of the Paracel and Spratly Archipelagoes in the East Sea was well established a long time ago. Very early on, during the French colonial rule, Gustave Salé wrote in his article “Les Iles Paracels et la Sécurité d’Extrême Orient” in the bulletin *Avenir du Tonkin* (1931):

“No one can deny the strategic importance of the Paracel archipelago... Until 1816 it had not been known. But in 1816, Vietnamese Emperor Gia Long ceremoniously planted a flag on its main island to formally claim possession of it. This event was recorded in the archives of the imperial court; and therefore, even as China wants to claim the territory, the French government must officially proclaim sovereignty over the islands.”

Over the last decades, since the discovery of oil in the area around the archipelagoes and its lucrative exploitation, big brother China began to contest the sovereignty of the other countries – especially of Vietnam – in the East Sea over those territories. The Paracel and Spratly

Archipelagoes are running the risk of being turned into a powder keg.

When the issue of oil in the East Sea became the talk of the day, I was still a student at the Faculty of Sciences in Saigon. I remembered clearly, in the 1960's, the promising preliminary oil reports from the United Nations notwithstanding, a professor of geology categorically affirmed that based on his expert judgment the probability for finding oil in Vietnam and the East Sea was nil.

As late as the early 1970's, that same professor still insisted that he was absolutely sure of that. He went so far as waxing poetic: "Oil, if it exists at all, could be compared to drops of dew lingering on the grass blades in the paddies. To dream of its commercial exploitation is like building a castle in the sand. How do you collect enough of those drops from the East Sea to sell at the market?"

But, less than one month after the "liberation" of Saigon in 1975, in a conference organized at the address No. 4 on Duy Tân Street by the Association of Patriotic Intellectuals and the General Association of the Students of the Liberation, the same professor when questioned about the prospect for oil in the East Sea, declared in a fiendish and cunning manner:

– We have oil and in abundance. Not only in the East Sea but also on land and even in the Mekong Delta.

When pressed to reconcile that statement with his previous assertion a couple of years before, an amused and contented professor claimed that his first statement was done in the service of the revolution:

– It's true that I had said it before. However, we need to put things into the historical context of the time. I did so in order to mislead the American Imperialists and prevent them from exploiting our oil (an argument undoubtedly borrowed from an editorial in the newspaper

Nhân Dân or People's Daily).

That said, he went on to cite a quote from Uncle Hồ:

– Our beloved Uncle Hồ taught us: “*The Hùng Kings founded our nation. I and you, my nephews, together we have to defend it*”. The defense of our fatherland implies the preservation of our natural resources. Nothing is more precious than oil in this industrial age... Now that our country is reunified, this is the good news I wish to reveal to you all.

Another “interesting” story at that same conference: A professor with a Ph.D. degree from an American university made this comment about the Apollo spaceship:

– There is no way the Americans can send a man to the Moon when their space science lags at least one generation behind the Soviet's.

That conference took place when I was attending college in New Zealand. I learned about it from Bé Tu.

To this day, I felt I am really fortunate I did not have to study a single day with those professors. We do not need to wait for the opening of thousands of “re-education” camps to get to know the face of treachery. The Mekong Delta does not produce only sweet fruits. To use Dr. Duy's terminology, the pioneers of the Southern March also find among their offspring a few “prodigal sons” with “defective genes”!

Nowadays, it became an undisputed fact that the oil pockets in the East Sea contain a reserve of seven billion barrels if not more. I never had the chance to meet Kham before but felt a kinship for him after I read his last book. In it I saw Kham as a “true” man or at least an extremely modest one because I did not detect a single instance Kham wrote about his “self” in those pages.

Once more, thanks to my friend Mr. Nhu Phong who is like a magic key that opens the door to the mysteries of the Vietnam's Experience, I learned a few things about Kham's past. He was the captain of one of the four World War II era destroyers the Americans handed down to the South Vietnamese.

In 1974, during the naval battle at the Paracels his ship confronted the Chinese fleet composed of the sub-chaser Kronstadt, heavy cruisers, patrol boats... equipped with long range missiles sailing under the cover of Mig 21 supersonic jet fighters. With his own eyes, he witnessed the unflinching determination, and heroic sacrifice of his valiant fellow sailors in a bloody fight against the Chinese in the East Sea. The boundless patriotism of the crew on the Patrol Craft - Escort (PCE) HQ10 Nhật Tảo led them to keep on fighting until the very end then go down with their sinking ship. To the last man, they remained loyal to their oath and gave their life to defend the honor of their country.

For a long time Kham has tried to stay clear from boats and sea. Still in his eyes, one could sometimes detect the reflections of clouds hovering over the islands or silvery waves swaying in the sea. His deep gaze betrayed an intense inner turmoil haunted by a tragedy of almost a quarter century old that refused to let go of him.

What took place twenty five years ago is still fresh in his memory. Kham and his sailors fought with the ardor and rage of a people who had suffered a thousand years of Chinese domination. They concentrated their fire on the enemy boats until they ran out of ammunition or their canons went out of service. Then, they waited for the order to head full steam towards the Paracels and run their ship aground on its beach in order to use it to make the last stand in the defense of their country's sovereignty over that archipelago. There was no doubt that were such an order given, all the Vietnamese warships present, including Kham's that was at that time listing 15 degree, would at once carry it out.

However, the order came not to beach at the Paracels but to sail away from it because at that time it already fell into the enemy's hands. Kham and his brothers in arms had to leave behind captain *Nguy Văn Thà* and his men on the corvette *Nhật Tảo* that subsequently went down to the bottom of the sea. Back to the home port, Kham and his fellow sailors were given a hero's welcome complete with flower necklaces that in his eyes looked more like consolation trophies for the vanquished. The only solace Kham found in all this was that he could consider himself a disciplined soldier who knew how to obey orders.

Again, it was Mr. *Nhu Phong* who filled me in about *Nguy Văn Thà*'s background. As a war reporter, Mr. *Nhu Phong* accompanied *Thà*, the captain of the Landing Ship Infantry Large (LSIL) *Tầm Sét HQ331*, on a supply convoy to relieve *Phnom Penh*, Cambodia's capital that was being besieged by the *Khmer Rouge*.

Life was not easy for Kham in the aftermath of the naval battle at the Paracels. For months he only knew sleepless nights and recurring nightmares. He saw himself in command of his former ship and fearless crew whose individual members he knew intimately. Then the same thing unfolded each time: while sailing toward the battle site and without being able to fire a single shot, his ship was hit by a Chinese long-range missile. As he and his men were about to drown with their sinking ship, he saw the clear silhouette of the *Nhật Tảo* approaching. On her deck, he could recognize *Nguy Văn Thà*, *Trí Voi* his second-in-command, and all the 80 sailors under his command manning their battle stations. He waved frantically in their direction but they did not see him. In that ghastly and gruesome nightmare the stately corvette *Nhật Tảo* unfailingly sailed by placidly as if she was an unsinkable ship going on with her mission to patrol the blue East Sea.

The treating psychiatrist explained that Kham was suffering from the syndrome of a castrated man. He viewed himself as a powerless captain to his crew and an impotent head of family at home. Besides the

usual medication, he was taken to a site similar to the one where the old naval engagement took place. Once there, he was allowed to throw a wreath of flower at the presumed spot where the super heroes Nguyễn Văn Thà and his men made the supreme sacrifice. Thanks to that treatment by catharsis, Kham was able to get rid of his PTSD and regained his latent inner strength. His family life became stabilized allowing him to resume his normal duty.

Following the commands of his heart, over the years, Kham continued to collect countless data about the East Sea, the Spratly and Paracel Archipelagoes whose sovereignty he knew was gradually slipping through Vietnam's fingers. While doing this, he unwittingly became a scholar, an expert on the issue and was hailed an authority on the East Sea. Such recognition somehow went against the sense of modesty he was widely known for.

Kham was fully aware that for Vietnam to prove its sovereignty over those archipelagoes, it must show solid evidence supporting its claim in areas such as geography, geology, history, archeology, administrative control, and ethnicity of the inhabitants of the place.

The book Kham wrote was viewed as the first attempt to achieve that objective. He nourished the hope that young Vietnamese both inside and outside the country would not only show concern for but also carry out extensive studies about the issue so that one day libraries would carry doctoral theses on the different facets of the East Sea on their shelves. On my part, I also harbored the same expectation for the Mekong.

Even though Kham held the National Geographic Society in high esteem for its scientific bent, the map of the Asia Pacific region printed in its most recent issue filled him with the utmost annoyance and disappointment. This map depicted the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) in the South China Sea exactly in the way the Chinese claimed it.

It is almost an exact replica of the old maps drawn by Imperial China. The Zone looked like a beef tongue and encompassed the East Sea as well as the Spratly and Paracel Archipelagoes. Kham was not surprised then to notice that the political borders between China and Tibet were also removed leaving the latter indistinguishable from other regions in the huge Chinese land mass.

From a political perspective, it is totally incorrect and unacceptable to draw international or regional maps in the way a particular country wishes it done. It's beyond comprehension to show Xisha, Nansha, Nanhai... as part of China while those territories are still being contested by other countries. We just cannot draw maps in such a cavalier manner because it could easily lead to quite serious and regrettable consequences.

The sinologist Tù Nguyễn once stated that it is a historical misfortune as well as a tragedy for the Vietnamese people to have to endure almost one millennium of Chinese rule. Almost every aspect of their society bears the influence of those foreign invaders. Even after they regained their independence, for a time, the Chinese scripts were still used in official documents resulting in the country's geographical locations been written in Chinese. On top of that, Vietnam's geography, history, and literary books were either destroyed by frequent wars or taken by the Chinese to their homeland. It would be a formidable task to search for those lost works inside the country or in the archives in China.

Therefore, Kham is absolutely justified in calling for the drawing of an accurate map of the East Sea that includes the continental shelves, islands, reefs, shallow or submerged beaches with their names written in Vietnamese. He takes it upon himself to undertake that project and hopes that it would prove handy when Vietnam asserts her rightful sovereignty over her territories in the East Sea.

During the last century, the huge country of China and its more

than one billion inhabitants endured years of suffering and humiliation at the hands of Western powers. Today's China is experiencing rapid economic development accompanied by a surge in its military might and a renewed appetite for expansionism. It could possibly turn out to be the top adversary of the Americans in the 21st century. Beijing has openly declared that Asia must fall into its sphere of influence and officially warned the United States not to interfere in the sovereignty dispute over the Spratly and Paracel Archipelagoes between her and the Southeast Asian nations.

The Chinese went so far as insisting that the United States withdraws all its armed forces from the Pacific arena – an unprecedented demand until now. Recently, they tested an intercontinental missile that could reach the American mainland. In the opinion of an AFP correspondent, the United States' involvement in the dispute over the Spratly Islands could potentially light the fuse of this powder keg to explode into a nuclear conflagration. A thing that the Americans surely wish to avoid unless their vital interests are at risk.

The Commander of the Chinese Navy had publicly asserted that the survival of China depends on the South China Sea's oil and fishing grounds. Fish will be the main protein source for its population of more than one billion souls.

China has shown signs it is willing to use its military muscle to extend its hegemony over all of Southeast Asia. A case in point is the dispute over the Spratly and Paracel Archipelagoes. Outwardly, China and Vietnam try to maintain a cordial relationship that actually hides serious disagreements and irreconcilable conflicts of interest. It is also in essence an unequal match between a big and a small country.

Under such extremely strenuous circumstances, there arises a dangerous school of thought among no other than the Vietnamese intellectuals living in Paris and North America.

Like day dreamers isolated in their ivory towers, they proclaim that “*the notion of nationalism shows signs of being diminished*” and is giving way to “*regional alliances and economic coalitions*”. The end result would be a wider playing field that transcends national boundaries and “*national identities will become less and less relevant*” [sic]. To expect that such a “brave new world order” would bring about “god sent” prosperity to all is like asking lambs to enter into perilous cohabitation with wolves. In such an unfair arrangement, the lambs will have to submit themselves to voluntary bondage and be treated as second-class citizens. And this new Chinese sphere of influence may be given the resounding name “Pax Sinica”.

Though Kham was no longer in his prime, in recent days, he shifted his focus to the study of oceanography and water-based civilizations like that of the Vietnamese. He believes that they basically have a distinct culture very different from that of the Chinese whose customs and ways of thinking are peculiar to a land-bound not sea-oriented people.

In his wildest imagination, Kham nurtures the “impossible dream” that before he breathes his last, he would be able to make a trans-oceanic trip on a raft from the River Delta to the American continent sailing the sea currents like his ancestors did during the pre Hùng Vương era. It seems as if Kham never forgives himself for having survived the naval battle at the Paracels. Subconsciously he longs for such a “grand exit” in order to seek a closure for his predicament and find his peace in the tranquil bottom of the sea.

Kham was invited to be the guest speaker at a conference held on the campus of the University of Berkeley. The audience consisted mainly of Vietnamese students and several Chinese who came as observers. On this occasion, I met Dr. Duy who drove all the way from Stanford University and also Bé Tư who just flew in from Vietnam. This young ornithologist told me that her request to do a study of the birds of the Paracels and Spratlys was turned down by the Vietnamese government

citing the precarious security situation and lack of amenities at those islands.

Though Kham is not a born orator and speaks English with a foreign accent, he had a way of reaching directly the heart of his listeners with his words. He often vividly compared the East Sea to the front yard of the Vietnamese house and the islands to the trees growing in that yard. The seagulls inhabiting those islands would be like the land birds nesting in the trees.

Since the topic chosen for the conference was too new to the audience, the exchanges took on the character of a presentation rather than a discussion group.

When a participant asked what should be done to deal with the existing situation, Kham suggested that the proper approach was not for the young people to volunteer and fight for the islands but for them to form groups of experts in the scientific fields such as oceanography, geology, ecology, and even Laws of the Sea Convention [UNCLOS] or international laws. Their expertise would play an indispensable and decisive role before the International Tribunal of La Haye that would decide the case in the future. He advocated patience in the firm belief that time is on their side.

In concert with a group of geography and history professors, Kham tirelessly reiterated the need to add a course about the East Sea including the Spratly and Paracel Archipelagoes in the school academic programs so that all Vietnamese possess a good understanding of and concern for the land, sea and sky of their motherland.

Kham succeeded in convincing his son who is a brilliant student to study international and maritime laws at Stanford's Law School instead of medicine with the Medical School at the University of California in San Francisco (UCSF). He harbored an unfaltering conviction that no

matter how long it might take, the archipelagoes now occupied by the Chinese by force would one day revert to Vietnamese sovereignty.

The sacrifices of his fellow sailors like *Nguy Văn Thà* and *Trí Voi* made him wonder what lessons could we draw from the naval battle at the *Paracels*? Or going one step further, what could we learn from our ancestors' struggle against foreign invaders who were well prepared for a long fight and willing to resort to the "expanding oil spot" strategy to achieve their goals?

His deep understanding of Vietnam's history taught *Kham* that the experiences of the nine-year resistance against the French and the two-decade war against the Americans do not apply to the Chinese. Once Vietnam loses its independence to China, its people must be prepared for a fight that will last for hundreds of years against a cunning enemy backed by a huge population and led by people known for their Machiavellian mind in the Oriental mold. In addition, this enemy also had shown a complete disregard for losses in human life as demonstrated during the Korean War and the Sino-Vietnamese border War of 1979.

If we cannot defeat the enemy by force of arms then we must resort to effective strategies. In lieu of the long-range missiles that we do not have, we will use long-term strategies that, sooner or later, will help us prevail and regain our sovereignty over our land.

A day dreamer *Kham* definitively is not! He incessantly contends that all Vietnamese inside and outside the country should save and help build up the nation's armed forces, in particular the Navy to be used in case of need. The fact that the Chinese fleet can at will sail in and out of Vietnamese territorial waters cannot be tolerated under any circumstances.

His intense patriotism does not prevent him from being measured

and deliberate in his approach. Any form of xenophobia is alien to him. Any accusation that he is a nationalist zealot or anti-Chinese will not fly. How can one claim that he is anti-Chinese when he is enamored with the beauty of a Tang poem by Du Fu or the charm of a Sung water painting by Hsia Kuei. Or while he happily gave the hand of his youngest daughter in marriage to a young Chinese physicist at Cornell where she was attending school? For him, one thing is clear and non-negotiable: the Vietnamese must be master of their destiny and their land – the Spratly and Paracel Archipelagoes included.

Pure logic dictates to him such hard-nose approach. Nevertheless, his gentle soul leads him to hope for a new world order as humankind crosses the threshold into the 21st century when superpowers are expected to forsake their reliance on brute force and act with accountability. In addition, he trusts that Chinese intellectuals who are fair-minded and conversant with the working of history will eventually sympathize with the Vietnamese. They will come to realize that the happiness of the two peoples lies in peaceful cohabitation and joint exploitation of the natural resources in the East Sea.

The book Kham wrote helped me gain a good grasp of the basic issues concerning the East Sea. With an area of 340,000 square meters, Vietnam has a 2,500 kilometer long coastline that runs along a shallow continental shelf. Its 2,500 islands or so are either grouped into archipelagoes or stand apart by themselves. On the still moving ocean bed, earthquakes do occasionally occur. In 1923, off the coast of Phan Rí and 22 miles to the south of the Phú Quý Island all of a sudden the Hòn Tro Island and a tiny islet emerged 30 meters above the ocean surface to disappear without a trace just several months later. It was believed that those two islands were formed from the lava and ashes of an erupting undersea volcano. They were later either carried away by the currents or sunk. For that reason the big island was named Hòn Tro meaning the Ash Island.

Throughout geological times, the rivers of Vietnam contributed greatly to the formation of the continental shelf in the East Sea. Among them we must count the Red and Mekong Rivers whose sources begin in the Tibetan High Plateau. They meander southward through several countries to finally run into the South Sea at estuaries located in Vietnam.

In the case of the Red River, over millions of years prior to the Pleistocene Epoch, the massive quantity of alluvium that river carried into the sea helped form the underwater plain that stretches from the Vietnamese coastline to the Cồn Cát Vàng or today's Paracels.

As for the Mekong, it only started to build the Mekong Delta only tens of thousands of years ago during the Tertiary Period. With the passing of time, the pyrite and iron in the Mekong current combined with the sulfur of the seawater to produce layers upon layers of deposits on the sea bed. The Mekong untiringly discharges huge amount of alluvium into the East Sea forming a continental shelf with two underwater valleys carved by the currents of the Tiền and Hậu Rivers. That formation reaches out 400 kilometers into the open sea all the way to the Từ Chính Beach in the Paracel Archipelago.

Deep below the continental shelf around the Spratlys and Paracels are found layers of sedimentary rocks where large pockets of oil were formed arousing covetous desires in many - especially China.

From a geological standpoint, scientific explorations showed that the Spratly and Paracel Archipelagoes are extensions of the Vietnamese continental shelf into the East Sea that are located far away from China. Suppose one day the sea level would subside leaving the underwater plain completely exposed, then the Paracels will appear as a stretch of land connected to the Vietnamese mainland and separated from China by a deep sea bed.

In 1925, Krempf working at the Oceanographic Institute of

Indochina conducted a study of the Paracels and observed that this archipelago is actually an extended arm of the Trường Sơn Mountain Range in Central Vietnam. He later concluded that:

“Geologically speaking, the Paracel Archipelago belongs to Vietnam”.

Turning our attention to the Spratlys, Vũ Hữu San, former Captain of Destroyer Escort, Radar Picket (DER) HQ 4 Trần Khánh Dư, author of the “Eastern Sea Geography and Paracel and Spratly Archipelagoes” asserted that if one looks closely at the depth contours on maritime maps, one can see clearly that the Spratly Archipelago is actually separated in the north and north east from mainland China and Taiwan by a 300 meter deep through. Furthermore, the East Palawan Through also keeps this island group apart from Brunei, Malaysia, and the Philippines. [69]

The government of the Republic of Vietnam in the South, not only went to the military defense of those Archipelagoes but it also spent a lot of efforts in the exploration and exploitation of the East Sea, the continental shelf, and the Spratly and Paracel Archipelagoes. The Institute of Marine Research at Nha Trang and the Departments of Geology and Biology at the University of Sciences in Saigon were entrusted with the duty of carrying out the lion’s share of those tasks.

In line with the most extensive research program named NAGA that lasted for two years (1959-1961); American, Thai, and Vietnamese scientists conducted studies of the corridors running along the continental shelf bordering Vietnam’s coasts all the way to the Gulf of Siam. They were able to gather a wealth of knowledge covering the geology, fauna, and oceanography of the East Sea. Upon his graduation from South Vietnam’s Navy School, young Kham was commissioned as an officer and assigned to serve on the ship called NAGA.

On the other hand, the leaders of the Communist Party in North Vietnam kept clear from the issue of sovereignty over the Spratly and Paracel Archipelagoes because they had surreptitiously surrendered them to Beijing a long time ago. In a letter dated 9/14/1958 sent to the Chinese communists, Prime Minister Phạm Văn Đồng wrote: “We agree with the content of the declaration of 9/4/1958 issued by the Government of the People’s Republic of China determining the territorial waters of China”

Fifteen years later, the issue dated May, 1975 of the “*Sài Gòn Giải Phóng/ Liberated Saigon Daily*” inconceivably stated its support for that ignoble diplomatic note: “Vietnam and China are two fraternal countries that share the same rivers, the same mountain ranges. The great country of China is not only our comrade but also our trustworthy teacher. Furthermore, it has eagerly come to our aid in the past enabling us to have what we have today. Therefore, whether the Paracel Islands belong to us or to China does not make a difference. The day we wish to claim the archipelago back, China will be more than ready to return it to us.”

Unfortunately, years later (March 14, 1988), that very same “great country of China” did not return the Paracels but added insult to injury by taking the Spratlys by force of arms from its Vietnamese comrade. In a brief naval engagement, the Chinese sank a Vietnamese navy ship and ruthlessly killed almost 100 Vietnamese sailors within the territorial waters of Vietnam in the East Sea.

Forced to account for their past actions, the leaders of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam had to resort to an argument involving its old nemesis to bolster its case. In the document distributed on 04/25/1988 they stated: “As stipulated in the Geneva Peace Accords of 1954, half of the country south of the 17th parallel was temporarily administered by the South Vietnamese authorities until the day of national reunification. The Saigon authorities took control of the Spratly and

Paracel Archipelagoes from the French in 1956 as the latter withdrew from Indochina. Since then until 1975 they had administered, explored and exploited those two archipelagoes...”

To explain away their historic blunder, the Vietnamese Communists contended: “It is true that those declarations [issued by the Vietnamese Communist leaders] were made. However, we must put things in their historical context. In a fight for survival against an invader possessing overwhelming military power, Vietnam had to seek assistance from its Chinese ally as much as possible in order to prevent the Americans from using those two archipelagoes as well as the East Sea in their war against us. We must view those declarations from that standpoint, those circumstances if we want to arrive at a proper understanding of those declarations.”

This is a pointless exercise in argumentation because the Vietnamese Communists must realize that as far as International Laws are concerned, the principle of “circumstantial adaptation” is no excuse before the law. Their actions will work to Vietnam’s disadvantage in any international meeting on the issue now as well as in the future.

The Law of the Sea Convention was signed by 159 nations on 12-10-1982 at Montego Bay, Jamaica and later approved by more than 60 countries to become law on 11-16-1994 with the noble motto: “The sea is the common heritage of humanity”.

Apart from China, all the countries of Southeast Asia had recognized that law. Claiming that the East Sea is an internal sea of China, the Chinese proclaimed the 1992 Territorial Water Law stipulating that boats (including submarines) and airplanes traveling in its territorial waters or airspace must obtain authorizations and comply with the laws of the People’s Republic of China.

Claiming for themselves the right to act as an authoritarian and

arbitrary superpower, China in its first step to “conquer the earth” [as stated by Chairman Mao] will try to dominate the East Sea without making the faintest attempt of covering up their expansionist ambitions. The Mekong is indisputably an international river. By building the eight hydroelectric dams in the series of the Mekong Cascades in Yunnan, China clearly displays its open contempt for International Laws. In this regard, the Chinese track records have never been good.

The 12/5/1994 issue of the Chinese Guang Ming Daily reported: “after one decade of in-depth studies, 400 well respected Chinese scholars and experts unequivocally proved that from ancient times China had exercised full control over the Paracel Archipelago. As a result, there is no need for China to take part in the negotiation.”

For two days (on June 28 and 29 of 1994), ten scholars from mainland China flew to Taiwan to participate with hundreds of their local counterparts in a Conference on the Pacific islands. They issued a final joint declaration saying that “China has a historical sovereignty over those territories”.

The most striking difference in all this is that unlike the Vietnamese Communists and Nationalists, in spite of their opposing views on reunification and system of government Taiwan quickly and unfailingly sides with Mainland China on their claim of sovereignty over the East Sea “in the name of the Chinese people”.

A look at China’s modern history spanning the last half of this century will reveal a continuous attempt by the Chinese to impose their control over the Vietnamese islands and territorial waters in the East Sea.

Following the end of World War II, France sent the warship Savorgnan de Brazza to reoccupy the Paracel Archipelago in June of 1946. Three months later it was forced to temporarily withdraw from

those islands as the Franco-Vietnamese war started with a fury in September of 1946. Under the pretext of disarming the Japanese, the Chinese Nationalists disembarked their troops on the Phú Lâm Island, the largest island in the Amphitrite Group to the east of the Paracels. France only issued a pro-forma protest at the time.

When the Chinese Communists took over the mainland in 1949, Generalissimo Chiang Kai Shek fled to Taiwan and his troops withdrew from Phú Lâm Island.

Come 1956, in the wake of the French departure from Vietnam, Communist China occupied Phú Lâm and the other islands in the Amphitrite Group and established the command headquarter of their forces for the defense of the Paracels there. This is also the most fortified military installation in the East Sea. A recent aerial photograph taken by a Japanese satellite of the Chinese military base at Phú Lâm showed that a 2,500 meter long airstrip had been built there.

The void left by the Americans upon their disengagement from the Vietnam War presented a golden opportunity for Mainland China to invade the Crescent Islands Group to the west of the Paracels which was under the control of the Republic of Vietnam. After a brief naval battle with the Vietnamese Navy, they occupied the Paracels and set the ground for the implementation of their long-term plan. They built a naval base, constructed an airstrip and sent out ships to sea in search of oil.

The Chinese expansionist policy did not stop there as China continued to move south. Fourteen years later, in 1988, the Chinese Navy sunk a Vietnamese ship and took by force eight more islands in the Spratlys where they planted on each a sign proclaiming their sovereignty over it. Until then, Vietnam's sovereignty over those islands was undisputed on historical, geographical and legal grounds. In addition to the conflict between China and Vietnam in the region,

the situation gets even more complicated with the dispute between China and Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines over the gas deposits on the continental shelf of the East Sea.

It should be noted that next to Communist China, there is another player in the game named Taiwan in the Spratly area. Taiwan now occupies Itu Aba, the largest island in the Spratlys where the French and Vietnamese set up a weather station before World War II. Itu Aba has been turned into a well-fortified Taiwanese military installation complete with seaport, airstrip, and observation stations. It is protected by formidable machine-gun emplacements and the permanent presence of a Marines battalion equipped with amphibious vehicles.

Twice the Chinese brandished their swords, twice they massacred the Vietnamese to the total indifference of their allies and the international community.

In the East Sea conflict of 1974, the U.S. Seventh Fleet was sailing the Pacific Ocean but the Americans made it known they wanted to stay out of the looming naval confrontation. Not exactly. They prevented the Vietnamese Navy from making use of their torpedo ships, withdrew the Seventh Fleet from the region, and decisively refused to carry out the humanitarian duty of rescuing the Vietnamese sailors stranded in the high sea in the aftermath of the naval engagement. During the confrontation on March 14, 1988 the Soviet fleet stayed motionless at Cam Ranh Bay where its warships were berthed.

The international community left Vietnam to its own device as this country dealt with the nuclear armed Chinese superpower. It is obvious that China intends to stick faithfully to the roadmap it has chosen to follow. By all means, be it by naked military force or under the guise of scientific research – or even abusing the United Nations name – it wants to swallow up the Spratly Archipelago.

Unable to deal with China's military might, the smaller countries in the East Sea attempted to bring the issue before the International Tribunal. Nevertheless, China categorically refused to go along accusing the La Hayes Tribunal of being only the game reserve of the capitalist imperialists.

More than six decades ago, the news media in Vietnam often mentioned the issue of the Spratly and Paracel Archipelagoes. The issue No. 172 dated May, 1932 of the *Nam Phong* magazine whose editor was Phạm Quỳnh stated: "The issue of (territorial) borders of the Spratlys and Paracels will be determined by force of arms."

Six years later, in the magazine *Ngày Nay* published by Tự lực Văn Đoàn on 07-24-1938, the writer Hoàng Đạo who was then in his thirties wrote in his column "Người và Việc": "Based on old and new rules the Spratlys and Paracels belong to An Nam (present day Vietnam). However, in international relations, those rules do not apply. The law of the strongest rules supreme."

Those observations prove to be quite prescient when applied to the case of China.

As long as we have a situation where "might makes right", the dispute in the East Sea is expected to remain extremely strained. When faced with a powerful China armed with submarines, bombers, warships; the smaller countries in the region, particularly Vietnam, will always feel threatened unless they are willing to acquiesce to Chinese dictates. Therefore, we are faced with a situation "When might rules the day, China will have its way".

In a conference room of the Center for Southeast Asian Studies on the Berkeley campus - famous for its anti-war activities throughout the Vietnam War - a self-assured Kham stood in front of a huge screen depicting the map of the East Sea with the Vietnamese geographical

names he had collected and stored in his computer.

In a clear voice Kham explained:

– Located at the intersection of the sea lanes moving along the north-south and east-west axes in the Pacific, the Spratly and Paracel Archipelagoes hold a strategic importance vis à vis the Southeast Asian region. In case a blockade is imposed against our country in the northern and western borders, we will not be completely isolated economically. But if the entirety of the eastern seacoast is also blockaded, then our external trade and movements of crucial goods by sea will come to a full stop.

Then Kham the strategist took over the presentation:

– Presently, Communist China has the ability to carry out such a blockade because it has at its disposal long-range missiles, strategic fighter jets, a navy with an aircraft carrier and a blue sea fleet. They can dominate the East Sea. In such an event, with cunning and craft, our traditional enemy will appear in its truly fearsome form to impose its oppressive yoke over our people.

He continued in a more passionate tone:

– It is better for us to tighten our belt and build a mighty navy and air force so that, should that ominous day ever come, we can wage an even fight on the open sea and do not have to succumb ignominiously to a blockade.

Turning toward me, he said:

– Then we must not forget our struggle against the ecological war like pollution, drought, salinization in the Mekong Delta... all caused by the diversion of water upstream the Mekong. The Friends of the

Mekong Group has tirelessly forewarned us of this threat over the years. Up north the water is being retained, down south the archipelagoes in the East Sea are being occupied! Truly Vietnam finds itself grasping for a workable solution.

In total control of the audio-visual functions of his computer, Kham gave a stirring close to his speech. He simultaneously projected two images on two adjacent big screens: on the first screen he showed a bird-view photograph of the Spratly and Paracel Archipelagoes lying off the “S” shape coasts of Vietnam. On the second one, a quote made by the mathematic professor and scholar Hoàng Xuân Hãn in the *Sử Địa Magazine* of 1974:

“History taught us the immovable lesson that each time our country was weakened by divisions and internal upheavals we were attacked by our neighbors... Today, the occupation of the Paracels is the manifest product of the discord existing among our people... despite the evidences past and present, inside and outside the country showing that they belong to our ancestral land.” [90]

All of a sudden, the participants heard the sounds of the waves from the East Sea mingled with a cacophony of calls of sea gulls serving as the background music to the latest news announcement from Radio France International (RFI):

“According to Kyodo news, Hanoi 09-19-1998: the Ministry of Communication and Transportation has completed in recent days the construction or restoration of civilian installations on the West Reef of the Spratly Archipelago. The works in question include: a fresh water reservoir, an electric generator, a residential complex, and a helipad – a landing area for helicopters, at a cost of US\$ 4 million. Those are considered long lasting structures.”

We should recall that only two weeks before that, the spokesperson

of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs had protested the presence China considered illegal of the Vietnamese sailors on the two underwater reef islands belonging to the Tu Chinh Beach in the Spratlys. He demanded the immediate withdrawal of the Vietnamese military from those islands. The Vietnamese refused to discuss the matter with China on the ground that Vietnam is in possession of sufficient historical and legal evidences asserting its sovereignty over the Spratly and Paracel Archipelagoes including the islands China has occupied by force.

One thing Kham refrained from saying is that despite the fact that, at the present time, if Vietnam is still in control of a number of islands in the Spratly Archipelago, the situation can change overnight in case the Chinese decide to impose a blockade of the place. There is no doubt the Chinese have the means to do it. And if they so choose, they can become the absolute owner of the Spratlys without a shot been fired.



*Logo of The Republic of Vietnam Navy,
Motto: The Fatherland - The Ocean*

Woody Island, Đảo Phú Lâm in Vietnamese, Yongxing Dao in Chinese, is the largest island of the Paracels. China took over the Paracels from South Vietnam in the “Bloody Battle of the Paracels” in January 1974. In February 2016, China deployed an advanced surface-to-air missiles system to this disputed island. [source: Google earth satellite]



China occupied the Paracel Islands in 1974 then the Spratly Islands in 1988 causing outrage in the heart of every Vietnamese. The ultimate sacrifice made by commander Ngụy Văn Thà, his second in command Nguyễn Thành Trí and the entire crew of the Republic of Vietnam Navy corvette Nhật Tảo HQ 10 at the Paracel Islands was an eloquent testimony to the integrity of Vietnam’s territorial sovereignty.



Nguyễn Văn Thà, commander of the Republic of Vietnam Navy corvette Nhật Tảo HQ 10.



Nguyễn Thanh Trí, vice commander of the Republic of Vietnam Navy corvette Nhật Tảo HQ 10.



East Sea fishing fleet resting at port during the full moon

CHAPTER XVI

THE BUDDHA MASTER AND
THE QIANLONG'S TABLETS FROM
YUNNAN

*Water has become expensive, and
it will be even more expensive in the future,
which will make it the 'Blue Gold' of the 21st century.
Ricardo Petrella, 3/2000*

From Giang Thành to Châu Đốc Tân Cương.

The Mekong Delta has a peculiar way to attract people. For a long time, I have been fascinated by it. To me, it remains a new frontier whose history, geography, people... I still have a lot to learn about.

Just take the case of the mysterious Thất Sơn area with its unending forests and mountain ranges bordering the banks of the Hậu River in the “Châu Đốc Tân Cương” region considered to be the last frontier of the Southern March. Its fascinating past was populated with such giants like Chuởng Cơ Nguyễn Hữu Cảnh who led the people of Hai Huyện blaze a trail southward in the conquest of new lands or Thoại Ngọc Hầu, the mandarin who helped found the Nguyễn dynasty two

centuries back. Hầu also headed the project to dig the strategic Vĩnh Tế canal connecting Châu Đốc with Hà Tiên to facilitate the pacification of the new borders.

Then, we also have the “*Phật Thầy*” or Buddha Master whose person is shrouded in enigma and myth. With a bamboo oar he paddled his small boat made of cork along the nooks and crannies of the canal ways to cure the sick with the small medicine bag he always kept by his side. Singlehandedly, he saved the people of Tòng Sơn Sa Đéc, his hometown, from a raging epidemic.

His reputation was such that the authorities became alarmed. They arrested and accused him of leading a heretical sect. Eventually he was released, forced to shave his head and take the vow like other religious. Instead of building a temple, the Buddha Master withdrew to the Sam Mountain in Châu Đốc where he started “Trại Ruộng” or Farming Communes. He rolled up his sleeves to work in the paddies to teach his followers the ‘lesson of self-reliance’ and live by their own labor and sweat.

Those “Farming Communes” were essentially groups of villagers who voluntarily came together and set up self-run communities to live and farm. The first one was established in Thới Sơn Bảy Núi. The Buddha Master later founded a second one named Bửu Hương Các at the Láng Linh village and entrusted it to the care of his devout disciple Đức Cố Quản Trần Văn Thành.

As the resistance against the French spread, the Bảy Thưa uprising in the vicinity of Long Xuyên captured the imagination of the local people. The “Farming Communes” were transformed overnight into rear bases of the revolutionaries.

In my college years, I was much impressed with the world acclaimed “Kibboutzim” the Israelis built at the inception of their country in the

1940's and 1950's as well as the “*Phuong Bối Am*” in Bảo Lộc, Lâm Đồng Province, founded by the Buddhist monk Thích Nhất Hạnh during the Vietnam War that gained some notoriety for a time. It could be said that both of them were to some extent late replicas of the ‘Farming Communes’ the Buddha Master envisioned a century ago.

Named Đoàn Minh Huyền at birth, he later took on the honorable title “Phật Thầy” or Buddha Master and the religious name “Bửu Sơn Kỳ Hương” (the Exotic Fragrance from the Precious Mountain). He advocated simple religious rites and renounced the building of temples or use of statues. It was not in a big temple but a small and humble hut that the Buddha Master practiced his religion. [However, in later years, on that site his followers erected the majestic and magnificent temple Tây An Cổ Tự.]

The only object of worship is a piece of dark red silk symbolizing tạo hóa huyền vi / cosmic mystery. The Buddha Master advocated a very down-to-earth or secular blend of Buddhism that teaches: “*do not favor your worldly life over your faith but also do not favor your faith over your worldly life*”.

He instructed his followers on the “Respect for the Four Great Blessings” (Tứ Đại Trọng Ân) that led them refer to this precept as “Gratitude to the Four Blessings”. It consists of: blessings from the ancestors and parents, blessings from the motherland, blessings from the Three Treasures of Buddha, and finally blessings from fellow countrymen and mankind. At first glance it looks simple but it is in this very simplicity that rests the core of their faith. After you screen out all the myths, embellishment and superstition the disciples attributed to him, the Buddha Master must be given the credit for bringing some sort of religious revival to the nation’s morale which was then sliding down the path of decline. He introduced his faith to the people with complete disregard to race and religion. His simple message is that of love and charity in preparation for the advent of globalization as humankind

ushers in the third millennium.

The Chinese “Early Comers” in the Mekong Delta

The Chinese have come and lived in Vietnam for thousands of years. Since the time the country was occupied by China and called Giao Chỉ Bộ. Throughout their history, from the time of their nation’s birth, the Vietnamese had to ward off the invasion and Sinicization of the Han People, their northern neighbors. In recent times, from north to south, though the Chinese did not directly control the country’s administrative machine, they virtually had the economic activities under their sway by virtue of which they represented a power that posed a challenge to the country’s governments.

It can be said that any political or military upheavals, any changes for better or for worse in the economy of China will inevitably affect the Southeast Asian region – in particular Vietnam its neighbor to the south.

The Vietnam Experience.

In 1644, the Ming was defeated by the Qing who came from Northeast China. Those who remained loyal to the Ming court refused to submit to the new rulers and formed the “*Defeat the Qing and restore the Ming*” movement. Some fled to southern China and took a number of the local inhabitants with them to seek refuge in the northern cities of Vietnam. Like in the case of Myanmar, those newcomers turned outlaws and destabilized the national security of their host country. This deplorable situation lasted for almost two centuries and caused indescribable sufferings to the Vietnamese at the hands of those “Tàu Ô” or “Chinese Bandits”.

Another group of former Ming officials followed their leaders and sailed further south. Those Chinese immigrants played an important

role in the settlement of the Mekong Delta.

History books recorded that in 1679, Dương Ngạn Địch and Trần Thắng Tài, division commanders of the districts in Kwanzhou and Kwantung Provinces respectively, sailed with more than 3,000 of their soldiers and families on 50 warships to the port of Thuận An. This group wore pig tails to set them apart from their Qing rulers. The two commanders sought an audience with the Nguyễn Shogun Chúa Hiền Nguyễn Phúc Tần to ask for political asylum and were allowed to resettle in the wilderness of the southern frontiers. What the Nguyễn Shogun did not know was that not all members of that group were willing to swear allegiance to the Phú Xuân (Huế) court. One of them was lieutenant general Huỳnh Tấn.

The Chinese newcomers split into two groups. Dương Ngạn Địch along with Huỳnh Tấn and their men headed toward the estuaries named Cửa Soài Rạp, Cửa Đại, and Cửa Tiểu to finally garrison in Mỹ Tho and Định Tường. On the other hand, Trần Thắng Tài and Trần An Bình led their soldiers to their encampments in Biên Hòa and Gia Định. They joined hand with the local Vietnamese to clear the land, cut down the forests, dig canals, build houses, construct roads.... Most of them intermarried with the Vietnamese and Khmers to start families with the intention to settle there for good.

The Vietnamese called them “*Minh Hương*” meaning the Chinese still loyal to the Ming who sought refuge in Vietnam. Those political refugees had accepted Vietnam as their second homeland and worked hand in hand with the Vietnamese pioneers to settle the South during the early days of the Nguyễn Dynasty. They also persuaded many of their countrymen from Malaysia and Singapore to immigrate to Vietnam.

On his part, lieutenant general Huỳnh Tấn succeeded in convincing many of the troops to follow him in the exploration of the wilderness bordering the Mekong’s banks. He found large stretches of fertile

land and intended to secede from Vietnamese rule to establish his own kingdom. When Dương Ngạn Địch who remained loyal to the Nguyễn Shogun opposed him, Huỳnh Tấn and his renegade troops killed Địch. The Nguyễn Shogun and Trần Thắng Tài joined forces to fight against Huỳnh Tấn. After an arduous campaign they had to resort to a subterfuge to capture and dispatch Huỳnh Tấn to his Maker. As a result, the eastern region in the Mekong Delta temporarily regained some form of normalcy. However, a remnant of the rebels escaped to the Tonle Sap Lake in the kingdom of Chenla to continue their fight against Vietnam. They were aided by the Khmers and Siamese making the Vietnamese pacification of the south more difficult. It was not until the Vietnamese conquered Phnom Penh that they were able to put an end to this insurrection.

In the following century, another group of Chinese in the Mekong Delta rose up against the Vietnamese authorities. They were led by Lý Văn Quang from Fukien. Profiting from the lax security in Đồng Nai they occupied Cù Lao Phố (1747) forcing the Nguyễn Shogun to order the Commander of the Border Trần Đại Định, the son of Trần Thắng Tài, to suppress them. Lý Văn Quang was captured and sent back to China.

Meanwhile, up north in China, in 1761, after an unsuccessful uprising against the Qing, Mạc Kính Cửu and his family boarded warships to make their escape with over 400 soldiers across the sea and arrived at the no-man's -land named Mang Khảm in Chenla.

When he arrived at Mang Khảm in his late twenties, Mạc Cửu already showed signs of being gifted in leadership and organizational skills. He had his followers clear the forests and land for farming, started trading and recruited adventurers or pirates to run his gambling houses and opium dens to enrich his coffers. Always short of workers, Mạc Cửu hired them from all available ethnic groups i.e. Chinese, Vietnamese or Khmer.

In a short while, he transformed what was once wilderness or

marshlands into a prosperous area that comprised of 7 villages including the Koh Tral Island or present day Phú Quốc. He chose Mang Khảm as the capital of his kingdom that he christened Cảng Khẩu Quốc. Its location was well suited for boat traffic coming from the north i.e. Nan Hai, Fukien; from the south i.e. Java, Indonesia; or from the west i.e. India and Malaysia. At the time Hà Tiên was still a principality which was administratively autonomous of Chenla and Đại Việt (today's Vietnam).

It is on account of that autonomy that Chinese emissaries and Western historians sometimes mistook Hà Tiên for a “small Chinese kingdom in the South China Sea”. However, the historian Phan Huy Chú recorded in the *Lịch Triều Hiến Chương Loại Chí*, the first encyclopedia of Vietnam in the Nguyễn Dynasty, the following words Mạc Thiên Tích, Mạc Cửu's son, penned in his collection of poems named *Hà Tiên Thập Vịnh*: “The Hà Tiên Frontier Province of Annam was formerly a wilderness. Our father has settled it thirty years ago allowing the local inhabitants to live in safety and go on with farming.”

Since the 17th century, during the Southern March, either by land or by sea, small groups of Vietnamese migrants went south. They sailed along the coast all the way to the Gulf of Siam. Probably they had landed at Mang Khảm, but confronted by the inhospitable environment they decided to move on. It was not until Mạc Cửu succeeded in settling the land with his men and managerial skills that trade could flourish allowing Mang Khảm to be transformed into a prosperous “special economic zone” and one of the earliest urban centers in the Mekong Delta predating the cities of Cần Thơ, Bạc Liêu, and Mỹ Tho...

The book *Mạc Thi Gia Phả* relates: “From the day Mạc Cửu established himself in Mang Khảm, he did not waste a day in settling the new land, transforming this wilderness and deserted place into a bustling and populated area. On one hand, he cleared the lands for the peasants to cultivate and build harbors for seagoing ships to berth. On

the other, he erected fortresses, trained soldiers to maintain security and laid the groundwork for independence. Mạc Cửu relied on kindness and integrity in his dealings with others. As a result, people flocked to the region and it did not take long for Mang Khảm to grow into a thriving port.”

In a way, Hà Tiên was the Singapore of the 18th century. Its reputation spread wide and far beyond the Southeast Asian region all the way to Europe. In his speech before the Académie Française in 1768, the French missionary-turned-entrepreneur Pierre Poivre stated: “Hà Tiên opened its ports for the merchant ships of all nations to come and trade. The taxes they had to pay were quite minimal.” (*Un Chinois des Mers du Sud, Le Fondateur de Hà Tiên - Gaspardone Émile, Journal Asiatique, 1952*)

On the fateful day the Siamese attacked and devastated Mang Khảm they captured Mạc Cửu along with all of his family members. The Mạc were deported to Siam but later fled back to Mang Khảm where Mạc Cửu plotted his comeback.

Once more, the book Mạc Thị Gia Phả reads: “Once back to Mang Khảm, a Chinese strategist loyal to the Ming advised (Mạc Cửu): ...The Khmers are weak and spineless. Furthermore, the Mang Khảm region lies along the coastline. It’s inevitable that one day we’ll have to face the Siamese again but cannot rely on the Khmers to come to our aid. Now, in the north, the Nguyễn Shogun allowed our people to settle and prosper there. In addition, the western part of Chenla is under the control of the Nguyễn’s troops who are opposed to the Siamese. The best option for us is to swear allegiance to the Vietnamese court and seek its steadfast protection.”

Seeing the logic in that argument, Mạc Cửu travelled in person to the Vietnamese capital of Phú Xuân to petition the emperor and offered the seven villages he settled to the court. The Nguyễn Shogun accepted

the proposal and renamed Mang Khảm the Frontier Province of Hà Tiên. He appointed Mạc Cửu to the rank of Commander and entrusted him with the defense of the Province. In addition, the Lord bestowed on him the seal, cap and ceremonial dress of his office and ordered a large escort to take him home. The province was added to the territory of Đại Việt, former name of Vietnam, and turned into a strategic bastion to check the expansion of Siam.

Mạc Cửu passed away at the ripe age of 80 (1655-1735) and was succeeded by his son Mạc Thiên Tứ who subsequently changed his name to Mạc Thiên Tích. Besides being a learned man, Tích also excelled as a general and diplomat. The young Mạc continued the task of expanding Mang Khảm with the addition of four districts: Long Xuyên, Kiên Giang, Trần Giang, and Trần Di. He once attacked Siam and established a protectorate over Chenla.

In 1774, the Shogun Nguyễn Phúc Khoát divided the country into 14 provinces but kept Hà Tiên status unchanged. Mạc Thiên Tích still retained his title as Commander. In a sense, Hà Tiên was considered an autonomous region administered by the Mạc with its own troops, fortresses, and currency. The only condition was for the Mạc to pay tribute, every three years, to the Nguyễn Shogun as a vassal.

Though they had become citizens of Vietnam and served at the Vietnamese court, the Mạc never let go of their control over Hà Tiên and always longed for an opportunity to act on their ambitious designs. Mạc Thiên Tích revealed his strength of character through these two lines in his poem “Lu Khê Nhàn Điếu”:

*Trên biển riêng cười con xé bóng
Đem dân ngoài cõi một ngư ông*

*Riding the ocean waves I chuckled at the sunset
This lone fisherman brought to safe shores the foreign settlers*

The stone tablets of Qianlong and the Buddha Master Tây-An

With that kind of ambition and strength of character, it would be difficult to imagine the Mạc content to play second fiddle to the Vietnamese court for long. They did not want to see a Vietnamese “enlightened king” born in the Mekong Delta whose Thất Sơn region with its “luxuriant hills, verdant trees, and clear streams” is obviously “The Land of Blossoms” (Vùng Hoa Địa) of Vietnam. Based on their understanding of Feng shui, the Mạc believed that with the Yin and Yang cohabiting in harmony in their region, it must undoubtedly be the “birthplace” of illustrious men.

According to the author Nguyễn Văn Hầu, nobody has yet offered a plausible explanation for the origin of the stone tablets the disciples of the Buddha Master discovered at Bài Bài in the Trịnh Biên District of Châu Đốc Province when the Mạc were still the administrators of Hà Tiên. It is believed that those tablets were buried there in 1792 during the Chinese Qing Dynasty in the 57th year of emperor Qianlong’s reign.

Only the Buddha Master who was privy to the secrets of the heaven above, the earth below and the hearts of men in the middle was able to foretell that the Thất Sơn region or in general the Mekong Delta is the Land of Blossoms of Vietnam. It is here that we can find the crossroads of the earth’s most vital energy flows “*địa huyết hiển linh*” that are waiting for the propitious time to inaugurate the “golden age” of peace and prosperity for all the four corners of the land.

For that reason, to prepare for the day Vietnam reverts to Chinese domination, the geomancers working for the Mạc clan buried the Qianlong tablets at sensitive spots to bring about the impoverishment of the land and thwart the blossoming of the “golden age” in the Mekong Delta or the coming of preeminent men.

Wherever the Qianlong Tablets were found, the Buddha Master had

new tablets erected to negate the effects of the old ones. He entrusted Đức Cố Quân Trần Văn Thành with the task of putting up four tablets in the Thất Sơn region. To this day, in the Mekong Delta, on an earthen mound at the mouth of the Thạch Mỹ stream at Vĩnh Thạnh Trung in An Giang Province still stands the “Palace of Đinh Ông Thử” where people come to worship him. They believe that it was thanks to him that we have now the “Civilization of Orchard”.

According to ancient legends, a Chinese geomancer by the name of Cao Biền knew that a sacrosanct dragon lived in the Red River Delta to protect the Vietnamese in their Southern March. He tried his best to neutralize its power. However, the dragon escaped to Ha Long Bay to wait for the day it could accompany the Vietnamese in their Southern March.

In the brief span of less than four centuries, the South has accumulated a large treasure chest of myths and tales. Each of us is free to believe them or not. Nevertheless, nothing prevents us from drawing symbolic meanings from them.

In my interpretation, the sacred Seven Head Naga Serpent could be the representation of the Mekong Delta’s rainforests. Like the Naga that swallowed the storm water to protect the Buddha, those rainforests act like gigantic sponges that soak in the Mekong’s water during the Rainy Season to release it in the Dry one thus sparing the peasants from flood and providing them with enough water to farm all year round.

So, what can we make of the Qianlong Tablets in the Mekong Delta? Could they express the desire of the Chinese to dominate that most vital region of our land? On the other hand, can we see in the tablets the Buddha Master erected a determination to resist and retain the country’s independence once lost and now under the threat of being so again?

The Buddha Master passed away more than a century ago. The

legacy he left behind is immeasurable. Yet, his resting place is only a modest grass covered grave nestled on a stony hillside.

In his absence, the Chinese geomancers in Tiananmen Square are still lurking around knowing full well that the Mekong is a sacred river and the Mekong Delta of vital importance to Vietnam because it serves as its lifeline. “*Freshwater will make it (to be) the blue-gold of the 21st century.*”

While Vietnam is left with few alternatives, China, with its fourteen dams in the series of the Mekong Cascades, continues to selfishly monopolize the use of the Mekong’s water and bequeath the people living downstream with a river drained dry of its water and life source.

Even though, at the present time, the Buddha Master’s Tablets can no longer be located, we still have the Children of the Mekong or the Friends of the Mekong Group who are relentlessly working to forestall the ominous day when the water will cease flowing, the alluvium stop coming, the Mekong drained dry, the land lie parched, and the fish disappear depriving the people of their important food source. On that doomsday, the Vietnamese would become dispirited and their land a part of a new world order called Pax Sinica.

A Visit to Hà Tiên in Search of a Remote Past

Alongside its beauty, Hà Tiên is also blessed with a rich history.

Tourists to this province will undoubtedly be introduced to the Hà Tiên Thập Vịnh, a collection of ten poems, penned by Mạc Thiên Tích in the Chinese Lishu (clerical style), Kaishu (traditional regular style), Caoshu (cursive style), and Dazhuan (large seal style) scripts to laud the charm of this region. Judging by the titles of the poems alone one can have an idea how lovely the place is...

The intellectuals in the ancient capital of Thăng Long took a liking

to those poems and from that time onward Hà Tiên became a celebrated geographical name with the nation's literati. At a later time, the writers Đông Hồ and Mộng Tuyết were recognized as the rising stars of the young generation of Hà Tiên's writers.

Located near the Cambodian borders, 90 kilometers to the west of Rạch Giá, Hà Tiên looks like an arrowhead that juts out of Kiên Giang Province. Its landscape is dominated by a limestone mountain range that runs into the sea at stunning geological locations adorned with caves, caverns, islets (Phu Tử Islet, Hòn Chông...), and islands (Thỏ Châu, Phú Quốc...)

The modern Hà Tiên Cement Factory was built in this limestone region.

Running straight like a rod, the Vĩnh Tế Canal links the city of Châu Đốc to the Giang Thành River that brings with it sweet water from the Hậu River to irrigate the paddies in Hà Tiên.

Phuong Thành Street in Hà Tiên is well known for its two pagodas. The first one is the Chùa Tam Bảo whose history dates back to the birth of the city itself. Mạc Cửu had a Buddha Amitabba statue cast for the pagoda after he sent for his mother to come from China and live there. The second one is the Chùa Phù Dung. Better known as the Phù Cừ Am. It was built by Mạc Thiên Tích for the beautiful lady Ái Cơ Phù Cừ. His fabled love for her is still being told to this day. "Phù Dung" or "Phù Cừ" is the name of a white lotus famous for its delicate beauty and fragrance.

In 1730, a traveler named Nguyễn Nghị took his son and daughter to Hà Tiên to seek refuge from the political turmoil in Laos. This learned scholar was well received by Mạc Cửu who asked him to be the private tutor for his son Mạc Thiên Tứ. So that he could teach his daughter and Tứ at the same time, he had his daughter Phù Cừ dressed as a boy.

At his father's death, Mạc Thiên Tứ succeeded him as commander of Hà Tiên. Besides his gift for leadership, Mạc Thiên Tích was also well versed in literature and poetry. He founded the poetry club Tao Đàn Chiêu Anh Các for the poets and poetry lovers to meet and recite their works. Among them was Nguyễn Cư Trinh, the person who proposed the “chính sách tằm thực” or silk worm strategy to the Nguyễn Shogun during the “Nam Tiến” Southern March. Nguyễn came from Gia Định and was one of Mạc Thiên Tích's esteemed literary friends.

In the beginning, Mạc Thiên Tích developed a close friendship with Phù Cừ because of her literary talent and good look. When he discovered that she was actually a girl, a deep romance developed between those two well-suited lovers. Eventually Mạc Thiên Tích took her in marriage as his second wife.

Driven by jealousy, his first wife had Phù Cừ thrown into a big jar and covered it with a lid. Fortunately, the rain came. When Mạc removed the lid to catch the rainwater he was thus able to rescue her on time. Completely dejected, Phù Cừ asked her husband to let her spend the rest of her life in the Phù Cừ Am pagoda. Mạc Thiên Tích later had the pagoda's tower raised so that he could see it from his future resting place next to his father's grave on Mount Lãng.

The writer Mộng Tuyết Thất Tiểu Muội was inspired by this moving love story when she wrote her famous short story “The Lady Ái Cơ in a Lid Covered Jar”.

Traveling 3 kilometers north of Hà Tiên one would arrive at Thạch Động. It is a 90 meter tall massive stone formation with a large cavern and an ancient temple. A path descends into its depth while another rises upward to an opening to the sky and sunlight. The wind that wanders in makes a whistling sound resembling that of a flute. Mạc Thiên Tích marveled at the sight and penned the poem Thạch Động Nuốt Mây or A Stone Cavern Swallowing the Clouds.

In the midst of such an enchanting scene, the visitor was stopped dead on his track by a monument called the “Bia Căm Thù” or “Tablet of Hatred” which should be more appropriately named “Bia Thương Tiếc” or “Memorial Tablet” to commemorate the massacre of 130 Vietnamese civilians at the hands of the Khmer Rouge in March of 1978.

However, this is not an isolated incident. Not far from the northern end of the Vĩnh Tế Canal in Châu Đốc, in between the Phi Lai and Tam Bảo Pagodas, is the Field of Death. During the “Time of Rage”, ferocious Khmer Rouge, like an army from the netherworld, crossed the borders. Armed to the teeth, they searched the houses, pagodas, caves for the Vietnamese and killed 3,157 of them – mostly women and children - an unimaginable act of barbarism. During that same time, the inhabitants of Thổ Chu Island, southwest of Phú Quốc Island, were “Cáp Duôn/decapitated” by Pol Pot’s men.

Among the victims were my friend’s daughter named Phùng Thặng and her son. She and her sister Phùng Khánh, became well known for their translation of Herman Hesse’s work Siddharta. Even after more than five decades, Mr. Như Phong still remembered this selected quote in the Vietnamese version entitled “Câu chuyện dòng sông”: “Dù bị đau đớn quằn quại, tôi vẫn tha thiết yêu thương trần gian điên dại này /Und allem Weh zum Trotze bleib ich. Verliebt in die verrückt Welt / And all woe in defiance, I stay in love with the crazy world.”

In Mr. Như Phong’s opinion, Phùng Thặng is the personification of Siddharta in real life. In some way, she followed the path of the Buddha and her name became bigger than life.

I believe that when talking about Pol Pot’s “army from the netherworld” one needs to mention the “sorcerer” who directs the whole show by remote control from China.

Over the last three centuries, the borders between Cambodia and

Vietnam have been constantly soaked in the blood of the innocent victims of the animosity that runs through the history between those two peoples.

For a moment, the chill air in the cavern that is permeated with an atmosphere of death makes me shudder. I look up at the white clouds drifting nonchalantly across the immense sky the color of jade. Could it be that man-caused tragedies, at any time or place, appear so insignificant or even irrelevant that they leave nature unperturbed and even inexplicably beautiful.

Standing on Thạch Động, one can admire the majestic mountain ranges that extend across the border. Over the horizon, the visitor will come face to face with Châu Nham Mountain with its many caves including one named after Thạch Sanh. As a Khmer tale has it, Thạch Sanh cuts off the head of a boa with his sword made from a section of a stalactite. Mạc Thiên Tích wrote the poem “Cánh Cò Châu Nham” based on that story.

Đông Hồ is the name of the Giang Thành River’s estuary that is flanked on the right by the Ngũ Hồ Mountain and the left the Tô Châu Range. The landscape is spectacular but one needs to contemplate it under a full moon to appreciate the poem Trăng In Mặt Nước / The Reflecting Moon on the Water.

To come to Mũi Nai located 4 kilometers from Hà Tiên is to come to a white sand beach, an azure sea, and gentle waves. This is the very picture painted in the poem Cảnh Thôn Lộc Trí / The Scenery at the Lộc Trí Village.

Nam Phổ is located 10 kilometers southeast of Hà Tiên on the way to Rạch Giá. It boasts a mountainous island with a tranquil beach all year round. That’s how the poem Nam Phổ Sóng Lặng / The Mild Waves at Nam Phổ depicts it.

Once in Hà Tiên, the visitor cannot help agreeing with the poet Đông Hồ Lâm Tấn Phác when he wrote these lines about Hà Tiên, his home town: “The place is so amazing. It seems to have everything. There you can find several deep caves similar to the ones in Lạng Sơn, a few stone formations rising out of the sea like the ones in Hạ Long Bay. Sadly enough, upon leaving Hà Tiên, a miniature landscape compared to the Grand Canyon in Northern America, all that present day visitors will remember is a Hà Tiên which has degenerated into a faded image of itself.”

Paris in the Far East where Winter was Absent

Immediately following the Peace Accords of 1784 relinquishing the six provinces in the south of Vietnam to them, the French went full speed ahead with the exploitation of the new colony through the intermediary of the Chinese whom they valued as industrious, trustworthy, and business-oriented.

They set up an office called “Sở Tân Đáo” in Saigon to process the immigration papers for Chinese who wished to settle in Vietnam – preferably in the South where the prospects were most attractive. Those Chinese newcomers were economic immigrants, opportunists who came in waves from the 18th to the mid-20th century. The late comers could always rely on the wholehearted help from their Bang Hội or Associations to start a new life. Regardless whether they are early or late comers, the Chinese in general usually showed a strong spirit of solidarity and mutual help.

The Chinese in Vietnam, even those in the fertile Mekong Delta, rarely opted for the arduous life of farmers. Those who were well off shun away from becoming land owners. They did not wish to deal with the destitute farmers or be accused of belonging to the exploitative class. They wisely engaged in businesses that do not require strenuous work but promise great profits. Small entrepreneurs opened modest

corner convenient stores or oriental medicine pharmacies wherever there were “houses with smoking chimneys” - meaning all over the place. Wealthier businessmen built rice mills or stores to trade in rice, vegetable and fruits. They worked together through their Associations and succeeded in monopolizing the economic activities of the entire Mekong Delta.

Their influence in the South grew with time. By the mid-19th century (1841), a super association named Hoa Phú Công Sứ was founded in Saigon. It brought together Associations of Guang Dong, Fukien, and Hainan. The Minh Hương, Chinese Vietnamese, were not regarded by those organizations as “true” Chinese. This super association acted as arbitrators in case of dispute among the Chinese and commanded decision making powers in political and economic matters i.e. the issue of residence cards and setting the market price of rice.

Throughout the French colonial rule (1884-1945) the Chinese in Vietnam enjoyed special privileges because they served the economic and security interests of the French. Pressure from Big China also helped. Just a few examples: Chinese coming from Singapore had the right to form their own association known as Clan Singapore. Those bearing British passports had their own clubs while the city of Chợ Lớn had its own Hội Đồng Quản Hạt or Administrative Council. This institution was a government within a government. It was endowed with the right to manage its residents, foreign exchange, market price of rice, and export quotas...In return the French were given the right to hunt down and extradite the Vietnamese revolutionaries who were then operating in China back to Vietnam.

It was Marshal Lê Văn Duyệt who gave the name Chợ Lớn to the city that was still sparsely populated at the time Francis Garnier served as its 24 year-old mayor. Garnier later joined Doudart de Lagrée to form an exploratory group sailing upstream the Mekong in search of a trade route to China from 1866 to 1868.

As time went by, Chợ Lớn grew into a city with the largest community of Chinese in Vietnam and a trade center supplying all the commercial and industrial needs for the people of the South. They held the monopoly in the issuing of credits to the Vietnamese farmers. Right from the start, the Chinese formed their own communities and lived in urban areas with the Vietnamese and Khmers. Most of them came from China's southern coastal region. Their business dealings led them to become proficient in both the Khmer and Vietnamese languages.

Very early on, those new immigrants remained in tight contact with the Chinese in Chợ Lớn thanks to the Tàu Hủ Canal built in 1819. It links Chợ Lớn with the networks of canals and rivers that crisscross the Mekong Delta.

The Chinese only account for about 2% of Vietnam's population. In addition to being good businessmen they also engage in unhealthy practices like speculation, hoarding, price fixing, and bribery of government officials even under the communist rule. They work hand in hand with international financiers in Southeast Asia to control the retail and wholesale trade of commercial as well as industrial goods, the financial and transportation services. Đền Ngạn, the Chinese name of Chợ Lớn, becomes a de facto important link in the Taiwan- Hong Kong-Singapore economic axis called the Chinese Economic Area (CEA) by today's news media.

The flame of the Xin Hai Revolution (1911) in the South

The Chinese revolutionary Sun Yat Sen visited Vietnam on at least three occasions. With the assistance of the Hsing-chung Hui/ Revive China Society acting as overseas offices of the Kuomintang, Sun Yat Sen was extremely successful in persuading the Chinese living in the South to support the Xin Hai Revolution for the People's Rights that was unfolding in China.

In a meeting with his compatriots in Chợ Lớn, Sun Yat Sen observed that the time was ripe to overthrow the Qing and succeeded in raising a considerable sum of money from the Chinese belonging to all walks of life in the city. Wherever he went, he got into contacts with the Chinese associations and tried to reconcile the differences between them. He revived in them the pride of the Han people and urged them to always look to their mother country which has always been the center of the world. He also reminded them to forever remain Chinese and not be assimilated by the locals.

In the aftermath of the Xin Hai Revolution on 10/10/1911, Sun Yat Sen was revered as the “father” of modern China. True to his exhortation, the overseas Chinese, wherever they live, identify closely with their motherland. In the words of the correspondents of the Far Eastern Economic Review they are and continue to be “the extended arms of Pax Sinica over the mainland as well as the islands.”

In Vietnam’s case, through all its Revolutionary Wars, at the start of the 21st century this country still remains basically a pyramid society with the poor and illiterate population occupying the base. They are being exploited and lead an existence of hired hands or renters in their own country. Sitting solidly at the top is a small group of Chinese who, in one form or another, collude with the ruling class be it the French Colonialists, the South Vietnamese generals or the Red Capitalists. Those Chinese are favored with 50-year contracts that guarantee them stable and generous returns.

On his visit to Hanoi in the first part of the 1980’s, scholar Milton Osborne was told by Foreign Minister Nguyễn Cơ Thạch of the intention of the Vietnamese Government to do away with the Chinese stranglehold on the country’s economy. Twenty years later, the exact opposite turned out to be true. The Chinese became more entrenched than ever with the help of the Vietnamese Communists. As for Mr. Thạch, he breathed his last a long time ago.

From a bird view, we can watch the Chinese thrive and grow stronger along the 4,800 kilometer long current of the Mekong. In Dr. Duy's parlance, they are like masses of fat that can instantly obstruct the body's arteries. To remove them would require painful resection. Hopefully, through benign assimilation and positive evolution they could be transformed into good cholesterol of the HDL type with no medical treatments needed. The magic remedy is "Democracy" not "Authoritarianism".

CHAPTER XVII

THE KHMER SMILE AND SUNSET ON THE MEKONG

*“It takes a great deal of history to produce
a little literature”*

Henry James (Hawthorne, 1879)

On his approach to the International Airport of Pochentong, the tower informed the pilot that due to technical reasons his plane was not cleared for landing yet. The plane tipped its wing and started on a large circle to overfly the Tonle Sap Lake, the largest freshwater lake in Asia, which is fed by the Tonle Sap River whose current reverses course depending on the season of the year. The Great Lake has been compared to the shape of either a violin, a huge four-compartment stomach of a ruminant, or the number “8” of a handcuff that has held half a million Vietnamese beholden to its fish and rice bowls.

Seen through the plane window, the Mekong resembles a long crimson silk strip. As the intersection of four rivers named Quatre Bras (Chamean Mon in the Cambodian language) receded to the back, the capital city of Phnom Penh with its pagoda roofs and royal palaces

popularized in post cards came into full view of the travelers. Finally the plane landed smoothly on a deserted airstrip.

The instant the plane's door opened, it revealed a completely different world: an empty and gloomy Phnom Penh airport. The diplomatic formalities were minimal: cursory greetings and handshakes, a photograph taken with the Khmer welcoming party bearing cold smiles on their faces. Difficult times were looming over the horizon.

In the company of a group of newsmen, Mr. Nhu Phong accompanied a high-level delegation of the Saigon government en route to Phnom Penh to discuss the re-establishment of diplomatic relations that had been suspended since 1963 under the reign of Prince Sihanouk. The Vietnamese diplomats also intended to use this occasion to direct public attention to their request that the Cambodian government "protect the lives and properties" of their countrymen living under persecution in the land of Angkor.

For over 300 years, the Mekong, that river of history and of time, has been mirroring the historic events that bind the two neighboring countries of Cambodia and Vietnam. Any history they share is marred by recurring animosities, turmoil and violence. The Vietnamese immigrants in Cambodia come in waves. It does not matter whether they choose to live separately or in groups, the threat of "cáp duồn" like the sword of Damocles, incessantly hangs over their heads.

"Cáp duồn" consists of two words: cáp means decapitation; duồn or yuon means barbarians, defamatory term given to the Vietnamese.

Lê Hương a well-known Vietnamese reporter, fluent in the Khmer language and author of "*Vietnamese Immigrants in Kampuchea*" [49], stated that, since the early 18th century, all mass decapitations of the Vietnamese were recorded in the Royal Almanac of Cambodia:

In 1730, a group of Khmers in Banam, near Laos, rose up and went on a killing spree of Vietnamese prompting the Nguyễn “shogun” to send in troops to protect his subjects. Thirty six years later, another group of Khmers sailed from the coast to pillage the Thổ Châu Island. They ransacked the house belonging to bishop Alexander de Rhôdes, hunted down then killed his Vietnamese Christian converts and seminarians. In 1776, a third group crossed the frontier at Hà Tiên Province, destroyed the church named Pinha-Leu, raped the Vietnamese nuns and slew the seminarians.

The Khmer fanatics in Baphom city went on a rampage to massacre the Vietnamese in 1818. The then Khmer monarch Ang Nom II also harbored a deep hatred of the Vietnamese and intended to wipe all of them out of his kingdom.

Come 1834, General Trương Minh Giảng changed Cambodia’s name to Trấn Tây Thành and administered it with an iron fist. His authoritarian and draconian style deepened the Khmer’s antagonism against the Vietnamese forcing their ruler to turn to Siam for protection and resulting in the withdrawal of the Vietnamese.

When the French invaded Indochina in 1863, their policy of “divide and rule” only helped aggravate the situation. Then, decapitation incidents were no longer limited within the Cambodian territory of Preyveng, Takeo, Svayrieng... They spread to the western provinces bordering the Tiền River in the Mekong Delta like Trà Vinh, Sóc Trang, and Châu Đốc. The Khmers moved in bands with machetes and sticks into far away villages and hamlets to look for and slaughter Vietnamese, plunder and burn down their houses. Those fortunate enough to escape with their life had to start anew empty handed.

In 1970, with American support, Lon Nol sealed an alliance with Sirik Matak and overthrew Prince Sihanouk. Unlike Sirik Matak who was of royal blood, Lon Nol came from common stock. Of limited

personal ability but driven by boundless ambition, he sought his fortune by climbing the military ladder and professed unconditional loyalty to Prince Sihanouk until the day he turned on his prince.

Lon Nol was proud of being a “pure” Khmer because of his dark skin in contrast to the Vietnamese who are of lighter complexion. He delighted in having his soldiers address him as “Dark Father” and did not hide his vanity when he requisitioned an ancient palace built more than 100 years ago during French colonial rule for his personal use. Francis Garnier viewed that colonial period in history to be the era for France to assume her “mission civilisatrice” in Indochina. Lon Nol founded the Khmer-Môn Institute to promote the revival of the once resplendent Angkor-Khmer civilization that was in decline at the hand of the treacherous Thmils or foreigners.

In 1970, Lon Nol started the rumor that a white crocodile, an omen of change, was spotted on a stretch of the Mekong near Phnom Penh to mobilize popular support for his impending coup against Prince Sihanouk. When the American vice-president Spiro Agnew presented him with a white elephant, Lon Nol then really became convinced he was given a mandate from Heaven to lead Cambodia.

Instead of looking forward to the future he clung to the past, visited ancient palaces, searched for the meanings of oracles written on the leaves of sweet palm trees to awaken benevolent spirits from their slumber. His obsession with grandiosity was described by a French newsman as “megalomania or folie des grandeurs”. To write history, the new authorities in Phnom Penh only had in their arsenals the weapon of xenophobia in the form of a “holy war” against the Vietnamese.

Less than one month after he firmly assumed the reins of power, Lon Nol gave the order to the military to urgently set up concentration camps across the nation to incarcerate all the Vietnamese.

Phnom Penh reached a fever pitch not because the capital city was being increasingly isolated as a result of the deteriorating military situation across Indochina but rather because of the anti-Vietnamese campaign that was in full swing.

The irony is that although the Phnom Penh government had to increasingly depend on the South Vietnamese military – even having to send their officer cadets to Saigon for training – a harmonious relationship between these two reluctant allies did not seem possible at all. Those trainees brought home stories of discriminations against them during their stays in Vietnam. True or not, those stories only heightened the sense of aggravation on the part of the Khmer leaders toward the Vietnamese. The situation worsened as the country's newspapers frequently reported the unbecoming conduct of both the North and South Vietnamese soldiers. They were accused of behaving like members of expeditionary forces displaying complete insensitivity to the feelings of the Khmers who were not yet ready to forget the bitterness and rancor of the past.

Long ago, at the AFP office in Saigon, Mr. Nhur Phong had the opportunity to read on the front pages of Phnom Penh's newspapers including *Le Courier Phnompenois* inflammatory headlines like: "*The Viet Cong: sworn enemies*" or "*the Vietnamese: hereditary enemies of the Cambodians*". This topic has been exploited interminably over Phnom Penh's radio waves that could also be heard in Saigon. It appeared as if the Cambodian leaders were attempting to erase the dividing line that differentiates the Viet Cong from the local Vietnamese who were leading a contented life in Cambodia.

The campaign against the Vietnamese reached its peak at a gigantic mass rally held at the Olympic Stadium in the center of Phnom Penh. In addition to battle hymns and the clanging of cymbals or gongs, the crowd was treated to endless rabble-rousing speeches about the heroic struggle of the Khmer people against the land grabbing and draconian

rule of the “Yuon” throughout Cambodia’s history. Surprisingly, the Thai were never mentioned. In summary, all the calamities or insecurities Cambodia had to suffer could be blamed on the Vietnamese. During peacetime, it was the dishonest, greedy Vietnamese businessmen that exploited the people. In wars, it was the Vietcong soldiers hiding in caves and jungle trails that invaded Cambodia.

The unanimous answer to the question “what needs to be done to save Cambodia and preserve the once magnificent Angkor Khmer civilization?” is quite simple: “Kill! Kill! The Yuon must be hunted down and killed”. The marches that followed the speeches were given the name “*March of National Concord*”, March for National Unity of Mind. The events were attended by Lon Nol, Sirik Matak, Long Boret and the entire cabinet. A jungle of men marched. They were armed with a few guns but for the most part with knives, sticks... and to a man fired up with hatred.

As a result, the inevitable came. In the streets of the capital city of Phnom Penh, walls were covered with slogans denouncing the Vietnamese painted not only in the Khmer language but also in English and French for the world to see the message: “We must kill all the Viet in Cambodia”. Banderoles showing fierce-looking mandarins of the Vietnamese court holding Khmer girls in their arms and standing on skulls of their Khmer victims were on full display everywhere. “*The worst is yet to come*” the people told each other on the streets and alleys of the cities.

Entering the Caves

The first stage is the “cleansing” of Phnom Penh. Policemen and soldiers, many of whom green recruits drafted the night before held a parade in plain sight of Western newsmen. The participants were armed with a medley of weapons like AK47 manufactured in China, American made M16s, or even Carbines from French colonial time.

One thing they had in common was the Buddha figures and amulets they wore around their necks as invincible shields that would protect them from shrapnel or bullets.

Lon Nol was building an army without having his troops go through basic training or military schools. He totally relied on the supernatural powers of magicians and sorcerers. This form of superstition appealed to a good number of peasants and Khmer Vietnamese who flocked back to Cambodia from Vietnam. The latter were called Kampuchea Krom and belonged to the Front of Liberation of the Mekong Delta.

The holy war started at the Tonle Sap Lake. Its victory was assured considering the absence of enemy's return fire. Under Lon Nol's order, the Republican soldiers were transported in several Soviet made Molotovs and civilian Coca Cola trucks to the banks of the Tonle Sap River on the outskirts of the capital city Phnom Penh. They split into small groups and attacked every one of the floating houses owned by the poor Vietnamese fishermen who had been living peacefully in that area for generations. They coldly and cheerfully laughed as they pulled down those floating dwellings. With glee, the soldiers watched the houses tumble into the water, break up into pieces and float down the current along with their plastic household goods.

The displaced families were sent to relocation centers. The commander of the police who happened to be also Lon Nol's brother offered the simple explanation that those "Viet Cong sanctuaries" had to be destroyed to ensure the security of the capital city of Phnom Penh.

Even more terrifying than instant death, people began to witness with their own eyes barbaric scenes taking place right on the streets of the capital city. At one corner, a group of four or five Vietnamese males were assaulted by the crowd. Those among them who were able to run away would fall into the hands of other assailants who called them Viet Cong and beat them to death. At another corner, a young Vietnamese girl

was surrounded by several young Khmer young men. They playfully stripped her of her clothes then paraded her naked through the streets before bringing her to an isolated place to gang rape and kill her.

The following day, a 6:00PM to 6:00AM special curfew was imposed on the Vietnamese. Phnom Penh at night returned to medieval times. Its streets looked dark and deserted. Only bands of hungry rats roamed free and fearlessly bit at the heels of the rare pedestrians who were brave enough to venture into the night. Even in daytime not many dared to step outside in fear for their lives. In several neighborhoods, Khmer soldiers dragged whole families from their houses. Amidst cries and supplications of women and children the men were taken away never to be seen again.

Only a minority of affluent or influential Vietnamese who lived in villas located in secluded and chic quarters like Dr. Henri Nhiêu, a friend of Mr. Nhu Phong, were spared. Nevertheless, they were wise enough to know that sooner or later their number would be up. To flee from the land that suddenly turned ingrate, treacherous and deadly; they frantically bribed government high officials with money or gold for Cambodian passports, their tickets to safety.

Henry Kamm, an American Jew reporter of the New York Times, witnessed the persecution and massacre of the Vietnamese minority at the time. He could not help but recall the childhood experience he and his family had to endure during the pogrom the Nazi visited on them when Hitler was the Fuhrer of Germany.

Lon Nol and Sirik Matak wanted the whole world to see a Cambodia on the move but Mr. Nhu Phong saw it differently. In his judgment, in the midst of rage and uproar, the land of Angkor was treading on the wrong side of history and in uncertainty. The country was writhing in agony and dying away. *“Pour certains le Cambodge renait, d’autres le voient mourir”* or for some, Cambodia is going through a re-birth,

others see it on its death bed. Mr. Nhu Phong belongs to the second group.

The days after the demonstrations, people waiting at the ferry stop, south of Phnom Penh, were horrified at the sight of corpses on civilian clothes drifting by on the Mekong. Those were the immediate victims of the campaign against the Vietnamese. They floated on their back, face down, headless, in groups of four or five tied together at the feet and arms with sharp bamboo strips or barbed wires. A sobbing French priest told the reporters: "Only over the last two days, I counted thousands of them. A good number of them were my parishioners. Some may be even seminarians. There is no way to tell."

Amidst all this turmoil and carnage, the Saigon delegation and reporters were treated to a show of traditional Cambodian dance at the Khmer-Môn Institute. Ordinarily, Mr. Nhu Phong reveled in watching this kind of show. But this was definitely not the appropriate time when news of atrocities perpetrated against the Vietnamese were pouring in. Travel became unsafe and the government used this good excuse to ban newsmen from venturing outside of Phnom Penh.

In a cavernous auditorium, the electric fans turned slowly. They struggled valiantly to circulate the thick and hot air of the Asian Monsoon in the room. A huge picture of the ruins of the Angkor Monuments nestled in the jungle served as a background for the stage. The young Khmer girls of the dance group moved rhythmically to the music. Flawlessly, they turned their bodies or curved their fingers and feet. Somehow, the gloomy events outside cast a pall over the audience and prevented it from responding enthusiastically to the performance.

La culture Cambodgienne est finie

Dr. Henri Nhiều turned to Mr. Nhu Phong and murmured to him those very words. Can art still hold any meaning or relevance in this

chaotic life and momentous time of change? As far as the wretched peasants were concerned, the magic word “Angkor” could still work wonders. It resembles a gigantic tree that provides them with plenty of shade to shelter them from the scorching sun or a key to open the door for them to lost paradises.

As the show was going strong, the power suddenly went dead. An unplanned intermission! In the dark, the air seemed to grow thicker and more stifling. Lately, Phnom Penh had been experiencing frequent blackouts due to a shortage of gasoline. However, you can always purchase it with no problems on the black market. Corruption under Sihanouk was bad enough. When Lon Nol took over it went out of control. An American female reporter observed sarcastically that it changed from “bad to worse!” Could this also be another facet of the Civilization of the Mekong? While the people were trying to start the gas-run Honda generator, Mr. Nhu Phong and Dr. Henri Nhiều decided to leave early.

The two were friends since their younger years in Hanoi. As a journalist, Mr. Nhu Phong showed a particular interest in Dr. Nhiều’s fascinating background. The doctor was a native of the Hậu Giang region. His early ancestor was an important mandarin in the Huế court who took part in the Southern March. Dr. Nhiều’s explained: “Probably because my ancestor showed improper ‘interests’ towards the ladies of the court that an angry king banished him to the South where he somehow managed against all odds to be appointed one of the trusted members of the king’s inner circle!” That’s how in his lighter moments Dr. Nhiều described his genealogy. It did not mean that he was not proud of his root. Quite the contrary! Each time he returned to his native village, in spite of his young age, he was allowed to sit at the honored table with the elders and officials. And he found great pleasure in that.

Dr. Nhiều attended the Lycée Chasseloup-Laubat at the same time as Prince Sihanouk then moved to Hanoi to study medicine. Upon

graduation, he did his internship as “interne des hôpitaux de Paris” or intern at the hospitals of Paris specializing in internal medicine and tropical diseases. On a visit to Angkor, Dr. Nhiều decided to stay and practice in Phnom Penh instead of returning to Saigon. He was well regarded by all including the French and maintained close ties with Cambodia’s royal family.

Dr. Nhiều was the perfect representative of the well-rounded generation of Asian intellectuals trained in Europe. He was not only proficient in the medical science but also possessed an extensive knowledge in other disciplines as well. Some compared him to a walking encyclopedia. The moment he started on the subject of Angkor, he would be so enthused that he could talk on and on like an expert of the *École d’Extrême Orient*.

An old hand of Cambodia, he could accurately summarize the “topopolitique” or the political scene of Cambodia in French with an impeccable Parisian accent. He was able to do so thanks to his deep understanding of the forces that motivated the complex personalities of the Khmer politicians. When asked what he thought of the Khmers in general by Mr. Nhu Phong, Dr. Nhiều replied:

– They bear their complexes even under colonial rule: while the French think the Vietnamese are industrious, hard-working; they look at the Cambodians and Laotians as less intelligent and lazy... that is the reason why the French mostly use Vietnamese in their administrative apparatus.

Dr. Nhiều continued, this time as a psychoanalyst of the Freudian school:

– Actually, the Khmers can live a much happier life and be spared those unwarranted complexes if they are not the heirs to the magnificent Angkor Civilization.

As an afterthought, Dr. Nhiều added:

– The Austrian psychologist stated: “The greater the complex of inferiority, the stronger the need to conquer and the larger the destruction.” On that point, Lon Nol is a good representative of the Khmer people. Outwardly he is extremely proud of and conceited about his race. Yet, deep inside lie fear and a complex of inferiority. If hatred is added to this mix then violence will be magnified many folds or grow unchecked.

That gifted medical doctor offered an astute diagnosis of the ailment that plagued Cambodia:

– The Angkor-Khmer Civilization with its wonderful monuments and advanced irrigation works had astonished the whole world. Now, people are shocked watching the Cambodians behaving like prehistoric tribesmen of the Stone or Bronze Age that predates the Angkor Civilization by centuries if not millenniums. They appear to be obsessed by the devil and mired in a paranoia that leads them to look at all Vietnamese as their enemy. Failing to catch the Viet Cong, any Vietnamese can be used as a sacrificial lamb. All Vietnamese must be done away with. If you cannot get rid of the message then it’s fine to kill the messenger. The psychiatrists have a term for this – they call it “displacement”.

Phnom Penh is the first capital city on the Mekong banks with palaces and temples overlooking Quatre Bras where big cargo ships from the East Sea can sail up to or even continue onward. Every year during the Rainy Season, a small island at this location grows taller and larger thanks to the alluvium deposited by the four rivers that meet there. A Singaporean firm named “Aggressive Hotel Group” planned to build a 5-star hotel on that island overlooking the Cambodiana Hotel it owned on the opposite bank.

Like many other big cities in Asia, Phnom Penh still retains vestiges

of French colonial times. Running inland from the Mekong's banks are straight streets lined on both sides with green trees and attractively designed villas which now look understandably grimy and rundown. Only civil servants of the older generations can speak French but the baguette breads still prove quite popular with the mass.

The former French rulers may be no longer around but the air-conditioned chic French restaurants on the Mekong like L'Ambroise, La Taverne... are still open for business. Their long menus list French dishes like Chateaubriand aux échalotes, crème de volaille.... Gourmets can always order special dishes like Coquille Saint-Jacques which is also the French name for Vũng Tàu Beach in Vietnam. The restaurants on the beach were reputed for being well stocked with rare and pricey wines. No wonder it was one of the favorite resort places for the French colonialists. To the well-heeled Vietnamese elite class, price was the last thing they would mind when ordering wine.

If the joint looks like an exact replica of a Parisian restaurant, there is a good chance that the owner comes from France. In better eateries, a sommelier would be eager to advise diners on the best choice of wine to go along with their food and taste. Most of the customers now are the new owners of Cambodia. They come from affluent Asian countries like Japan, Korea, Singapore, Taiwan...Henri Nhiều remarks that this phenomenon is not restricted only to Cambodia. It is also being observed in Europe - especially in France - where local owners suffer the indignation of being replaced by the new Asian kids on the block.

The notable thing is that those select 4 or 5 star establishments are like isolated islands existing in the middle of an ocean of poverty called Cambodia. The minute one steps outside the doors of luxurious hotels, one would be surrounded by beggars: women clutching babies in their arms, maimed men or even old men and women. Those are the real faces of the Cambodian people. The war forced a good number of these farmers to leave their homes and fields to seek refuge in the capital city.

People with a good conscience and caring heart cannot find any solace when confronted with such disheartening conditions. But, why should one be burdened with a guilty conscience? Everybody comes to this country with good intentions. Even tourists who set their foot in this land merely to seek pleasure, in one way or another, still contribute to its economic development!

On either bank of the Mekong, societies in the region are organized in a pyramid shape with the poor people occupying the base. In his work as journalist, Mr. Nhu Phong had more than once come to the land of Angkor. On that day, he again walked on the deserted boulevards along the Mekong banks to return to his hotel.

For thousands of years the river still flows at the same pace. As late as the 1940's or 1950's people had mentioned the rich potential for hydroelectricity of this river.

Not counting the big dams of the Mekong Cascades in Yunnan, Laos, and Thailand; the land of Angkor had three dam building projects named Sambor, Stung Treng, and Tonle Sap under consideration. The fourth one is planned for the tributary Prek Thuot which begins at the Đâu Khẩu Mountain Range and runs along a west to east axis to finally end at the Bassac River. This project was the first to be implemented in the 1960's but had to be abandoned midway because of the war. Were all those dams built, their combined power output would easily meet Cambodia's domestic needs. The surplus would be earmarked for export to Vietnam. Naturally, their implementation could only be resumed after the restoration of peace. No one could tell when peace would come while gunshots and bomb explosions were still being heard in the Mekong Delta for the last half century.

A Journalist's Diary

Prasot, April 10, 1970. The Recon Teams of South Vietnam's 9th

Infantry Division advanced into Prasot, a small town on the Vietnamese-Cambodian border. They were greeted by a horrifying scene of death and devastation. The smell of blood and sight of dead bodies of men, women, and children were everywhere. They were barbarously slaughtered by Lon Nol's soldiers who in their rush to withdraw did not have the time to throw their victims into the Mekong's current. Not a living soul could be found and the death toll was put at 89 Vietnamese. When pressed by the international press corps, Phnom Penh only offered the unconvincing explanation that those were the victims of an exchange of fire with the Viet Cong.

Chrui Changwar, April 20, 1970. An islet on the Bassac River, one of the two tributaries of the Mekong. This tributary was renamed Sông Hậu when it crosses the border into Vietnam. Many generations ago, Vietnamese Catholics founded a village on the Chrui Changwar islet. In the thick of the night, Lon Nol's troops landed on the islet and seized 800 men of the village amid the cries and pleas of their families. The prisoners were tied up and separated into small groups before being led aboard ships of the Cambodian Navy that cast anchors on the river. After the soldiers accomplished their assigned mission, the ships steamed off to the middle of the current where the prisoners were machine gunned and their bodies thrown into the Basac River. Several days later, corpses were seen floating at the ferry stop at Neak Luong.

Takeo City, May 1970. Takeo, 50 miles south of Phnom Penh, was a small city pulsing with an active commercial life where Vietnamese had been cohabiting in harmony with their Khmer neighbors for many years. But they could not escape the fate that befell their unfortunate compatriots living elsewhere in Cambodia.

Three weeks after the above mentioned incident, 150 Vietnamese males were brought to the city's high school to be detained, interrogated without being fed or taken care of. They survived on the food their family members brought in once a day in the afternoon. Then tragedy

hit them unexpectedly with the force of a hurricane. Groups of Khmer soldiers appeared from nowhere and began to shoot indiscriminately from the school yard into the classrooms where the Vietnamese were kept. The murderers then coldly left impervious to the moaning and cries of the wounded. Nobody came to their rescue and they were left to fend for themselves in such desperate condition. Groups after groups of armed men came and shot at them. Bullets pockmarked the walls. Even the already dead were shot at numerous times.

The day after the massacre, foreign reporters arrived at the scene. Corpses could be seen everywhere. Some were covered with straw mats. The few survivors and their families still milled around the place bowing and pleading to any foreigner they saw. The severely wounded lay around with their strength draining out of them by the second and the lifeless look in their eyes appeared to be pleading desperately for help.

Again, it was left for Henry Kamm a Pulitzer Prize winner for International Reporting to observe: *“In spite of the groaning that emanated from the classroom, a Khmer guard stood impassively in the school yard. He looked very young, with dark skin and curly locks of black hair. An amulet and a Buddha statue hung around his neck. He tightly grasped a brand new AK47 with its curved clip in his hands. The look in his eyes was completely cold. He was only doing his duty to stand guard there. Who was he watching over while nobody around was strong enough to walk past that narrow school gate? Facing the newsmen, though not asked, he ventured a brief explanation through the interpreters: Others shot them! Satisfied with his statement, he looked up into the sky and smiled showing a gold tooth glistening among a mouthful of white teeth. A Khmer smile infused with the chilliness of death.”* [18]

At the time when the embassies of Hanoi and the National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam were burned down by the Khmer

demonstrators and diplomatic protests fell on deaf ears, both the Vietnamese Communist and South Vietnamese governments found themselves powerless to come to the protection of their countrymen. The Vietnamese expatriates in Cambodia grew desperate. They acted like a band of ants running on a hot frying pan with the fire being stoked on by a growing wind.

Their only hope was to jump into the river current and be rescued by ships of the South Vietnamese Navy as they sailed past on their way back to Saigon after they had unloaded their relief supplies at Phnom Penh. In the new relocation centers, those unlucky souls faced an equally stark reality: war was raging on and there were no friends or relatives or houses waiting for them in Vietnam. Many of those families immigrated to Cambodia generations ago to flee from persecution against the Christians. They did not know what hometown to return to except to claim that Vietnam is their homeland.

Nguy Văn Thà, a South Vietnamese Navy officer, took part in one of those missions. The first and immediate task he and his fellow sailors had to address was to neutralize the Viet Cong and Khmer Rouges that laid ambushes along their route. In addition, they had to coordinate with the South Vietnamese Marines to reoccupy the enemy-controlled city of Neak Luong to ensure safe passage on the river for their “elephant convoys” carrying relief to the Phnom Penh regime that was killing their compatriots. On the return trip, he had to pick up those unfortunate countrymen and make sure to bring them back safely to Saigon. Not a single person of his passengers was left untouched by the tragedy that was unfolding in the land of Angkor.

Thousands of people of all age and sex were transported from their concentration camps to the pick-up areas on the riverbanks. Haggard, they stood in small groups waiting patiently for dock landing ships (LSD) to come and evacuate them. They originally came to that land empty handed and in order to save their life they had to leave with empty

hands. The houses and properties they acquired with their labor and sweat had to be handed over to the more “deserving” Khmer nationals. Such is the rationale professed by the Phnom Penh authorities.

Instead of taking a flight back to Saigon, Mr. Nhu Phong decided to sail down the Mekong on board a navy boat already bursting at the seams with Vietnamese refugees.

The war went on unabated and the overall battleground looked more and more like a leopard skin with expanding spots occupied by opposing parties i.e. North Vietnamese regulars, South Vietnamese armed forces, Khmer Rouge, and the mish mash of forces under the control of the Phnom Penh government. Road travel was totally unsafe and it was out of question to send boats to rescue the Vietnamese living in the western parts of Cambodia.

A number of them succeeded at great risk to reach the borders with Thailand only to be sent back to Cambodia. They were left stranded there to fall victim to the “ethnic cleansing” campaign several years later. Two million Khmer including those considered to have “*Khmer bodies with Viet souls*” by the Khmer Rouge also perished during that same time.

On several occasions in the past, Mr. Nhu Phong had the chance to watch many spectacular scenes on the Mekong. However, this was the first time that he came face to face with such a heart-wrenching sight at a short section of the current located near the ferry stop on the route linking Phnom Penh to Saigon.

Dawn just began over the river, yet the sun looked more to him like that of dusk and the air instead of having the freshness of a new day felt the mugginess of a sweltering afternoon. The morning clouds resembled evening ones tinged with the warm colors of the setting sun while in the river the water mixed with alluvium took on a darker red because of the blood of the corpses drifting silently down the current

in droves. In a short time, Mr. Nhu Phong counted a couple of hundred bodies filing by before his eyes including tiny corpses of babies or of adults with long hairs apparently of women. He wondered whether he was looking at the fate reserved for all of his fellow countrymen in Cambodia? And the Mekong, was it the predestined passageway for them to use on their return to their homeland?

Those tragic scenes that sowed distress in the conscience of the whole world were and are unfolding under plain daylight in the 20th century. Nobody even took the pain to cover them up as they were being recorded by the cameras of the foreign news media. Violence was on the rise and spreading. An angry world voices its condemnation. The leaders in Cambodia kept silent, not uttering a single word of apology or condolence. That country's intelligentsia, if not actively participating in the pogrom, then quietly adopted an incomprehensibly detached attitude. Generally speaking, the Khmer people are a divided lot. They are of one mind, however, when it comes to their hatred for the Vietnamese.

A Cambodian teacher at a religious school in Phnom Penh who attended the Lycée Chasseloup Laubat in Saigon stated to the foreign reporters:

– You journalists can never fully understand the historic interactions between Cambodia and Vietnam. You cannot imagine how the Yuon oppressed us over the centuries. The atrocities you are now witnessing are nothing compared to what they did to us in the past.

Then he repeated the story reported by the French of the cruel mandarin of the Huế court named Trương Minh Giảng who had helpless Cambodians buried alive or use their skulls to make a tripod for cooking.

He added:

– We cannot live in peace as long as there remains a single Yuon living in our midst. Do you know the number of Vietcong infiltrators living among the Vietnamese community in Phnom Penh? We have to drain the lake to capture the fish - the fish with snake heads ready to bite us at any moment. How can we just cross our arms and wait for them to come and cut our heads or bury us alive? To survive our people must defend themselves. There is no other choice. Then he spoke in French in an attempt to reassert what he just said: “*Tuer les Yuon – ennemis pour ne pas être tué soi-même!*” or Kill the Yuon enemy if you don’t want to be killed!

Right after he finished speaking, not Mr. Nhu Phong but a reporter of Le Monde retorted:

– It does not mean that you have the right to decapitate all innocent and harmless Vietnamese...

The Boats or Mercy eventually brought Mr. Nhu Phong and the Vietnamese refugees to safe harbor in Saigon.

Finally, after slaughtering the unarmed Vietnamese expatriates without any difficulty, Lon Nol’s “holy” army marched into real combat. They actually had to come face to face with and become easy targets to the real firepower of their opponents, the Communist North Vietnamese. Their battalions and regiments, whether protected by the amulets or Buddha statues or not, were in turn annihilated by their foes until the whole army collapsed.

At the same Olympic Stadium where he launched the anti-Vietnamese campaign five years ago, General of the Army “Dark Father” Lon Nol boarded a plane to flee while Sirik Matak and Long Boret chose to stay behind and face the Khmer Rouge firing squad. The suicidal genocide that lasted for the next four years had claimed their first victims! The green fields where the sweet palm trees grew were

turned into Killing Fields covered with human skulls and white bones.

Twice a white alligator appeared in the river section near Phnom Penh – twice momentous events took place in Cambodia. The first time was in 1970 when Lon Nol instigated a coup d'état to overthrow the monarchy headed by Prince Sihanouk. The second time in 1975 when the Khmer Rouge advanced into Phnom Penh putting an end to Cambodia's Republic. Both turned out to be blood-soaked occurrences: the blood of Vietnamese and that of more than 2 million Cambodians.

White crocodiles are sacred animals in Cambodia's mythology. They do not have lacrimal glands.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE PLA BEUK FESTIVAL NEAR THE DEEP POOL OF LUANG PRABANG

*Extinction is forever,
endangered means we still have time
Sea World San Diego*

Soon after attending the somewhat productive conference “The Mekong in Danger” held for the first time in the United States with the attendance of the International Rivers Network and Cambodia, I was already making arrangements to fly to Thailand on Dr. Chamsak’s invitation. The Thai professor was among the first to send a cable from Bangkok in support of the “The Declaration of the Mekong”.

I first met him four years ago. Since then Dr. Chamsak has remained a staunch environmentalist. With the cooperation of the Chiang Khong villagers, Dr. Chamsak actively promoted and organized the workshop of the Wild Life Fund of Thailand with the participation of the four member countries of the Mekong River Commission namely Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam. This workshop’s immediate

objective was to preserve the Pla Beuks as a “flagship species” with the ultimate goal: the conservation of the Mekong.

To this day, the Pla Beuks still retain a mythical aura about them. This giant variety of catfish is unique to the Mekong. They are given the scientific name *Pangasianodon gigas* of the Siluriformes order and Pangasiidae family. The Pla Beuks are considered a rare species in the group of 25 fresh water catfishes of Asia. Their peculiar body has a flat back and curved belly, with no scales, extremely low eyes, and toothless. They subsist on a diverse food diet. The Wels that live in the Danube River are the only other species of catfish comparable to the Pla Beuk in the world. They can grow up to 4 meters long and weigh 180 kilograms.

Dr. Chamsak remarked:

– I believe that the Pla Beuk is running the risk of becoming an endangered species.

“Endangered means we still have time, Extinction is forever”. That thought was chiseled in my mind during a trip I took with Bé Tur to the Sea World in San Diego a long time ago.

Experts in ichthyology of the Mekong River Commission maintain that the Pla Beuks inhabit the downstream section of that river in Cambodia. When the temperature in the current changes, they cross the Khone Waterfall and migrate in droves upstream to Ubon Ratchatani, Nong Khai, Luang Prabang, past Chiang Khong to Chiang Saen. They then enter the Shan State in Myanmar before reaching China. This 2,000 kilometer long journey ends at Erhai Lake by the old Dali Citadel near the source of the Mekong. It is here that the Pla Beuks spawn their eggs during the months of April and May.

Just a few years back, Thai biologists started artificial breeding in

a successful effort to preserve the Pla Beuks. First, the fish of both sexes are injected with hormones before about 8 to 10 kilograms of the female eggs are fertilized with the male sperms. The baby Pla Beuks called “fry” are bred in small pools until they reach the right size. As soon as they are able to fend for themselves, they are released into the river. Over the last seven years, 20,000 Pla Beuks were bred in such a manner. The remaining question is: how much longer will the Mekong’s habitat stay hospitable to the continued existence of the fish?

On the other hand, the peasants in Laos and Thailand believe that the Pla Beuks dwell in deep caves in the stretch of the Mekong near Luang Prabang. They say that in mid-April, during the Songkhran Festival or the Thai New Year, not only the Pla Beuks but also the ‘genii’ come out of the caves.

For this reason, the fishermen always conduct a prayer to the ‘genii’ before and after each fishing trip. They claim that on Festival Day, the Pla Beuks assemble at the deep pool near Luang Prabang to select those lucky enough to make the trip to Erhai Lake to spawn and those that will stay behind to become prey to the fishermen. Each year, about one month prior to the Pimay Festival in April, the inhabitants of Chiang Mai in Thailand and Luang Prabang in Laos together celebrate the Pla Beuk Festival. To this day, the Had Krai Village in Chiang Khong Province is still reputed to be the best location to catch the Pla Beuks because it is located at a section of the current where there are no big stone formations and the bed is flat sparing the fishing nets from being torn.

During the fishing season, groups of spotters in Had Krai stand on bridges from dawn to dusk to look out for wave patterns on the river current that point to the presence of Pla Beuks. The moment they catch sight of the fish, they immediately throw their traditional “mong lai” nets into the water to catch them.

During the Pla Beuk Festival, fishermen of Had Krai village still

practice Brahmin rites on their boats. The boat owners would grab a small amount of rice in their hands. If the number of grains turns out even, it means that the 'genii' of fishing wants a sacrifice of pork meat. In case it is an odd number, chicken will do. Each time a Pla Beuk is caught, the 'genii' will be treated to a sumptuous meal of cooked sticky rice, chicken or pork meat, and bean wine. Following that ceremony, the villagers on the Thai and Lao sides of the Mekong take part in beauty contests and boat racing to add an air of festivity to the day.

People in Had Krai Village know full well the time the Pla Beuks will arrive to go looking for them. In recent years, due to fierce competition from other villages, they can no longer afford to wait for the Pla Beuks to swim by their place but have to take their boats farther downstream the river to fish.

It does not make much difference whether you ask a Lao or Thai fisherman. To a man, they believe that the Pla Beuk is a sacred fish and if you happen to catch a Pla Beuk with many black spots on its back you will be very lucky and have a good fishing season that year.

In 1990 alone, the villagers of Had Krai caught a total of 69 Pla Beuks. Eight years later, that number dropped drastically to a single one without any spot on its back. Since then, their catches are growing poorer and poorer.

In the old days, the Mekong current was so placid and undisturbed that from Had Krai you could discern the characteristic wave patterns made by schools of various fish that swim by. Things have changed now. Boats of all size and shape crowd the water. Some equipped with sonar and modern nets are constantly prowling the current to catch any fish they can, including the Pla Beuks.

Many worrisome things are taking place in the Mekong Subregion: extensive cutting down of the rainforests; gigantic hydroelectric dams in

Yunnan retaining the water upstream; and China's plan to use dynamites to blast away the river's rock formations, whirlpools, waterfalls, and deepen its bed to allow big ships to navigate up or down the current.

Together, all these developments produce a series of snowballing impacts on the fish population: first, the reduction in spawning habitats due to the disappearance of underwater caves and second, the inability of some fish species to survive because of sudden changes in temperature and flow rate of the current. Consequently, we are witnessing at the present time a severe drop in the fish catch from the river. Regrettably, it is an indisputable fact that the fish provide the main protein source for the inhabitants of the Mekong Region. It is not an exaggeration to say that Rice and Fish form the backbone of the Mekong's economy.

Only about five years back, with a quick glance at the fish baskets the fishermen brought to the market to sell, you could easily count 6 to 7 different kinds of fish. Now, the fish in the baskets are not only fewer in number but also in variety. There are less fish to be caught yet the technology to catch them is being improved all the time! Fishermen use bigger boats and larger nets (so large they can almost be deployed across the width of the current) with tinier eyes to make sure they do not miss any. Such a "search and destroy" fishing method will very soon wipe out the fish population of the Mekong and transform that river into a pipeline for industrial waste discharged by the factories in Yunnan.

With only the Manwan Dam in operation, we can already see a noticeable drop in the Mekong's water level. And this dam is not even the largest in the series of dams to be built. Who can tell what the whole picture will really look like when all the dams in the Mekong Cascades in Yunnan will go into operation? The Pla Beuks require a water depth of at least three meters to survive. If no preventive measures are taken, they will slowly but surely go the way of the dinosaurs.

We can safely add that the survival of the Pla Beuks, the entire fish

population and inhabitants of the Mekong is now in the hands of big brother China. In the old days, when threatened by drought, people would perform a Rain Dance or say a Rain Prayer. Now, they simply pray that water will be released from the dams up north.

On the side of the Conference, Dr. Chamsak introduced me to Boonrean Jinarat. This 52 year old fisherman from Had Krai did not graduate from any university or make any claim of being a fishery expert. Twelve years ago, when he found out that the Pla Beuks were threatened with extinction he immediately sprang into action and founded the Club for the Preservation of the Pla Beuk. It was Jinarat who inspired Dr. Chamsak to organize the Conference.

As we talked, Jinarat confided in me that just a few years ago, he could not entertain the thought that one day the Pla Beuks could disappear from the Mekong. He absolutely rejected the prospect that future generations would not be able to see a live Pla Beuk in its natural habitat and could only learn about it from the tales about the Mekong.

In 1996, with Dr. Chamsak's help, Jinarat launched a fund raising campaign that brought in over two million Bahts or approximately US\$ 5,000. They bought five Pla Beuks from the Had Krai fishermen and released them back into the Mekong with the naïve expectation that they would survive and propagate. To their dismay, the fish got caught again soon afterward.

Undaunted, Jinarat went ahead with the project of digging a large lake by the Mekong bank to rear Pla Beuks. This audacious idea of creating an ecosystem hospitable to the fish similar to that of Sea World in America unfortunately did not work. The lake they dug was not large enough to contain the volume of water the Pla Beuks need. Those that survived were all sterile.

Traditionally, the catching of Pla Beuks was only done for ceremonial

purposes during the Festivals or for local consumption. Starting in the 1980's, greedy traders converged on the region and began to buy Pla Beuks to sell to specialty restaurants that served rare meat in Bangkok. Their price kept on soaring at times reaching 500 Bahts per kilo. With rising demand and seemingly no ceiling to the price the fish could command, the fishermen went on a feverish hunt for the Pla Beuks.

Unfortunately, as I predicted, the quartet at the four-party Conference on the Mekong quickly became mired in discord and started to play a dissonant concerto. When Jinarat introduced the idea of imposing a fishing quota for the Pla Beuks, it was shot down on the spot by the Lao representative. Vietnam was content to attend the discussions as a passive observer.

The only significant outcome from that Conference was a paper project to establish at Chiang Khong, Thailand a Research and Study Center of Mekong Giant Catfish and Fish in the Mekong River.

In Dr. Chamsak's opinion, the Thai government failed to show any interest in the fate of the Pla Beuks. The fishermen were also divided on this issue. The final understanding they reached was: Jinarat could carry on with his efforts to save the Pla Beuks if he so wished while the fishermen could continue catching the Pla Beuks if they so desired. The law of the jungle reigned supreme!

Referring to the Vietnamese delegation, Dr. Chamsak bitterly commented:

– Why did Vietnam choose to participate as a mere observer? Do the Vietnamese want to pretend that the Pla Beuks do not live in the Mekong Delta? It's the same as if we claim that the Eastern Sarus Cranes and the Oriental Darters, Lesser Adjutant Storks, Painted Storks, only exist in the birds sanctuaries of Vietnam.

Chamsak added:

– I happen to believe that the Pla Beuks, Irrawady Dolphins, Cranes and Storks at Tam Nông Bird Sanctuary are not personal properties of any individuals or groups. They must be regarded as the common denominator to measure the safety level of the entire eco-system of the Mekong and its Basin. We must all join in the preservation of the river and not stick to the motto: “God for all and everybody for himself”!

I did not feel offended but somewhat put to shame by Dr. Chamsak’s severe remarks. He went on to offer a practical, comprehensive view of the entire region that extends beyond national boundaries:

– In Vietnam, to protect the bird sanctuaries, it is not enough to issue administrative edicts prohibiting hungry peasants from exploiting the sanctuaries’ natural resources. Likewise, we cannot just proclaim a ban and expect the Lao or Thai fishermen to stop fishing the Pla Beuks which is a traditional way of living handed down to them by past generations.

Being a good professor of economics, Dr. Chamsak was not content to voice criticism. He also ventured a solution:

– It is not fair to sit in an office in Bangkok and blame the fishermen in Chiang Khong or Had Krai for the killing of the Pla Beuks. The issue is finding ways to help them, to compensate them for their financial losses when they agree to limit catching Pla Beuks of a certain size - say not less than 1 meter in length - and to two months of the year.

To add flesh to Jinarat’s dream, Dr. Chamsak passionately talked about his future project:

– The Center for the Preservation of the Pla Beuks will house an aquarium not only for the Pla Beuks but also for the Irrawady Dolphins and the abundant variety of other fish in the Mekong. A kind of River World that can attract tourists. In that way, we will have enough money

to compensate the fishermen. What's more, they will also receive a share of the revenue from the restaurants and souvenirs or gift shops at the Center. I heard that a young Vietnamese American engineer in the United States has posted a similar project on the website of the Mekong Forum. A proposal to start a tourism center to finance the preservation works at the Tam Nông Bird Sanctuary.

I knew that young engineer well. He happens to be Bé Tu's older brother.

Dr. Chamsak switched to a more intimate tone and said:

– It'd be a sad day when the Pla Beuks, Irrawady Dolphins, Eastern Sarus Cranes, Oriental Darters, Lesser Adjutant Storks, and Painted Storks disappear from the Mekong. From a larger perspective, their demise is also a “red alert” for the entire fragile eco-system of that river extending from Tibet to the East Sea.

I was greatly moved by the grave but optimistic view expressed by Dr. Chamsak at the close of the Conference. The Thai professor succinctly affirmed:

– “Does the Mekong have a future? Yes! Even though time is running out. If all of us get our act together we should be able to conserve the Mekong River.”

“All of us” here means the 60 million or so inhabitants of the Mekong Subregion. The Conference of the Wild Life Fund of Thailand left an indelible impression on Bé Tu and me. Watching the enthusiasm and dedication the Cambodian, Lao, and Thai peasants displayed at the conference; I thought that it is high time for the farmers and fishermen of the Mekong Delta to stand tall on their feet and courageously raise their voice in defense of the Mekong and its Delta, their home.

Before returning to the United States, I paid a visit to Laos for the fourth time to celebrate the Pimay New Year Festival. The first stop of my trip was Luang Prabang not Vientiane, the capital. According to Mr. Nhu Phong, to truly appreciate the meaning of the Pimay Festival, one must celebrate it at the ancient capital Luang Prabang, a city rich in history but not too steeped in its aristocratic past and distant from the common people.

Luang Prabang or Mùòng Luông was chosen by king Fa Ngoum in the 14th century to be the capital of the Lan Xang Kingdom, the land of a million elephants. Prabang is the name of the most sacred Buddha statue in Laos while Fa Ngoum is revered as the mythical, greatest and first monarch of Laos. Their history books say that Fa Ngoum was a Lao prince who sought asylum at the Angkor court but still aspired to reestablish his kingdom. He later returned to his country at the head of an army of Khmer soldiers to conquer and unify the dissenting tribes and found the mighty kingdom of Lan Xang.

Luang Prabang, formerly known as Chawa or Java, was a land covered by lush green tropical trees with the center of town dominated by the Phousi Hill. At an elevation of 300 meters, it sits at a river bend where the Mekong meets its tributary Nam Khan.

The climate in Luang Prabang is unique in the land. The sky appears constantly clouded by a thin smoke. People say that the smoke comes from the burning of forest lands started by the Lao Theung (Kha) and Lao Soung who practice slash-and-burn farming. Luckily, the city is often fanned by a cool and humid breeze blowing in from the Mekong.

It seems as if everything in Luang Prabang has a special air about it. The products found in the city like woven fabrics, fruits, and vegetable are the best in the land and worthy to be chosen as tributes to the royal court. It is believed that the water and special quality of the soil bordered by the four rivers the Mekong, Nam Ou, Nam Sang, and

Nam Khan have something to do with its fruits and vegetable tasting so good. Even the sand at this location looks more golden.

During the Dry Season, the water level in the river dips so low that it lays bare large stretches of the sand covered bed. This is the occasion for the villagers to rush to the place and prospect for gold nuggets buried in the sand. Several young attractive Lao girls are taking a bath in the river. Half soaked in water, their wet dresses stick close to their bodies revealing their supple, healthy and attractive curvatures.

The nuggets are purchased by Chinese merchants who possess a special method to process them into pure gold. They are combined with mercury and squeezed into blocs in pieces of cloth. Then a welder's torch is used to burn away the mercury leaving only pure gold behind. If lucky, those occasional prospectors working all day in the water can bring home about 600 kips, the Lao national currency. Converted, it is worth less than US\$ 1.00 but still six times their average daily earning.

More than 130 years ago, the French exploration group led by Francis Garnier and Doudart de Lagrée left Vientiane for Luang Prabang where their compatriot and fellow explorer Henri Mouhot was once given a warm reception. They weighed anchor on April 4th, 1867 to embark on a 150 kilometer long journey. The trip was perilous on account of the whirlpools that dotted the current flanked by inaccessible mountain ranges. At times, they had to unload the ship's cargo and transport it by land to allow the ship to be pulled by hired hands upstream the river. They finally arrived in Luang Prabang 20 days later completely exhausted and with bleeding feet. The group was able to take a long rest as the capital city was in full celebration. Luang Prabang at that time was a protectorate of both the Hué and Bangkok courts and a thriving commercial center.

On this trip, the French exploration group succeeded in locating the shallow grave Henri Mouhot was buried in six years before. It was

situated 2 kilometers from the Phanom hamlet on a stiff slope by the Nam Khan River.

The Phanom hamlet, to the east of Luang Prabang, consisted of over 100 families belonging to the Lu tribe. For three centuries, they are known for the distinctive colors and patterns of their traditionally woven silk or cotton shawls (pha biang) and sarongs (pha sin). In the old days, one had to wait for a market meet to be able to buy such a shawl. Now, in the “Renovation” era, they are readily available at booths erected alongside the road that ply fakes made in Thailand to sell to the credulous and easy to please tourists.

Let’s turn back the clock and retrace Mouhot’s footsteps as he treaded through the ancient jungles of the Asian continent and along the Mekong’s current. While hunting in the jungle for rare insects, Mouhot was completely transfixed as he unexpectedly came upon the ruins of the magnificent Angkor Monuments in 1860. At first, Mouhot could not bring himself to believe that Angkor was built by the ancestors of the cruel and mediocre Khmer he encountered. He wrote: “... *the ancient people of Cambodia who have left all these traces of civilization, and that of their successors, who appear only to have known how to destroy, never to reconstruct.*” [22]

From Angkor, Mouhot continued northward along the Mekong and entered Laos. On October 15, 1861 he was still determined to continue his lonely journey through the virgin rainforests infested with bands of running elephants and growling tigers. At night, the place resounded with the chirping of nocturnal birds and howling of gibbons. That young French biologist and adventurous explorer did not entertain any illusion he would bring his endeavor to a successful end. He penned these prophetic lines in his diary: “If I must die here, where so many wanderers have left their bones, I shall be ready when my hour comes.”

And that fateful rendezvous with destiny came. Not long afterwards,

Mouhot fell victim to bouts of jungle fevers which were in fact spells of malignant malaria. In those days, the study of tropical diseases was not yet part of the curriculum at the Faculté de Médecine in Paris and quinine still unknown. If you came down with malignant malaria your number is up. On October 19th, 1861, Mouhot wrote: “*Attacked by fever...*” Then ten days after on October 29th, he wrote these last words: “*Have pity on me, oh my God...!*” Mouhot breathed his last on the 10th of the following month. His remains were given a hasty burial on the bank of the Nam Khan River. By the side of his grave stood his lone and loyal companion, a dog named Tin Tin. The animal refused to eat or leave his master’s grave and just howled.

It was not until six years later in 1867 that a tomb was built for him by the exploration group led by French explorers Francis Garnier and Doudart de Lagrée. In a way, it was a memorial for the dead and at the same time a living reminder to the six members of the group that they could be stricken by death like Mouhot at any time.

As a matter of fact, two of the six who stood by Mouhot’s grave on that day passed away a few years later. Their leader, Doudart de Lagrée, lost his life to liver abscess, also a tropical disease. Though Francis Garnier survived the Mekong expedition, he was killed one year later in an ambush led by Luru Vĩnh Phúc’s Giặc Cờ Đen, a group of Chinese Black Flag’s bandits, at Ô Châu Giáy near Hanoi.

A nice surprise awaited the group when they met Mouhot’s pet Tin Tin at a Lao family’s house in Luang Prabang. The animal did not have the slightest idea who those white friends of his former master were and did not hesitate to rush out and attack them. More than five decades of war caused Mouhot’s tomb to fall into disrepair. In 1990, restoration works were done with the addition of a plaque sent from Mouhot’s birthplace with the simple but meaningful inscription “*La ville de Montbéliard fière de son enfant – 1990*” [The town of Montbéliard, proud of her son – 1990]. These days, throngs of tourists come to visit

Mouhot's resting place every year.

In his book "The Mekong River Expedition", Milton Osborne observed that Mouhot, Doudart de Lagrée, Francis Garnier...were fine representatives of the educated generation of Europe's youth of the 19th century. It was a period characterized by forbearance and stoicism. They were not only brave and enthused by the call to explore unknown lands but also firmly believed in the "mission civilisatrice" or "civilizing mission" France had to carry to the primitive people in the Far East. [25]

Standing on the slope of the Nam Khan River by Mouhot's tomb 130 years later, I looked at the water flowing placidly by in the Mekong. I marveled at all the things that this river of history and of time has beheld throughout history. For a moment I was saddened by the thought that it may be the last of the rivers too! People also call it the river of love and happiness. To borrow a line from the song "River of No Return" we can describe the river as "Sometimes it's peaceful and sometimes wild and free". When wild, it unleashes destructive power and untold misery. Its current brings life as much as it sows death. It is and will always be an enigmatic unknown that attracts people with its mysterious force.

That river had been associated with tragedies during the last half century of warfare. Now, in peacetime, it is being romanticized in the campaign of "Ecotourism in 2000".

My long-time friend, Mr. Nhu Phong, insists that through the course of the war, this river constantly invokes in him memories of horror and hope and teaches him that the two greatest truths in life are Love and Death. As the renowned author Rudyard Kipling said it so well:

*"Two things greater than all things are
The first is love and the second war"*

From time immemorial, Luang Prabang has always been around. Rain or shine, it never ceases to reflect itself on the water of the Mekong even when this capital was devastated by waves of foreign invaders.

The hundreds of pagodas, small or large, that adorned the city were reduced by two third during the 18th century. The Royal Palace we see today is not of ancient construction. It was rebuilt by the French in 1909 using French architects and workers brought in from Vietnam and Thailand. The French colonial administration funded the construction project as a gift to the Lao king.

As far as I am concerned, the charm of Luang Prabang is not found in its old palaces but rather in the thousands of Buddha statues displayed in them as well as in the ancient temples that had escaped the devastation of war.

According to Mr. Nhu Phong, acclaimed as the reporter of reporters, the Golden Buddha statue Prabang has a second name Lopburi Buddha. This is a 12th century statue of a Buddha standing in the Abhayamudra position with the right hand held up and the left palm extending forward as if to offer blessings and protection or to ward off all uncertainties and fright. It bears a marked influence of the Khmer culture.

The Communists took total control of Laos in 1975. This country of 4 million inhabitants has the lowest population density in Asia. For this reason, Mao Tse Tung once entertained the idea of sending Chinese immigrants to settle in Laos. In its northern mountainous region, there are places with only five inhabitants per square kilometer. Ranked one of the poorest countries in the world, Laos however is rich in its racial diversity. Its 68 ethnic groups are divided into three main groups: Lao Lum (the lowland Lao), Lao Theung or Kha (the highland Lao), and Lao Soung or Hmong and Yao (the mountain Lao).

King Savang Vathana, the last Lao monarch, was an affable and

upstanding person. He graduated from the *École de Science Politique de Paris* and was known for his vast knowledge and love for reading. This well-loved king was arrested and sent with his queen and crown prince to various reeducation camps in Sam Neua where he eventually passed away. Branded as “pakitan” or criminal puppets, soldiers and civil servants of the royal government did not fare any better at the hands of their captors, the Pathet Lao. From that time on, monarchy became past history in Laos.

A French journalist once mocked that the word “socialism” in the slogan “Forward to Socialism” used by the Lao’s People Revolutionary Party was actually an abbreviation of the phrase “socialism made in Vietnam”. To prove him wrong and assert Laos’ sovereignty vis à vis Vietnam, the Lao President Mr. Kaysone Phomvihane avoided to describe Laos’ reformation with the Vietnamese moniker “Renovation” but called it “Chin Thanakaan” or “New Idea” instead. He also chose to label socialism by the Lao word “Sangkhom Nyom” or “Just and Perfect Society”.

He could call it by any names or be as skillful with semantics as he wished, the fact still remained that he could not outdo his “Kèo Đèng” or comrade Viet Cong. And he could not deviate from communist Vietnam’s model either. It means that the bamboo curtain must be rolled up and the red carpet rolled out to welcome foreign investors. Naturally, among them one would see Americans with their ubiquitous laptops in hand. Just a few years back, they had to leave this country in shame. Their return is referred to as the “*Ultime revanche des Américains/ or The ultimate revenge of the Americans*” by a reporter from *Le Monde*.

To achieve that “Sangkhom Nyom” or Just and Perfect Society, the picturesque capital city is being prostituted into a hybrid place to cater to foreign visitors. The Royal Palace was renamed The National Museum. It still stands on Phothisarath Street running along the taller bank of the Mekong. Under the monarchy, guests of the Royal Family

used to sail to this spot for a visit to the royal palace.

The palaces are still there but their former occupants are nowhere to be found. Only the gifts the world leaders presented to the Lao monarchs are being displayed in the reception hall: a hunting rifle with an encrusted mother of pearl butt from Leonid Brezhnev, a tea set from Mao Tse Tung, a specimen of a moon rock brought back by the spaceship Apollo II and presented by an American President.... I was most interested in a mural titled “*A Day in Luang Prabang*” the French artist Alex de Fontereau painted in the Throne Hall. It depicted the activities in the city on a pleasant day over half a century ago. The mural’s beauty was represented in the lines of a poem written by the lady poet Vân Đài in 1942:

*Chuông chiều ngân trong gió
Tháp núi ẩn màn sương
Lầu vua thu bóng nhỏ
Chùa bụt lạnh hơi sương*

An imperfect translation into English would read as follows:

*In the wind linger the evening bell’s chimes
Behind the veil of fog the mountaintop hides
In the upper chamber the king curls up for the night
In the pagoda the Buddha shivers with the mist.*

Though UNESCO has classified Luang Prabang as a World Heritage Site in 1995, in the name of “Bringing Progress to Laos” this city runs the risk of being irrevocably transformed by the invading hordes of tourists that disembark from Nong Khai, Thailand.

To make things worse, plans are under way to build a highway connecting Vientiane to Luang Prabang then all the way to Kunming at the southern border of China. From Nong Khai the travelers will cross

the Mittaphap Bridge to Vientiane before going on their way to Luang Prabang. I fully realize that the charm of that ancient capital resides in its glistening ancient temples, the monks in their bright yellow robes, the shaded streets lined with lush green trees and pervaded with the scent of incense and flowers, the chirpings of birds, children playing in the streets without having to mind the car traffic, and people moving around at their unhurried pace.... Alas, there will come a day when all this will end up as distant memories of the past.

Suddenly the idea came to me that the Mekong is like a pole which carries Laos along its length and offers this country a gate to the outside world at each of its extremities. All year round, the Lao look at the Mekong as their source of life and happiness. Without it, they would be like listless bodies walking around like zombies.

Not only in Luang Prabang, but all along the Mekong's current, the existence of the Lao is inextricably interwoven with that body of water. It is the irreplaceable place to hold the most important holidays of the Dry and Rainy Seasons in this land of the Asian Monsoon where the Dry Season runs from May to October and the Dry one from November to April.

During the high-water season, people celebrate the Bun Xuông Hua Festival and converge on the river banks to watch boats racing past the old royal barge. At nightfall when the celebration complete with flower garlands and paper lanterns begins, young boys and girls release tiny boats into the water. Thousands of them, with their candles twinkling float in procession down the current in the dark of the night. In the dry season, at the stretch of the river where the bed is dry, it's time to observe the Bun Bǎng Phay or Festival of Prayers. Bamboo fences as high as 10 meters are erected on the river banks for groups of young people of both sexes to meet, sing, and dance. At the end, they put bamboo firecrackers (bǎng phay) on elevated frames then set them off.

However, the most important holiday in the year is still Bun Pimay

or the Lao New Year. It takes place on a date very different from that of the New Year in the lunar or solar calendar. The explanation could be found in the complex way the Lao keep time. They stipulate that the year is calculated based on the revolution of the earth around the sun while the month is based on that of the moon around the earth. Ordinarily, the Lao year starts in the second half of November or first week of December of the solar calendar. The strange and difficult thing to understand is that Bun Pimay is not celebrated on the first day of the Lao year but about five months afterwards - around mid-April of the solar calendar. It coincides with the end of the Dry Season in Laos when the weather is extremely hot - usually the hottest period of the year.

So, the “Pimay Festival” or the New Year celebration is actually the Bun Đườn Hạ or May Festival that is held five months after the start of the year. Again, it falls on Mr. Nhu Phong to offer this interesting explanation: the Lao by nature are gentle, simple, and easy-going but at the same time particularly “astute”. They notice that if the New Year festivities take place at the time called for by the Lao calendar then the nights will be longer than the days and it would not be right to start the year while darkness prevails. Darkness symbolizes loneliness and unhappiness. On the contrary, starting from April of the solar calendar, the days start to be longer than the nights. The Lao choose to observe their New Year at that time to welcome in light with all its goodness and the expectation that brightness, happiness and good fortune will knock at their doors.

In thinking that way, the Lao do not spare any efforts to fully enjoy themselves during the first three days of the New Year if not longer. Each of the first three days of the New Year bears a particular meaning:

The first day, Mu Sang Khan Pay: the “Spirit” of the previous year ascends to the heaven. The Vietnamese likewise have the “*Ông Táo*” the Spirit of the Kitchen that reports to the Heaven on the 23 of

December of the lunar calendar.

The second day, Mu Nao: the day bridging the old and the new years.

The third day, Mu Sang Khan Kune: the day the genii of the New Year takes over from the old one.

The diplomat and reporter Phạm Trọng Nhân, Mr. Như Phong's friend, who worked for the Bách Khoa Magazine before 1975 and once served as the Vietnamese ambassador to Laos wittily affirmed that there could not be a "transfer of office" for the simple reason that the Mu Nao has already elapsed before the new genii comes to take over the duty of the old one.

In Laos, the Pimay's observance is somewhat similar to that in Vietnam. Before the Tết, people clean their houses from top to bottom in order to remove all the dirt and dust, darkness and misfortunes of the past to welcome a happier, brighter year.

On the Pimay day, the Lao put on their best clothes then head to the temples to take part in the cleansing of the Buddha statues with scented water and pray for a safer and more prosperous year. Afterward, they spend their time visiting and wishing each other well. Those who are burdened with personal problems try to conceal them behind a serene face.

On the second day, the Lao get together for group celebrations. They play drums, the traditional khèn... while the "phoubao and phousao" or the boys and girls tease and throw water at each other. Should anybody act in an uncouth manner, he or she could be forgiven on this special occasion:

Ơ Sáo, Ơ Sáo

Oh! Girl. Oh! Girl

Sáo dù bản đáy
Ái khó xị đè

What hamlet are you from
 Let me do it, do it!

Having to face such a rowdy lad, the poor shy girl just blushes and steals away. Next, the revelers head for the riverside to release animals in a rite of religious compassion. They free fish kept in containers into the current or let loose birds from cages to let them fly up to the bright blue sky. Along the Mekong or Mae Nam Khong meaning the Mother River in Lao, they compete to build sand castles on which they stick the animal symbol of the new year to pray for health, longevity, and as much money as the sand on the riverbanks...

Equally solemn is the ceremony known as the Pou Gneu Gna Pneu the Lao observe to honor their ancestors. The procession called Nang San Khang snakes through the streets with the participants wearing masks or carrying skulls while performing the lion dance. Whenever the people see the king pass by, they will kneel down then spray water on him to wish him a long life. Meanwhile, the crown prince who accompanies the king is set upon by beautiful young girls (Phou Sao) who tear up his clothes in a spirit of congeniality and merriment. That year, a beautiful girl smeared soot on Mr. Nhu Phong's face but spared him from having his clothes torn.

Probably the Lao people will never be able to forget the Pimays in Luang Prabang when their king was still around. The regal elephant procession proceeded down the streets to take the monarch and his royal family to the Vat May pagoda.

Once there, they performed the water purification ceremony for the Buddha statue that was taken down from its pedestal to the courtyard's ground for the Phun Lin dragon to spray water on it.

The monarch also paid a visit to the Pak Ou cave located 20 kilometers north of Luang Prabang during the Pimay Festival. From the

river, visitors would climb steps dug into the hillside to reach this cool and humid cave. Thousands of Buddha statues in all size and shape are displayed in the Tham Thing / Lower Cave and Tham Phung / Upper Cave. It was said that prior to an attack on Luang Prabang in the 16th century, the people hid those statues in the Pak Ou Cave to protect them from the foreign invaders. Four centuries have gone by since then!

By land or by river route, people flock to the cave to bathe the Buddha statues with scented water. Time has inevitably left its marks on them in the form of cracks or mossy growths. The only thing that has not changed is the imperturbable smile of the Buddha!

Anywhere I go, I encounter a gentle, simple and kind people who show no taste for struggle or competition. Those who prefer a simplistic explanation believe that the Lao's practice of Buddhism, Laos' national religion, over the centuries has brought about this remarkable result. Nevertheless, a logical question would then come to mind: what about the Siamese and Khmer? For centuries, both have been living with the same merciful teachings of the Buddha and Buddhism is also their national religion.

The Thai treacherously produced a band of ruthless pirates who sowed terror and horror as they raped and robbed the Vietnamese boat people in the East Sea. On their part, the cruel and violent Khmer never let go of a chance to decapitate their countless Vietnamese victims. The “Mùa Thỏ Dậy”, the Uprising Season of the Khmer Krom, will remain forever a terrifying obsession for the Vietnamese living in the provinces near the Cambodian and Vietnamese borders.

The question I ask myself does not allow for an easy answer. However, one thing I am certain of is that religion cannot be the lone contributing factor that brought about the gentle nature of the Lao. As a result, to borrow Carl Gustav Jung's terminology, we must take into consideration other factors like history, anthropology... to account for their collective unconscious, their not easily alterable second nature.



Malaleuca woods and Ecotour in Mekong Delta [photo by Nguyễn Thạch]



Mother of the Mekong Delta [photo by Nguyễn Thạch]

*Prof. Võ Tòng Xuân
in a barren field
caused by saline
intrusion at the
Gia Rai District,
Mekong Delta
[source: Võ Tòng
Xuân, University of
An Giang]*



*The Mekong drained dry, the scorched earth, the environmental refugee: Mr. Thạch Thanh, an inhabitant of a region impacted by severe salinization, Mỹ Xuyên District, Sóc Trăng Province, sat forlorn by his parched, arid field. “I feel hopeless with this sweltering heat. Unable to farm the land, many have left for the Eastern region to earn a living.”
[source: VNExpress: 03.11.2016]*



Ba Tri Beach, Bến Tre chased by the ocean waves the sand buried the trees and white shells of dead clams, mussels were scattered all over the dry and hot sandy beach [photo by Nguyễn Hữu Thiện]



Boat on Hậu River



Tam Nông Bird Sanctuary



Crane Mating Dance, [source: photo by Nguyễn Văn Hùng]



Crane Feeding on the lookout for their safety [source: photo by Nguyễn Văn Hùng]



Crane Unison Call [source: photo by Nguyễn Văn Hùng]



Floating Houses in Mekong Delta



Floating Market Cái Răng on Hậu River



Life scene in the Mekong Delta during the “High Water Season” in 2000



Civilization of Jars, water everywhere yet people still show a need for these Jars



Tomb above water in Đồng Tháp [photo by Kỳ Hùng]



Crossing the Hậu River to visit construction site of the Cần Thơ Bridge



Timid little boy in Năm Căn, the southernmost rural district of Cà Mau

CHAPTER XIX

EXPLOSIONS AT THE FOOT OF THE KHONE FALLS

*Ordinary life goes on...
that has saved many a man's reason*
Graham Greene, *The Quiet American* [1955]

After spending unforgettable days celebrating the Pimay Festival in Luang Prabang, I went to Done Khong south of the Khone Waterfall to join Dr. Chamsak. We had agreed to meet at that scenic place. To fully understand the richness of the Mekong's fish and plant life, I wanted to learn more about the genesis of that river's formation.

The birth of the Mekong River only took place during the Pleistocene Epoch, between 10,000 to 1.6 million years ago. The present day's river consists of four sections from different rivers that were displaced and joined together by a series of earthquakes. A stretch of the Chao Phraya River was "captured" that way and made part of the Mekong. Those rivers subsequently formed the upper basin of the Mekong. The fact that the Mekong is made up of many rivers helps explain the rich variety of fish and other animal species found in its current.

The Mekong Delta took its present shape about 10,000 years ago.

At that time, iron in the alluvium carried in the river current combined with sulphur in the seawater produced pyrite. This mineral and the sedimentary deposits kept on building up on the sea floor until it emerged from the bottom of the East Sea and became today's Mekong Delta. This process is still going on now. A completely different geological event took place about 5,700 years ago and resulted in the formation of the Tonle Sap Lake. A land formation suddenly sank below its surrounding area and gave us the Lake.

Where is the source of the Mekong

More than 130 years ago, Doudart de Lagrée and Francis Garnier sailed from the port of Saigon at the head of a French exploration group to head upstream the Mekong in search of a river trade route with China. At that time, Vietnam was still a French colony. Based on the information available to them at the time, they only had a vague idea that the river starts somewhere in Tibet. Their arduous and perilous journey that lasted for two years from 1866 to 1868 came to an abrupt end in Yunnan, China with the death of their leader Doudart de Lagrée.

Almost three decades later, in 1894, another exploration group led by Dutreuil de Rhins and his companion Joseph-Fernand Grenard departed from Paris for Samarkand. They crossed Turkestan in Russia to enter China before heading south toward Ladakh. From there, the group traveled north on the Silk Road across the Taklamakan Desert to reach the Tibetan High Plateau through a tortuous road. They were considered the explorers who came closest to the source of the Mekong at the time. Sadly, Dutreuil de Rhins met a tragic end when he was killed by the Khamba villagers in a dispute over a stolen horse. Grenard returned to Paris and declared that his group had found the source of the Mekong without being able to show evidence to substantiate his claim. Therefore, up to the 1950's, the source of the Mekong still remained an enigma.

In 1992, journalist Thomas O'Neil and correspondent-photographer

Michael S. Yamashita of the National Geographic set foot in Tibet and were taken by the local nomads to Zadoi at the elevation of 4,600 meters above sea level. This is the farthest they were able to reach on the Dza Chu River, the Tibetan name of the Mekong. They were convinced they found the source of the Mekong:

“We rode behind the mountain and found in a shallow draw a sheet of ice some 300 yards long – shaped like an hourglass. Crouching down on the frozen surface, I could hear below a trickle of water. It was the beginning notes of the Mekong. Mike and I were, as far as I can discover, the first Western journalists to hear them.” [p.10 National Geographic, Feb 1993]

The coordinates and the name of the sacred mountain they provided could not be verified on the map. The assertion the National Geographic reporters made was eventually dismissed as an unconfirmed claim.

The world had to wait until September 17th, 1994 for the truly historic discovery of the birthplace of the Mekong to become a reality. The Anglo-French observation group headed by Michael Peissel made its way to the top of the Rupsa Pass and verified for the first time the source of the Mekong. It is situated at the most isolated place in the Central Asia High Plateau at an elevation of 4,975 meters above sea level and hundreds of miles from the nearest populated area. Most importantly, Michael Peissel was the first person to accurately confirm the coordinates of the Mekong’s source: Latitude 33°16’534 North, Longitude 3°52’929 East. From now on, at any place and any time, we can use those numbers to locate the source of the Mekong on any world maps.

Michael Peissel recorded his feelings in these lines:

“This was what geography and exploration was all about. Just a few numbers, yet what a struggle to record them – how much bloodshed,

tears, and sweat so that what had been spelled out in 1866 as the goals of the Mekong Committee of the French Société de Géographie could at long last be fulfilled. Suddenly it became important to record the day, September 17, 1994. Twenty five years after man had set foot on the moon, here we were recording for the first time the source of the third-largest river of Asia.” [28]

Until the middle of the 20th century, the impacts caused by humans on the Mekong were negligible considering that the river still retained its pristine condition. Similarly, its tributaries like the Nam Ou River to the north of Luang Prabang and the Sekong or Sesan Rivers in the Northeast of Cambodia were still in their wilderness state. The “*prey lik tuk*” or flooded forests stretching from the Song Kram River in the northeast of Thailand to the Tonle Sap Lake and further south to the Mekong Delta remained for the most part untouched. It was not until the 1950’s that the situation took an abrupt turn for the worse. The Mekong started on a course toward degradation at an alarming pace.

The section of the Mekong that flows to the “See Pan Done” or Khone Waterfall at the southernmost part of Laos is reputed for its whirlpools and falls. It runs wild like that for a while before it becomes tamer as it approaches the Cambodian border. At this location, people can witness the most amazing phenomena of the Mekong. Right at the foot of the waterfall we can find the largest congregation of fresh water tropical fish species not only in Southeast Asia but also in the whole world. Its abundant population of shrimps, snails, crabs, turtles, weeds and plants also offers a rich protein source to the inhabitants of the Lower Mekong.

The sudden changes in altitude of the nine main waterfalls in this section - some as high as 21 meters – combined with its 30 rivulets and a multitude of deep underwater caves make for an ideal haven for fish to spawn and breed. At one place, the width of the Khone Waterfall measures up to 14 kilometers from its western to eastern banks. This

is also where the Mekong that flows through seven countries including Tibet is at its widest.

During the Rainy Season, the Mekong overflows its banks and floods the rainforests at places submerging trees as much as 20 meters deep.

The French exploration group led by Doudart de Lagrée and Francis Garnier was astounded when it came face to face with the Khone Waterfall. Prior to that time, they had heard about that waterfall they imagined to be like the Niagara of Asia, the only one in this continent whose water pours down from a high altitude.

However, what the Frenchmen had before their eyes was not a Niagara but a succession of interlinking falls and whirlpools stretching over a distance of 12 kilometers. The scenery was simply majestic and spectacular, alive with the thundering sounds of water splashing and foaming at the tips. Looking at the dead bodies of fish and alligators floating at the foot of the waterfall, it would not be difficult to visualize how mighty the current was when it smashed the poor animals against the rock formations upstream. It became evident to the group that after the Sambor Waterfall in Cambodia, the Khone Waterfall represented a second natural obstacle that would render the Mekong not amenable to riverine navigation.

Francis Garnier recorded: *“We saw waterfalls descending fifteen meters over a reach sometimes a kilometer long. The cascade of the waterfalls stretches, broken into several reaches, over a total length of twelve to thirteen kilometers.”* [9]

The Mekong proved in the end unusable as a trade route to China. Nevertheless, its exploration represented a “hurdle to be conquered” that Francis Garnier whose nickname was Mademoiselle Bonaparte just could not ignore. In his eyes, it was a challenge like any others i.e.

an expedition to the South Pole or a climb to the top of the Himalayas.

The Khone Waterfall was considered to be an ideal natural laboratory, a microcosm of the entire eco-system of the Mekong for biologists and ichthyologists to study. For that unique reason, Dr. Mark Hill argued that due consideration must be given for the conservation of the Khone Waterfall in all development projects or construction of hydroelectric dams on the Mekong's current.

The Mekong water level peaks in September or November at the southern part of the Khone Waterfall near the Lao-Cambodian border. That river's water level in the Rainy Season can be 15 meters higher than during the Dry one. At Kratie, northern Cambodia, where the Sesan River that originates from the Vietnamese Central Highlands meets the Mekong, the water level can reach more than 20 meters in depth. Then we cannot omit the other tributaries like the Kong, San Srepok, and Krieng Rivers.

In the beginning, I only felt a concerned curiosity about the Mekong. When did that sentiment grow into an obsession or a "great love" in my heart remains a mystery to me. Usually Dr. Chamsak and I preferred to meet at well-known locations on the Mekong. During one of those encounters, Dr. Chamsak lightheartedly told me: "Considering all you've done for the Pla Beuks and the Irrawady Dolphins, at times people forget that you're a lead engineer in charge of many important construction projects in America".

Auberge Sala Done Khong.

Upon our arrival, Bé Tu and I were taken directly to the inn where Dr. Chamsak had made a reservation for us. The inn built on one of the two main islands of the Khone Waterfall was used as the guest house of the Lao foreign minister. This wooden structure offered the best amenities and services in the southern region of Laos. Its clean bathroom had hot

running water while a generator provided electricity from afternoon to midnight. Past that time, the guests were offered no other choice than to “enjoy” the romantic atmosphere of the candlelight in a country reputed to be the “Kuwait of hydropower of Southeast Asia”.

We were given the special treatment of having two rooms with a balcony overlooking the Mekong. On the first day, the lady who owned the place served us a delectable Lao meal of “mok pa” or steamed fish in banana leaves, fish braised in coconut milk, and baby chicken fried with ginger.

Chamsak once shared with me the most “dreadful” news concerning a very controversial project in the early 1990’s to build a 5 star, 300-room hotel with a Las Vegas style casino and a golf course at the foot of the Khong Phapheng Waterfall near Done Khone. The place would be serviced by a small airport, a helicopter landing pad, and a highway leading to Pakse and Ubon Ratchathani in Thailand. The prime reason behind it? The Prime Minister, Mr. Khamtay Sinphandone, was born there and it was his earnest wish to develop and modernize his birthplace.

The local villagers understandably embraced the project as a special favor from their famous native son and welcome the additional jobs or money it had to offer. On the other hand, in the opinion of Dr. Chamsak and environmentalists including the Canadian born Baird, this project would bring about a “disaster” to the eco-system of the Khone Waterfall.

Dr. Chamsak also added that a potential tragedy was averted when the Congress of the Lao People Revolutionary Party met in 1996 and relieved Khamtay from his post because he was too closely associated with the Thai businessmen.

Dr. Chamsak commented:

– That’s what really happened. But some people want to see it as a victory for Vietnam thus perpetuating a perception that goes back to the Nguyễn dynasty time when Laos was a bone of contention between the Siamese and Vietnamese royal courts.

Before I met Ian Baird for the first time I already had heard a lot about him. Born in Canada, Baird chose to live for many years in Laos. Starting in 1993, he managed the “Laos Community Fisheries and Dolphin Protection Project” in southern Laos. With an annual budget of US\$ 60,000, Baird coordinated the efforts of 63 villages in the region to save the dolphins that were threatened with extinction. Actually, his long-range objective was to establish a program to develop sustainable fishery because it is apparent that “rice and fish” are the backbone of the Mekong’s economy.

Without any doubt, Baird was correct in choosing the Irrawady Dolphins as a flagship species for his conservation works. He hoped that by protecting the Dolphins he would be able to save the more than one thousand other fish species of the Mekong. The Irrawady Dolphins live in Laos and Cambodia. Only a few of them can be found in Vietnam. The most formidable hurdle Baird faces is the state of lawlessness that runs rampant in Cambodia.

The Irrawady Dolphins in the Mekong

The dolphins are aquatic mammals closely related to the whales. The Lao call them Pakha or human fish. The inhabitants of the Mekong Delta name them “cá nước” or “cá heo”.

Their skin looks a greenish grey with a shiny and metallic tint. On the average, they measure from 2.5 to 2.8 meters long and weigh up to 200 kilograms. They live in pairs, like married couples, in groups of 8 to 10 individuals. Some can live as long as 50 years and swim at a speed of more than 40 km per hour that is unmatched by many boats or

ships. Every two years, the female becomes pregnant. After a 9-month gestation, she gives birth to a calf instead of spawning eggs like other fish species. There are tales purporting that like with humans, when a Dolphin gives birth, a midwife comes to help with the delivery. They feed on fish or squid and hunt for food by relying on a special organ on their forehead that emits sonar beams to locate the preys in the murky and alluvia rich water of the Mekong.

According to expert ichthyologists, seawater Dolphins inhabit the northern coasts of Australia all the way to the Bengal Gulf off the Indian coasts. The fresh-water Irrawady Dolphins have the scientific name *Orchaella brevirostris* and were first spotted in the Irrawady River of Myanmar in 1738. They have a short snout and are becoming rarer in Southeast Asia. Presently, they are only seen in the Mekong.

Over the last decades, the Dolphins have become extinct in the Chao Phraya River in Thailand as this waterway had been turned into a pipeline for agricultural and industrial waste. Things are not any better with the Yangtze in China, the Amazon of Brazil or the Ganges in India. The surviving Irrawady Dolphins in the Mekong constantly run the risk of being crushed by giant barges operated by lumber companies that ply the region's waterways. Moreover, we cannot forget the hydroelectric dams that are wreaking havoc to the rivers, the fish's natural habitat. Those rivers are being drained dry and becoming more polluted from the industrial waste discharged by the factories upstream.

Tales about the Dolphins abound. Older people take pleasure in telling the story of a greedy couple who gave their young and beautiful daughter in marriage to an ugly and slimy looking boa. In desperation, the girl jumped into the Tonle Thom River, the Cambodian name for the Mekong, to end her life. She did not die but changed into a Dolphin.

Another tale says that, once upon a time, a husband and his wife traveled on a raft down the Mae Nam Khong (the Lao and Thai name of

the Mekong) with a chicken, a duck, a frog, and a peacock.

As the raft approached a whirlpool near the Khone Waterfall the animals panicked. The chicken clucked for its owner to stop. Though it can swim, the duck quacked and asked to be allowed to go ashore. The frog croaked expressing its intention to get off the raft. Only the conceited peacock squeaked “plaew wong, plaew wong” meaning “keep on going, keep on going”. Since the peacock was such a beautiful bird, the couple complied with its wish and they continued to navigate toward the whirlpool. What had to happen happened! The raft was caught in the whirlpool and sank. Not a single soul survived. The couple who had good karmas was reincarnated: the gentle husband became a Swallow flying over the river and his wife was turned into a Pakha fish. The two formed an inseparable pair and never caused any harms to anybody.

Four years ago, at Vientiane’s Lan Sang Hotel overlooking the Mekong, Dr. Chamsak told me of another tale concerning the Dolphins. The Thai elders relate that way back in time, a horrendous earthquake hit China and Vietnam. It was followed by other natural disasters like storms and floods resulting in a monstrous death toll in those two countries. A Chinese was reincarnated into a Pakha while a Vietnamese a Swallow. When calm returned, the two met and talked. The Swallow said: “In my previous life I was a human. So, now I do not bring harm to anybody!” The Pakha replied: “Me too. I only want to save people!”

Nowadays, there are many reports of Pakhas helping fishermen during the fishing seasons, rescuing drowning victims – or even snatching humans from the jaws of alligators.

Unfortunately, in our time, in various ways humans are slaughtering the Dolphins into extinction.

Looking at Ian Baird, Dr. Chamsak ventured a general opinion:

– Like in the case of the Pla Beuks, the fate of the Irrawady Dolphins illustrates the uncertain future facing the overall development of the Mekong.

He elaborated on the idea:

– This is true not only of the Dolphins but also of all the fish species in the Mekong. They are being decimated at a dizzying rate due to the destructive and irresponsible fishing methods using explosives, grenades, electricity shocks, and trawls or nets attached with steel hooks ...

As an afterthought, he added a somewhat more balanced touch to his remark:

– The Lao fishermen are fully aware that those vicious ways of fishing will soon exhaust the fish source of the Mekong. Nevertheless, they feel powerless to put an end to them when the perpetrators are generals or high ranking officers who have guns and power. This is especially true in Cambodia....

Touch Sieng working for the Fishery Office of Cambodia offered a reassurance:

– In any case, the Office for the Preservation of Fishing has regulations banning fishermen from the use of nets attached with steel hooks, dynamites, and toxics while fishing on lakes and rivers. Violators are subject to a fine of 50,000 Riels or about 14 American Dollars.

In lieu of praise, I looked in Baird's direction and ventured an observation coming from a novice's perspective:

– It's quite touching and heartening to see, in isolated villages near the rainforests of the southernmost region of Laos, banderoles or people

wearing T-shirts bearing the message: “Save the Pakha, the jewel of the Mekong” in the Lao language. The message is being taught in schools and discussed at village meetings.

In the end, Baird, the Canadian, is no longer the lone ranger in the preservation of the Dolphins. Japanese from the HAB21 Group and Australians of the Australian-based Community Aid Abroad came from faraway places to give him a helping hand.

The works Iwashige and the HAB21 Group did for the Dolphins are something to marvel at. Iwashige is a respected and influential owner of a Japanese network of banks. Very different from Fuji; the severe, condescending, and uncaring high official of the Asian Development Bank (ADB) that is financing the construction of dams on the Mekong’s tributaries in Laos; Iwashige is known as a thoughtful and free soul. He is fond of telling how he became enamored with the graceful Dolphins frolicking in the ocean at dawn or sunset during the time he lived as a child on the Kagoshima Island in the south of Japan... however, when he returned, after a few years of absence, to his native village the Dolphins were all gone because of industrial pollution. The desperation and longing he felt for them motivated him to found the group Human-Animal Bond for the 21st Century (HAB21).

For unexplainable reasons, Iwashige felt he was inexorably drawn from his isolated Japanese island nation to Kambi, a tiny fishing village located on the bank of a lake near the Mekong and 180 kilometers to the northeast of Phnom Penh. His Buddhist faith led him to believe that something he did in his previous life had set him on this course.

This big lake covers an area of 8 acres and is of considerable depth. Some American divers reported it to be as deep as 70 meters even during the Dry Season. The northern part of the lake lies in Lao territory. Scattered around the place are numerous islets, sandbanks or even large rock formations rising above the water. This is the favorite

place for the rare Dolphins to inhabit most of the year. At times, people can watch them emerge and cavort with each other above the water surface. In the Rainy Season, the Dolphins swim upstream to far away tributaries to spawn and return to the deep holes to live during the Dry one.

If the ichthyologists are correct, only less than one hundred Irrawady Dolphins survive to this day in the entire Mekong system in the three countries of Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam.

Both the Lao and Cambodian fishermen consider the Dolphins to be sacred animals. The more superstitious ones hold that it would be extremely unlucky to touch or net a Dolphin while fishing. Consequently, except under the Khmer Rouge, people do not eat or hunt the Dolphins. In the 1970's, the fish were systematically killed for their fat which can be processed into machine lubricants or lamp oil. One Dolphin can give up to 25 kilograms of fat. According to Touch Sieng, since the start of the current year, only two Dolphins were spotted in the Tonle Sap Lake.

During the Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia in the 1980's, the Vietnamese troops and their Cambodian allies indiscriminately used dynamites or bullets to fish in the lakes and rivers of the land of Angkor. From the Laos side of the border, shots or explosions could be heard downstream the Mekong as Cambodian soldiers went on their fishing spree. For every fish caught by the Lao fishermen, their Cambodian colleagues, with their outrageous fishing methods, can bag hundreds. Of course, the surplus will be sold at bargain price in the cities of southern Laos.

In a voice heavy with bitterness Ian Baird remarked:

– As expected, many a Dolphin was killed by those explosions. I saw with my own eyes terrified Dolphins leaping out of the water to avoid the pressure caused by the explosions even though they took

place hundreds of meters away. Using the parlance of the American newsmen when they talked about the secret war in Laos during the Indochinese War, we can say those fish are the collateral damages of the violent fishing method done Khmer style.

When told that the Irrawadi Dolphins still lived in the water around Kambi, Iwashige immediately took off for the village. He was not at all disappointed. It was an exceptionally beautiful sunset on the Mekong that day. Only a gentle breeze was blowing over the placid current. For the first time after so many years, Iwashige could watch bands of Dolphins swim past with their dorsal fins moving gracefully up and down the water surface. They emitted whistling sounds through a blowhole on their foreheads as they moved down the current.

The following morning, however, a heart-wrenching and mournful scene awaited Iwashige. He saw the lifeless body of a dolphin caught in a net attached with steel hooks he was convinced he saw playfully swimming by the previous day.

It was a female adolescent fish because it only measured 1.5 meters long. The villagers told him that it was the 9th dolphin killed so far in that Dry Season. With a really graceful and slim body, the fish looked so regal that Iwashige could not help compare it to a gorgeous princess of the Mekong.

Under the scorching heat of a midday sun, the princess' body took on a darker tint. She looked more like a "sleeping beauty" in a fairy tale. Her eyes were shut tight while her mouth was adorned with the youthful grin of an innocent child. Grieving villagers stood around her while curious children, too young to grasp the full meaning of the drama they saw, ran their nimble fingers on her dorsal fin.

Finally, the onlookers put her in a truck that took her to the well-equipped Fishery Office on the northern bank of the river to be dissected

and studied. There, researchers opened up her body and cut off her head as if they were trying to search for the “unknown” cause of her death.

People do not eat Pakha flesh but value their teeth. Each can fetch as much as 3,000 Kips or about US\$ 4.00. It is believed that children who wear one around their neck would be protected from evil spirits and rice paddies “fertilized” with their bones would produce better and larger crops.

Iwashige, on his part, was deeply pained thinking of the Dolphins’ red blood being shed in the Mekong River where it is on occasions mixed with human one.

He was haunted and horrified by that first encounter with the Mekong. Upon his return to Japan, he adopted Kambi as his second native village and vowed to do his utmost to save the Dolphins and prevent the Kagoshima tragedy from being repeated on the Mekong.

A couple of months had barely gone by when Shintani led the first members of the HAB21 Group consisting of ichthyologists and specialists in wildlife biology to Kambi village. They set up a Center for Dolphin Research to support and train the local staff. Their final objective is to hand over the center’s operation to those trainees at the appropriate time.

In an interview with the attractive and bright reporter Ánh Nguyệt of the Vietnam TV Channel Shintani stated:

– Actually the Dolphins represent a challenge to us. If we can learn to live harmoniously with them, it also means we can keep a pristine and healthier environment for the Mekong and by the same token for our planet.

On the morning of our departure from Don Khong, Bé Tur and I

paid a visit to the small village where our new friend Chanthao, the young worker at the inn, lived. The girl's old mother was still watering her beds of lush green cabbages in the garden when we showed up. Chanthao lived with her mother and a brother who was out working in the fields.

The old lady greeted us with a bright smile on her wrinkled face and led us into the house. Chanthao explained: "My mother is in her seventies but still has to work very hard. She has four children. However, two are no longer with us." I just kept silent because I did not want to dwell on that painful subject knowing full well not a single family in the Mekong came out of the war untouched. Her mother sent Chanthao to prepare tea while she herself went into the kitchen and brought back sticky rice cakes called Kao Nom Kok sprinkled with coconut flakes for the guests. She treated us like her own children – the way the Mothers of the Mekong always do.

Regardless whether it is Bé Tu's mother in the Mekong Delta or Chanthao's at the Khone Waterfall, from time immemorial, the Mothers of the Mekong have always been patient, loving, and forbearing. Throughout the recent half century of warfare, they were laboriously at work tending to their duties in good or bad times.

"Ordinary life goes on...that has saved many a man's reason". It appears as if Graham Greene had empathized with them very early on when he wrote those words in his book "The Quiet American". [13]

Farewell, Mothers of the Mekong. Farewell, Green Village with the grumbling of a distant waterfall.

Before our eyes, I saw an immense section of the Mekong. This river is the home of the Pakhas, the swallows and kingfishers as well. The inhabitants of the Mekong Delta called the latter "chim thẳng chài". More than one hundred and fifty years ago, in the warm sunlight

of dawn, Francis Garnier caught sight of this bird flying swiftly over the river like a straight arrow. Today, in spite of the passing of time, its plumage still retains its distinctive bright blue color. In the fleeting moment of a bird's flight, one is reminded of the more than 150 years of blood and turmoil that left their marks on the Mekong - that river of history and of time - and God forbid, not the last of the rivers!

CHAPTER XX

FROM THE MONKEY BRIDGE TO THE MỸ THUẬN BRIDGE Y2K

*N'attendez pas le jugement dernier. Il a lieu tous les jours
Don't wait for judgment day. It takes place each day*
Albert Camus, La Chute [1956]

After my stay at the Khone Waterfall, I looked forward to meet Xuân at the “*Conference on the Ecology of the Mekong*” in Cambodia, a country that, like the Phoenix, is rising from its ashes. Having undergone punishing years under the Khmer Rouge, The Tonle Sap Lake is given a new lease on life after it is classified as an International Biosphere Reserve. A French friend gave me a book named “*Fishes of the Cambodian Mekong*” written by Walter J. Rainboth. It gives details on almost 500 fish species, their photographs as well as scientific and Khmer names. The Khmer names would be invaluable to me in my studies of the fish that migrate from the Great Lake to the Mekong Delta during the Dry and Rainy Seasons.

The Conference was held under unusual circumstances in the capital city of Phnom Penh two decades after the Vietnamese troops occupied the Land of Angkor. Large crowds of Cambodian students of the post-war era demonstrated in front of the Vietnamese Embassy

and on university campuses. They burned the Vietnamese flag, carried banderoles demanding that Vietnam return the land to their people, and shouted anti-Vietnamese slogans. These events were incessantly praised and heralded by the local news media especially the daily *Courier Phnompenois* as indications of a Cambodia on its way toward revival and democracy.

“For sure, we have more democracy than Vietnam” a Cambodian journalist boldly asserted. He added: “Have you ever seen such demonstrations by the Vietnamese students in both the North and South of that country during all these past years?” The above comment of the Cambodian journalist was not without foundation. It had a grain of truth in it. I also found the passivity or non-commitment of the Vietnamese college students both disconcerting and shocking.

While Prince Sihanouk was increasingly reduced to an irrelevant role in Cambodia’s political arena, his opponent Mr. Hun Sen, a former Khmer Rouge officer, had been consolidating his position to become the country’s strongman. He succeeded in overcoming countless challenges and difficulties to steer the ship of state toward a brighter future including that of his two sons. Those two graduated from world renowned military academies: West Point in the United States and Saint Cyr in France. It would certainly be an exaggeration to accuse Hun Sen of being a stooge of Hanoi. To give back to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, we must give Mr. Hun Sen credit for having adroitly manipulated Ranariddh, Sihanouk’s son, and the students in order to use them as catalysts for internal and external changes.

The Conference lasted two consecutive days with the participation of the four countries in the Lower Mekong Basin. The first guest speaker at the Conference was an expert from the United Nations whose presentation dealt with the general issue of water management. It could be said that the first part of the Conference was an extension of The International Conference of Cairo on March 22, 1999 with the

motto: “*World Water Day: Everybody Lives Downstream*”.

The 20th century was undeniably under the spell of wars for oil. The 21st century will be under the curse of wars for water. Freshwater flows through the world’s nations via 215 rivers. The Mekong which runs through seven countries including Tibet is one of them. To survive, each person needs at least from 20 to 40 liters of water per day for drinking, cooking, and personal hygiene. Currently, 22 nations are facing critical penury of water and unable to meet the minimum of 20 liters per head per day. More than 80 other countries are hard pressed to work out acceptable solutions to their pressing demand for water. The daunting dilemma facing them is twofold: a dwindling supply of freshwater coupled with a population growing at an exponential rate.

The Middle East though rich in oil is poor in water resources accounting in part for its poverty and scarcity of food.

The discussion turned really heated when a participant raised the issue of the Chinese construction of hydroelectric dams and their devastating impacts on the economies of the five ASEAN nations. The exploitation of the Mekong’s natural resources instead of bringing about the expected prosperity may result in confrontations and wars. The main instigator in this case is no one else but the big superpower to the north that has a plan to build the series of dams called the Mekong Cascades in Yunnan threatening the livelihood of 250 million inhabitants of the Mekong Subregion.

Dr. Chamsak from the Thammasat University in Bangkok took the podium and declared:

– We cannot think about the exploitation of the Mekong without mentioning its Chinese connection. I want to refer here to our need to deal with that superpower. It is undeniable that China’s plan to build gigantic dams in Yunnan would wreak havoc on the ecology.

In support of Dr. Chamsak, as a member of the Mekong Forum, I took the opportunity to remind the Conference:

– As you all know, disagreement about water distribution has led to wars in the Middle East. The Arab-Israel Six-Day War of 1967 was the first modern Water War. The same thing may occur in the Mekong Subregion. Therefore, for the sake of peaceful cohabitation, we need to arrive at a plan acceptable to all the 7 countries of the region. A plan that will offer optimum benefits to all without imposing undue hardships to no one. The two major concerns for the Mekong region in the 21st century will be: water and China. The Middle Kingdom or Middle Power - a more relevant name in our time - is becoming a center of economic and military might not only in Asia but in the world. It would be in everybody's interests for that power to act responsibly toward its small neighbors to render peaceful and lasting developments possible.

Not mincing his words, Dr. Xuân a member of the Vietnamese delegation, joined in:

– For over a decade, China has been unilaterally taking steps to implement its plan to build the 8 then later raised to 14 mammoth dams in the series of the Mekong Cascades in Yunnan. For all practical purposes it has engaged in an undeclared ecological war on the 5 nations downstream the Mekong.

As usual, Xuân kept his composure but stuck to his resolute stand:

– Albert Camus once wrote: *“Don't wait for judgment day. It takes place each day”*. Every second of the day, our future is being robbed from us before our very eyes.

At the close of the Conference, all participants agreed on this motto “Vigilance and Unity”. However, those goals can only be achieved

when all the 7 nations involved are capable of putting the “Spirit of the Mekong” above their short-sighted national interests.

Dark clouds announcing stormy weathers were already blowing in from the North. The Conference in Phnom Penh ended in a gloomy note. No matter how gloomy, we need to keep up hope. We need to look at the glass as being half full – not half empty. I already have drawn up a plan to visit the Mekong Delta and the Mỹ Thuận Bridge, a symbol for a bright future to be completed before the year 2000. This is also a good time for me to revisit the other bridges of history, the bridges of time which will take me back to the Southern March of a not too distant past.

The Bridges in the Heat of War

It can be said that the most visible signs of destruction during the Vietnam War can be found in the major bridges. Not a single one of them was spared. That particular feat must be attributed first to the Vietcong who spent years digging up roads, building mounds to obstruct the traffic on the roads, and destroying bridges made of iron, cement, wood or even monkey bridges. Second, to the U.S. Air Force that carried out endless sorties against key transportation axes in North Vietnam with bridges as prime targets. *“We would shove them back into the Stone Age with Air power or Naval power—not with ground forces.”* Those were the famous words uttered by U.S. Air Force General Curtis Lemay (1965).

Cầu Hàm Rồng and the Smart Bomb

The “Cầu Hàm Rồng” or Dragon Jaw Bridge in Thanh Hóa Province North Central Coast of Vietnam received extensive press coverage during the Vietnam War. It sat astride the Mã River that was immortalized by a poem penned by poet Quang Dũng in 1948 during the Resistance against the French:

*Tây Tiến đoàn quân không mọc tóc
Sông Mã gầm lên khúc độc hành*

In the Tây Tiến campaign the fighters lost their hair*
The Mã River roared the hymn of the lonely march

**The inhospitable environments of the Mã River's upper section took the lives of many soldiers. The lucky survivors who came down with malignant malaria would suffer from jaundice and hair loss. At the time only quinine was available to treat the disease.*

This bridge represents the most vital and vulnerable link in the transportation network connecting the North to the South of the country. Consequently, it was heavily defended by an intricate web of anti-aircraft guns so redoubtable that in spite of their determined efforts to take it down from 1965 to 1972 at a loss of 70 planes of all types, the Americans failed to achieve their goal.

A similar case applies with the Long Biên or Paul Doumer Bridge across the Red River near Hanoi.

It was not until 1972 after the Americans got hold of the “laser guided smart bombs” that they were finally able to destroy the Dragon Jaw and Paul Doumer Bridges without incurring any additional loss of aircrafts.

The only problem was: right after the destruction of those two bridges, the North Vietnamese immediately replaced them with pontoon bridges and the transportation of war materials and supplies went on unhindered.

Hiền Lương Bridge over the Bến Hải River

That bridge connects the two cities of Quảng Bình and Quảng Trị.

More than 900 years ago the land still belonged to Champa, a powerful kingdom that frequently attacked Vietnam forcing emperor Lý Thánh Tông to trust the rein of power to his queen Ý Lan so that he could lead a punitive campaign against the Chăm. He defeated and captured the Chăm king Vijaya Rudravarman (Chế Củ), in the Year of the Cock (1069). To make amend, Chế Củ relinquished the Chăm districts of Địa Lý, Ma Linh, and Bồ Chính - present day Quảng Bình and Quảng Trị, to the Vietnamese court.

During the Vietnam War, the province of Quảng Bình stretching from Đồng Hới to Vĩnh Linh was classified as a White Zone or a No Man's Land while the Quảng Trị Province from "*Cố Thành*" or Old Capital to Cửa Việt became a battle zone. In 1972 a vicious street-to-street combat took place in Quảng Trị between the North and South forces to gain control of every inch of land and house in the city.

A quarter of a century has gone by. On a visit to this old battlefield still littered with mines, shrapnel and visible vestiges of bomb explosions, an American correspondent remarked that the place could be viewed as a living museum of the Vietnam War. The Hiền Lương Bridge would be an integral and indispensable part of the museum.

Like so many other construction works, the bridge was built during French colonial times. However, the Hiền Lương Bridge took on a historic dimension with the signing of the Geneva Accords on July 20, 1954 partitioning Vietnam into two parts at the 17th parallel. It stands forlorn inside the demarcation zone marking the lone physical connection between the two parts of the divided country as it straddles the Bến Hải River.

The Bridge stands as a symbol of the partition of the country and of the ensuing Vietnam War, the most costly and destructive war in the country's history. If one decides to make a bronze plaque summarizing that war's topmost statistics it would read something like this:

“Death toll - Civilians: 2 million, North Vietnamese soldiers: 1.1 million, South Vietnamese soldiers: 250,000, American soldiers: 58,272, bombs dropped: 14 million tons or equivalent to 700 atomic bombs of the Hiroshima type, Orange Agent: dropped over 2.2 million acres”.

Human memory is known to be short-lived. Everything will recede into the past. Almost half a century has gone by since the day the country was partitioned. The Hanoi government was toying with the idea of dismantling that bridge on the pretext that there is already a nearby new bridge built by the Russians. Moreover, with its 10 cement feet, the bridge is hampering the flow of the Bến Hải River into the Cửa Tùng Estuary.

The inhabitants of Quảng Trị however strongly opposed the idea because the Hiền Lương Bridge serves as a big tourist attraction that draws visitors from the four corners of the world to their town. Last year alone there were 12,000 tourists, mostly from foreign countries, who came to see it.

Without the Hiền Lương Bridge, Quảng Trị – that arid and poorest province in the country would have nothing to show for as far as tourist attraction is concerned.

In spite of it all, the leaders in Hanoi offered a new argument in support of their desire to do away with the bridge. They contended that the present bridge was not the original one built by the French which was destroyed by bombs in 1967. The bridge that we see now was only constructed by the North Vietnamese troops two months prior to the fall of Saigon.

A counterargument then comes to mind: Why don't we build a new Hiền Lương Bridge that is an exact replica of the old one with the added advantage of not impeding the flow of the river?

The suggestion was summarily brushed aside by the Vietnamese authorities. This time by pure fiat with no explanation given.

Should this type of attitude persist among the country's leaders, Vietnam will be robbed of its past while facing an uncertain future. The country would be a patchwork of dull-looking buildings constructed by international cartels whose only motive is profit making.

The Monkey Bridges

The Mekong Delta is endowed with a vast honeycomb of monkey bridges. Their origin dated back to the early days of the Southern March - almost three centuries ago - when the people of Hai Huyện followed Commander Nguyễn Hữu Cảnh to go south and “draw up a new horizon/Đi Vạch Một Chân Trời” as described by author Sơn Nam, a well-known son of the South.

They came to a delta covered by marshlands and wilderness. Swarms of humming mosquitoes flew in the air and bands of blood sucking leeches swam in the water. At night, the place resounded with the chirping of nocturnal birds and the howling of gibbons. On land, hordes of tigers and venomous serpents roamed while famished alligators lurched in the current.

Were they able to chase off the tigers, the pioneers still had the many alligators to contend with. To safely cross the canals or streams, they held tight to tree vines then swung across Tarzan style. Should the canals or streams be too wide, they drove stakes into their beds and put planks on the top to walk across. Thus, the first monkey bridge was born under such trying circumstances.

According to the Theory of Evolution, it took three million years for chimpanzees to evolve into Homo sapiens. When those pioneers came face to face with such a primordial environment, they reverted to

their primitive instincts i.e. climbing, swinging on tree vines to survive.

With several trunks from the cork trees, a couple of cork dippers driven deep into the stream bed, and several bamboo or cork trunks tied together with rattan strips at the top and “voilà!” a monkey bridge was built to allow the people in the Mekong Delta to cross at any time of the day. Those monkey bridges constructed in such a flimsy way cannot be expected to last forever.

Through generations, the technique of erecting monkey bridges remains unchanged. In remote areas, over canals and marshlands they connect hamlets to each other or isolated huts hidden behind lush trees to the outside world. So that, at these places, young boys and girls can “*hát đối*” or sing the work songs and parallel verses together during harvest times or farmers can entertain each other with “*câu vọng cổ*” romantic and witty nostalgic tunes while working in the paddies.

The poverty is wrenching, yet, through the magic pen of Lương Thu Trung the whole scene appears so poetic, so captivating! To romanticize poverty, can it also be a form of denial or rationalization that allows us to accept and live with it more easily?

*Thương thay cầu khi một mình
Cầu tre lắt lẻo gập ghềnh khó đi*

*I feel for you who stand alone by the monkey bridge
That tortuous bamboo bridge is so difficult to cross*

We will ring in the third millennium soon. Thousands of monkey bridges still stand in the Mekong Delta providing the unique means of moving around for the offspring of the pioneers of the Southern March of three hundred years ago. They cross those bridges less to go to school than to work. It is not rare for them to fall into the water and drown. Such events are so frequent they do not make the news anymore.

The Friendship Bridges in Peace Time

April, 1994 is a date to remember. On that occasion, the Lao President, Thai King, and Australian Prime Minister attended the inauguration ceremony of the first bridge built downstream on the Mekong River linking the Lao capital of Vientiane to the city of Nong Khai, northeast of Thailand. Though this bridge project had been approved a long time ago, it was put on hold due to war activities. The war was over and the Cold War a thing of the past. With the improved relations between Laos and Thailand, the green light was finally given to start the construction of the bridge.

The Friendship Bridge named Mittaphap measured 1.2 kilometers long and was financed by Australia at a cost of US\$ 30 million. It serves as an important link in the Super Highway network connecting Singapore to Beijing and is intended to play a vital role in an ambitious development plan for the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) that consists of the four countries downstream the Mekong and the two non-members Myanmar and Mainland China.

This bridge means different things to each member country. To Laos, a small landlocked nation, it provides a doorway to the ocean via Thailand. For Thailand, it represents an opportunity for the Thai entrepreneurs to invest and exploit a country that is poor, sparsely populated yet rich in natural resources. In the case of Australia, it offers an occasion for this country to extend its sphere of influence beyond the Indonesian archipelagoes to the Southeast Asian nations bordering China.

Three more bridge projects were under consideration at the time of this writing for the Southern Mekong Region: a bridge between Savannakhet and Mukhalan, a second one linking Thakhet with Nakhon Phanom in Thailand and Laos respectively. The third one is the Mỹ Thuận Bridge that spans the Tiền River in the Mekong Delta of South

Vietnam.

The project to construct the Mỹ Thuật Bridge was already under consideration back in the 1950's and 1960's since Vietnam, at the time, was very eager to build a big bridge spanning the Tiền River in the Mekong Delta. Unfortunately, this project was adamantly opposed by Cambodia, a member country of the Mekong River Committee, on the pretext that it would impede navigation from the East Sea to Phnom Penh. When this country casted its veto, the project was shelved. In later years, as diplomatic relations between the two neighbors worsened because of the expanding Vietnam War, the Mỹ Thuận Bridge project came to a full stop.

The Mỹ Thuận Bridge Y2K

According to Richard Mangusson, the project manager of the Mỹ Thuận Bridge Project, at least 80% of the works had been completed counting from the day the Australian Prime Minister came to Vietnam to attend the laying of the first brick ceremony in July of 1997 to May, 1999. Later on, the two ends of the bridge were built and 32 of the 128 suspending cables installed.

The bridge has a length of 1,535.2 meters and a clearance of 37.5 meters. It is a suspension bridge with the two main “H” shape towers standing in the middle of the current and the two main anchorages erected on the north and south banks of the Tiền River. Traffic moves on two lanes in each direction and there are two lanes specially reserved for pedestrians.

Its scheduled completion date was slated for April, 2000 – two months earlier than projected or 6 years to the day after the Mittaphap Bridge.

For Vietnam, the Mỹ Thuận Bridge symbolizes the progress and

development of the Mekong Delta. Once more, through the building of the bridge, Australia wants to remind the countries in Asia of her high technological abilities and the presence of a power dominated by the white men in the southern hemisphere.

I realized that the frenzy commercial activities at the two barge stations on either bank of the river will soon become history. In the coming days, each trip I will take on the new bridge would remind me of the old times I spent with the Mỹ Thuận Barge. The bus had barely stopped at the barge station when it was instantly surrounded by vendors standing impatiently in wait on the sides of the road. They pressed against the body of the vehicle. Some even got inside the bus. Old or young, they noisily advertised their ware: “*Sugar canes. Sugar canes*”, “*Pork hash here! Pork hash here!*”, “*Ice tea! Ice tea! Anybody?*”, “*Coconut milk! Coconut milk! Fresh and sweet!*” Their shouts could not be more to the point than that.

Long lines of vehicles always waited on the pier. Since cars were allowed to get on board in pairs, every driver would dream of being parked next to a mail truck so that the two could be given priority to get aboard the barge. Those unlucky enough to travel on the day a military convoy needed to use the barge could count on wasting at least half a day in wait. The water in the current was dyed red by alluvia. Clumps of purple hyacinth in bloom drifting up and down with the waves were negotiating their way in a maze of commercial boats. Occasionally, there would be a tug boat pulling along tens of water crafts in different sizes loaded with rice or vegetable moving upstream toward Phnom Penh. Restaurants advertising all kinds of local specialty dishes lined the two banks.

The food here is fresh and attractively arranged. The variety is wide: grilled tiger prawns, barbecued pork ribs with scallions, fried sparrows in skewers... all of them releasing mouth-watering scent as they are being prepared. The fruits are sold in season: grape fruits, oranges,

mangoes, guavas, longans, rambutans, bananas, jackfruits, coconuts... You name it. They are transported to the place from Mỹ Thuận, Cái Bè, Mỹ Tho, Bến Tre... and offered for sale in huge and colorful displays.

Visitors coming from the North of the country would marvel at the abundance of fruits they see and be pleasantly surprised to be given 14 or 16 fruits at the price of the 10 they ordered. If not familiar with this practice, they would think that there is an error in the count. But once they found out, they will understand that the South is really the land of plenty where the trees in the orchards are weighed down with fruits, the fields so vast the storks could fly over them at will, the rice sparkling white, the water crystal clear and the rivers and ponds swarming with fish and shrimps.

Soon the barges will stop operating! However, who can say for sure that the travelers will no longer stop at the heads of the Mỹ Thuận Bridge to buy the local products?

The four of us met that day: Xuân, Đạt, Hoàng and I. On this trip, we all kept a host of personal thoughts to ourselves. This was not the first time for Đạt and me to visit Vietnam. Not so for Dr. Hoàng. Thanks to the arrangements Má Bảy made twenty years ago, he was able to flee from Vietnam on a boat. On this first home visit, Hoàng would do his utmost to look for Má Bảy, the benefactor of his family.

The Mothers of the Mekong

Very early in the morning, Má Bảy and her daughter Bé Năm left their home on a boat. They were extremely anxious to get Má Bảy's maternal grandchild to the hospital before dusk. It was almost noontime when they arrived at Thủ Thừa and had to wait for the current to reverse its course before they could continue on their way. Though they were afterward moving with the current, the mother and daughter still rowed as hard as they could so that they would reach their destination on time.

Even so, it was not until late in the afternoon that they could berth at the market pier.

Exhausted, the grandmother held the oar in one hand and trusted the baby to the care of his mother. Then they hurriedly followed an earth road to head in the direction of the hospital. To their big relief, they saw Dr. Hai Lộc walk out of his office dressed in a crisp white smock and holding a leather briefcase in his hand.

Acting as if he did not recognize her and without a word of salutation, the doctor raised his face in a disdainful way and said:

– The office is closed, you know?

Stunned by his impolite behavior, the old lady stared at him speechless for a brief moment. After she got hold of herself she screamed at him at the top of her lungs:

– You ingrate thing! Let me ask you this: while you were starving in the resistance, did I ever refuse to feed you in the early hours of the day or wee hours of the night? Now that you are doing well, how dare you treat me in such an awful manner?

Not giving him time to react, she repeatedly used the oar that she had used for so long paddling the water of the Mekong to rain repeated blows on Hai Lộc's head. Totally astounded by the old lady's behavior and trying to save face, the poor doctor used his briefcase as a shield to protect himself then made a dash for his office. Once inside he locked the door behind him for his own safety.

All her life, Má Bảy never made a distinction between the communists or nationalists. She did not care about politics but only followed the dictates of her conscience in helping the people she considered the “underdogs”. During wartime, she felt for young people like Hai Lộc

who had to hide from the authorities so she lent them a helping hand. That's all. When the table was turned, she did not see anything wrong in aiding the former South Vietnamese soldiers who were labeled "lính ngụy" or puppet troops and ill-treated by the communist cadres who boastfully called themselves "giải phóng" or liberators like Hai Lộc, Tám Trí and Mười Nhe.

Hai Lộc was at his wits' end. No matter what, he was no longer the young medic running around in his shorts and hiding at Má Bẫy's place. He had become a doctor "chuyên tu" promoted from the ranks of medics and now director of the hospital. But what could he do to treat the tiny boy who was grasping for breath with a high fever while he only had a few IV bags and herbs to be used as antibiotics. One thing he did not know and did not care to know was that there were tens of thousands of antibiotic pills left behind by the "puppet government" in the facility's supply room. Nobody of the new hospital staff had any idea about their pharmaceutical properties or approaching expiration dates.

Finally, he came up with a solution. He ordered a security officer to tell Hoàng, the "bác sĩ ngụy" or puppet doctor, to report to him.

For the first time, Hai Lộc used the term "đồng chí" or comrade to address Dr. Hoàng in a stern yet endearing tone: *"Comrade, at any price you have to save the boy. He belongs to a family that made laudable contributions to the revolution. They belong to "điện chính sách" special treatment program of the Party. If you need any kind of drugs, just let me know!"*

Before letting Dr. Hoàng go, he did not forget to extend a gesture of kindness toward his subordinate:

– Ah! I already approved your leave of absence so that you can go visit your family for a week. You can go to the Administrative Office

to get it.

Like all prudent cadres, he added a warning:

– The leave is for you to go to Ho Chi Minh City, not to board a boat for a one-way trip. Don't forget that!

Their conversation ended with a cold smile on Hai Lộc's expressionless face. Immediately after, a consultation was held in the director's office to decide on a treatment protocol. The result? The boy who was in danger of losing his life was saved by the hospital director who was also a member of the Party Executive Committee – an ideal marriage between professional expertise and political power.

Nevertheless, Má Bảy knew perfectly well who saved her grandchild. She felt grateful to Dr. Hoàng, the real benefactor of her family. Like all Mothers of the Mekong, with a magnanimous heart as vast as the ocean, Má Bảy was ready to forgive those bad sheep who went astray like Hai Lộc. The day her grandchild was discharged, Má Bảy took the best fruits from her garden to the hospital and gave them to the staff. Her kindness toward them knew no bounds.

Not long after that incident and with a heavy heart Má Bảy saw to it that Dr. Hoàng, this talented son of the Mekong, and his family were taken to the open sea. They landed safely at the island of Poulo Bidon two days later and eventually resettled in France.

Twenty years have gone by since that fateful day. Yet, everything seems as if it just happened a while back. Doctor Hoàng's two children were all grown up with careers of their own and did not need him anymore. Deep inside Dr. Hoàng knew that Vietnam is the homeland he longs to return to. He took this trip in the expectation that it would pave the way for him to return to his homeland to live among his dear ones and acquaintances like Má Bảy's family. The fact that the land

was still ruled by an authoritarian regime that he will never embrace is only of secondary concern to him.

When inquired about the old village, Xuân told Dr. Hoàng:

– The hospital is now under direct supervision of the University of Cần Thơ. Hai Lộc has retired. A doctor who graduated years after you is now in charge. The place is staffed with young doctors who are formally trained at the universities. They are no longer promoted from the ranks of medics or carriers of stretchers, like Hai Lộc.

Unaware of his friend's secret intention, Xuân suggested:

– They have quantity not quality there. The Medical School at the University of Cần Thơ suffers from a dire need of competent professors. It would be perfect if specialists like you can go back to teach there. Not necessarily as members of the permanent staff. You can just join as a visiting lecturer.

What Xuân just earnestly mentioned perfectly tied in with Dr. Hoàng's intentions and he decided he would discuss the matter further with Xuân during his coming visit to Tây Đô. On that occasion, Dr. Hoàng assumed he and his wife would no longer have to use the barge to cross the river. He would then ask her to walk with him to the mid-section of the Mỹ Thuận Bridge so that together they could look down into the current and realize that “after the storm the sun will shine”. During the many times he stood in the cold watching the Seine River in Paris, Dr. Hoàng felt a firm conviction that one day he would have the chance to stand on a modern bridge like Mỹ Thuận in his homeland.

The lines in a poem written by the French poet Apollinaire came back to mind and filled him with joyful expectation:

Sous le pont de Mirabeau/Mỹ Thuận

*Coule la Seine/le Mekong
Et nos amours
Faut-il qu'il m'en souviennne
La joie venait toujours après la peine.*

Under the Mirabeau Bridge/Mỹ Thuận
Runs the River Seine/the Mekong
And our loves
I have to be reminded
That joy will always come in the wake of sorrow.

On the same day, on National Route Number 1, as our car approached kilometer 1978 in the Châu Thành District of Tiền Giang Province, we happened upon the “inauguration” ceremony of the 19 bridges on the Saigon-Cần Thơ section.

On the way, Xuân earnestly asked me and Đạt about the news concerning our old professor Phạm Hoàng Hộ. The mere mention of his name brought back to us the memories of our youth. In my mind, I always hold professor Hộ in the highest esteem.

About a quarter of a century ago, when the T54 tanks of the North Vietnamese Communists rolled toward Saigon’s outskirts, the Americans broadcasted on their military airwaves the song “*White Christmas*” to signal the start of their massive evacuation by helicopters from the roof of the U.S. Embassy.

While thousands of frightened people climbed the compound’s walls to look for a chance to flee from the communists, professor Hộ remained perfectly calm and refused the offer to leave with the four members of his family. He was determined to stay with the strong expectation that once peace was restored to the land, he would be able to work hard with his countrymen for its reconstruction. “It would not take long for flowers to bloom everywhere again” he liked to mention!

Unfortunately, his dream was inexorably dashed. Instead of moving forward the country took several steps backward. The sad turn of events he witnessed at that late stage in his life rendered him bitter and disillusioned. He had no other choice but to leave - except that this time - utterly crestfallen.

Once outside the country, professor Hộ felt like a wounded beast and chose to lead a hermit's life. He was haunted by his unfulfilled dreams and lost all interests in current affairs. Assailed by the anxieties of old age and feelings of loneliness, his mind began to show signs of deterioration. He could remember clearly what happened in the remote past but was unable to connect with the present. His daughter, a medical doctor, feared that he was suffering from presenile dementia though not a candidate for Alzheimer yet. No longer the scientist he once was he became preoccupied with metaphysics and death. Eventually he resigned himself to accept it as a tragic condition of human destiny. I felt really sad to find my professor reduced to such a pathetic state of mind. At the same time, a sense of unbearable loss overwhelmed me.

The city of Mỹ Tho, the provincial capital of Tiền Giang, sits on the bank of a tributary of the Tiền River, 70 kilometers south east of Saigon. It has quite a colorful history.

Until the 17th century the region remained mostly a wild marshland belonging to Cambodia. Gradually, it changed to Vietnamese hand as a result of the “tâm thực” or gradual take over strategy advocated by Nguyễn Cư Trinh during the “*Nam Tiến*” Southern March. In his work “*Gia Định Thành Thông Chí*” Chronicle of the Prefecture of Gia Định written at the end of that century, the Vietnamese mandarin Trịnh Hoài Đức stated that this city had already been transformed into a prosperous commercial center: “...houses covered with tile roofs, the communal buildings adorned with tall sculptured columns, large pagodas, multitudes of boats converging on the place from different rivers turning it into a vibrant and thriving trade center. For that reason

it was named “Mỹ Tho Đại Phố” or “Mỹ Tho the Great Commercial Post”.

In the following century, a defeated Gia Long had to flee abroad. To keep his throne he sought help from Siam and turned Mỹ Tho into a large battlefield. The fight against the foreign troops ended in a victory by his rival Nguyễn Huệ at the battles in 1784 at Rạch Gầm and Xoài Mút north of Mỹ Tho forcing the 50,000 strong Siamese contingent to withdraw from the country.

Along with the other cities in the South, the French took Mỹ Tho in 1862 and later suffered considerable losses fighting the heroic uprisings led by Trương Định and Thủ Khoa Huân.

Visitors to Mỹ Tho could not help hearing about the “Côn Phụng” or Phoenix Island, the Prajna boat of the “Ông Đạo Dừa” or Coconut Monk during the Vietnam War era. For a time, this island was also known as the “Peace Island” where there was a complete absence of hostilities in the midst of a raging and unforgiving war.

Another often mentioned name is Ấp Bắc 1962. It was at this location that the communist insurgents scored their first success against a well-equipped unit of the South Vietnamese Army prompting Lt. Colonel John Paul Vann to comment in a disparaging tone: “*It was a miserable damn performance, just like it always is.*” And that contemptuous attitude toward an ally considered unworthy but at the same time indispensable of the U.S. persisted throughout and even after the war. Vann, a prominent as well as controversial figure, was known for the important role he played during the course of the war. He never stopped at criticizing the American officials he viewed as arrogant and corrupt. In March 1963, Vann was forced to give up his advisor position and left the Army.

Vann returned to Vietnam in March, 1965 to serve as a civilian

Deputy Director for the Civil Operations and Rural Development Support (CORDS): an integrated group of personnel from USAID, USIS, CIA and State Department along with U.S. Army personnel to provide the needed coordination and manpower for the rural pacification program. His group was responsible for “*Chiến dịch Phượng Hoàng*” or the Phoenix program which implemented the “neutralization” of the Viet Cong rural infrastructures. In the Spring Offensive of 1972, John Paul Vann lost his life at 47 during a helicopter night mission over the fog covered Central Highlands of Vietnam. It was the time the North Vietnamese attacked and overran Kontum starting a chain of events that led to the collapse of the South three years later.

John Paul Vann was hailed as an American soldier in whom one can see the personification of the Vietnam War itself. He was accorded an official funeral at the Arlington National Cemetery in the presence of all major political and military leaders responsible for the American involvement in the Vietnam’s quagmire. The American correspondent Neil Sheehan opined that, in the mind of those who attended the funeral that day, the burial of John Paul Vann in June 1972 also meant the interment of the Vietnam War as far as the Americans were concerned. Buried as well were the solemn assurances Washington made to its friends in South Vietnam.

When we revisited Washington D.C during the cherry blossom season, Mr. Nhu Phong and I were so surprised that Paul John Vann - a highly decorated Korean veteran and a Lt. Colonel during the Vietnam War - was not among the 58,272 names listed on the Memorial Wall.

With a veteran journalist like Mr. Nhu Phong, no question once asked could be left unanswered. It did not take him long to find out the reason behind that momentous “omission”. A Presidential Executive Order states: “*the Memorial is dedicated to the 2.7 million men and women in the U.S. military who served in Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, and coastal areas as a combat zone and would contain the permanent*

inscription of the names of all who died or who remain missing in the war". Paul John Vann, at the time of this death was a civilian. Consequently, his name was excluded and not engraved on the wall.

After spending one day in Mỹ Tho, Xuân took his friends to the University of Cần Thơ. On the barge servicing the Tiền River Hoàng, Đạt, and I we all shared the thought that this might be the last barge trip the three of us would make together before the year 2000.

Đạt who until then had kept to himself turned to Xuân and inquired:

– A quarter of century after the reunification of the country, with all the “gray matter” and absolute power they commanded, the communists proved incapable of building a highway running from the North to the South. After the Mỹ Thuận Bridge, how much longer do we have to wait for a bridge to Cần thơ over the Hậu River to be built?

I joined the conversation:

– At a price tag of US\$ 70 Million per bridge, how much of that money and others had been funneled into the black or red coffers of the “supposed” servants of the people during the Renovation era?

Instead of an answer, Xuân only ventured an observation:

– Throughout the war years, we must admit that the Communist Vietnamese proved to be totally committed to their cause. Ironically, in the twenty five years after reunification and peace, they proved to be equally lackadaisical in their effort to rebuild the country. Even if we look at things through the prism of their “logic” and “dialectics” we would be hard pressed to arrive at a satisfactory understanding of their behavior.

Xuân who was fondly called “Teacher Xuân, Dr. Rice Honda” by

the peasants added:

– The first biplane flight from Saigon to Gò Công took place in 1913. Now people are talking about the prospects for Air Mekong jets to take off from Asian capitals and land in the Mekong Delta in the not too distant future.

Without waiting for his listeners to ask, Xuân elaborated:

– The Air Mekong Company is a joint venture with General Industry Co. in Singapore. Its flights will connect the Mekong Delta with the major cities in Asia like Hong Kong, Bangkok, Singapore... their main objective is to serve the large number of tourists that are expected to visit the Mekong and the “Civilization of Orchard” as projected by the “Green Tour - Eco Tour 2000” program. Of course, they will also see the monkey bridges straddling perilously the streams and canals or connecting the muddy roads of our villages.

That night, in the guest house of the University of Cần Thơ, the four friends talked until the wee hours of the night. They discussed the future of the Mekong Delta and came to the understanding that even though the Tiền and Hậu Rivers were not completely drained dry, their flow rate was diminishing at an alarming rate. A direct outcome was the intrusion of seawater far inland causing the salinization not only of the big rivers but also of the entire network of canals and streams. Millions of acres of rice paddies, farm crops, and fruit trees were being destroyed. Even drinkable water was getting scarce. If no preventive measures were taken, that deep and strong Mekong of “*nine estuaries and two currents*” would inevitably be turned into a river of seawater in the foreseeable future.

After much turning and tossing, precious sleep finally came to Đạt at a cost. In a horrible nightmare, he saw the graceful Mỹ Thuận Bridge arching over a drained dry Tiền River. With no rainfalls the lakes,

ponds, canals, streams, and swamps bare their parched beds. At several locations, people were running out of drinking water. The high water no longer came and droughts lasted for prolonged periods. Barren fields exposed their arid and chapped soil.

Stricken by hunger and thirst, bands of famished people roamed the river banks to look for crabs, snails....anything edible they could lay their hands on. In that crowd of emaciated souls, Đạt saw his mother holding Bé Tư in her arms stumbling along on a dry road. Each time she put her foot down it stirred up a cloud of dust that was caught in a whirlwind and blown away like a small sandstorm.

The Tiền River was still flowing under the Mỹ Thuận Bridge. In his thirst, Đạt buried his head into the water to drink. He tasted its saltiness but immediately reassured himself: *"It's not too bad. It's only as salty as human tears!"* He kept on drinking without being able to assuage his thirst.

When his mother and Bé Tư disappeared from sight, Đạt woke up. His mouth was dry from thirst and his eyes still wet like the not yet completely drained dry Tiền River.



Mỹ Thuận Bridge 11.1999 near completion



Crossing Mỹ Thuận Bridge, a cable-stayed bridge over the Tiền River.

CHAPTER XXI

FROM THE FAMINE YEAR OF THE
ROOSTER 1945
TO THE CÀN THỐ BRIDGE
SIXTY YEARS LATER

La vie humaine commence de l'autre côté du désespoir
Human life begins at the reverse side of despair
Jean Paul Sartre [Les Mouches, 1943]

From Paris, the train took Mr. Nhu Phong on a 700-kilometer journey through the historic region of southern France famous for its ancient Saint Sauveur Church and the Route de Cézanne leading to La Montagne Sainte Victoire. This landscape has been immortalized in a painting Mr. Nhu Phong saw in the London Museum during a trip he made at the start of the previous year in order to accept a position with the BBC. It was at the BBC building that he once enjoyed watching red roses growing around age-old tree trunks.

For years, Mr. Nhu Phong has admired Cézanne's art. More than once, the high-speed train carried him to the birthplace of the celebrated artist where the brilliant sun reflected on the red tiled roofs, the hilltops,

and the Mediterranean Sea. He was able to relive the visual experience that allowed Cézanne to paint the forms with “colors where the soul and universe harmoniously rendez-vous”. The artist left his mark on all the painting schools of his time be it impressionism, fauvism or cubism. After him, renowned artists of the 20th century like Matisse, Dufy, Braque, Chagall, Picasso ... came to this region to look for inspiration and composed their memorable works.

The weather of the Mediterranean Sea in the fall was still warm and the sky crystal clear. For Mr. Nhr Phong, the time he spent in Aix-en-Provence could be considered the happiest period of his life. Rain or snow, twice a day he walked from his rented room to the Indochinese Archives section of the library to studiously do research for his book, *Cahier d’Asie du Sud-Est*. He intended to publish its first version in Vietnamese to celebrate the Têt in the Year of the Dragon or 2000.

Each day was like a new day to him. Every one of them was filled with unbounded joy. Though well past his seventies, the all knowing omniscient age, Mr. Nhr Phong still felt rejuvenated as if he was reliving his student days. Surrounded by a jungle of books and research materials, he looked at the Aix-en-Provence library as the “promised land” for researchers who wish to learn about Vietnam under French colonial rule.

By chance, he met Duy and Bé Tu who came to attend the festival “*A Century of Music*” commemorating the dawn of the new millennium. On that happy occasion, Mr. Nhr Phong took a day off from his research and brought his two young friends to Le Bistro Latin for lunch. He chose this place not only because of its delectable menu that included his favorite Italian dish, risotto scampi, but also because of its reasonable fixed price of 89 Francs per meal. Even at that bargain price, it was quite a hefty sum for the budget of an “old” student like him.

When they were about to take leave of each other, Duy and Bé Tư firmly grabbed Mr. Nhu Phong's hands and told him in earnest:

– No matter how busy you are, don't forget to go back to Tây Đô Cần Thơ and attend our wedding.

Mr. Nhu Phong reassured them with a gentle smile:

– For sure. How can I miss the wedding of the century?

A while back, Mr. Nhu Phong received an airline ticket Đạt bought for him to fly home to attend the Conference on the Ecology of the Mekong organized for the first time in Vietnam by the Friends of the Mekong Group. It took place on the same day the ceremony for the laying of the cornerstone for the Cần Thơ Bridge was held. As if by pure coincidence, everything came together during the first week of August, 2000.

From the Notebook of a Journalist

As was his habit, every morning before leaving home, Mr. Nhu Phong gave a cursory look at the websites of his favorite newspapers. The headlines from the Nhân Dân daily caught his attention so he took time to read them more carefully:

Three years after Japan and Vietnam signed the agreement for the construction of the Cần Thơ Bridge on October 4, 1999, the representatives of Nippon Company came to Vĩnh Long and Cần Thơ to work with the local People's Committees in order to start the constructions in August of 2001. The projected completion date is set for April, 2003.

The bridge will be built 3 kilometers downstream from the existing barge station, opposite of Cồn Ấu. The end of the bridge on the Vĩnh

Long side connects with National Route Number 1 at Kilometer No. 2061 and continues on to Cái Vồn – Bình Minh. The other end on the Cần Thơ side starts at Kilometer No. 2077 within the boundaries of the Ba Láng tourist area. Its length of 2,615 meters makes it the longest suspension bridge in Vietnam. The other vital statistics include: clearance: 39.1 meters, width: 24.9 meters, and total length: 15 kilometers.

It is an undisputed fact that Japan committed untold atrocities during the Second World War: the Nanking Massacre in China, the infamous famine of the year of the Rooster 1945 in Vietnam... Those events still weigh heavily on the conscience of the Japanese people and they continue to pay the price.

In Vietnam, Japan is still making war reparation payments: in the 1960's it financed the construction of the Đa Nhim Hydroelectric Dam 160 MW near Đà Lạt at the cost of US\$ 39 million. Now it is the turn of the Cần Thơ Bridge straddling the Hậu River. The Japanese picked up its price tag of US\$ 249 million in non-refundable loans as a form of war reparation. It is the largest sum Japan accepts to pay in compensation for the almost two million souls who perished during the famine of 1945.

War reparation is only of secondary importance to the whole issue. The important question that should be raised is: "How did the famine in the year of the Rooster really happen?" In Mr. Như Phong's opinion, the answer to that question is not only limited to its horrific death toll but must be sought in the wider historical context of an Indochina under French and Japanese occupations.

At first it was thought that those victims already found their lasting peace in their graves. But on the contrary, somehow they woke up from their sleep to silently finish the final leg of the 60-year Southern March in order to bring it to its final destination: the country's reunification.

Just like in the time of the Tower of Babel, depending on the frame of mind of the person you ask, the Cầu Thơ Bridge is given different names: the Bridge of the year of the Rooster for those who cannot forget and forgive the past like Mr. Như Phong, the Bridge of Japanese-Vietnamese Friendship in the view of the present government, or the Bridge of Reunification for those who aspire for a brighter future. A quarter of a century after 1975, a road running uninterrupted along the entire length of the country has yet to be built and the people's hearts are still mired in despair or gloom.

Mr. Như Phong and his Memory of the Year of the Rooster Famine

In those days, Như Phong was living in Hanoi where his father was teaching at the Trường Bưởi High School and his mother managing a bookstore on Tràng Thi Street. At sixteen, he was not fully an adult but no longer a child either. Not yet ready to assume the responsibility of a grown up but old enough to understand and remember clearly what took place during the first six months of the year of the Rooster.

Having decided that formal schooling was not of much use during those tumultuous times, he left the family home at seventeen to walk in the footsteps of his uncle who was a revolutionary. He idolized his uncle, a member of the “Việt Quốc” or Viet Kuomintang (KMT), who later disappeared without a trace while traveling to Kunming, China. Those in the know suspected that the uncle was kidnapped and killed by the Vietminh.

When he left Hanoi to move South at the age of thirty two, Mr. Như Phong could claim under his belt more than a decade of uninterrupted work as a journalist. His personal efforts and ability had earned him a well-deserved reputation among his peers who held him in deep affection and high esteem. Particularly, those of the younger generations who called him “the journalist of journalists”.

Mr. Nhu Phong extensive knowledge of the communists did not prevent him from staying in Vietnam in 1975. On account of his connection with his late uncle, he was unfairly branded a Việt Quốc by the communist authorities and sent to prison for 14 years. In the face of all those adversities, he remained unfazed and true to himself.

After his release he went overseas and was thrilled at the vast collection of books and research materials he found. Vietnam just went through a nightmarish chapter of its history and the wounds it left behind were still fresh. Under such circumstances, who could write or paint in old, brilliant fashions. Of course, people will continue to write but in tormented styles conditioned by tragic, heart-wrenching experiences. Writing under such conditions would be a challenge and words would act like pointed arrows striking at the heart of the readers both inside and outside the country.

The Diary of a Journalist

The French Experience.

The pages from the book “Témoignages et Documents Français Relatifs à la Colonisation Française au Viet-Nam, 04/1945” stared at Mr. Nhu Phong. They brought him back to the Year of the Rooster (1945) but this time through the eyes of French witnesses:

“...They marched in long, unending lines of families, men, women, old, young, children... looking gaunt and destitute. Their scarcely clothed bodies revealed trembling and emaciated skeletons. Even young girls in their puberty who are supposed to be fresh and attractive did not look any better. Occasionally they stopped on their track either to close the eyes of one of them who just fell for the last time on the road or to take with them the rags that covered the dead body. The sight of these corpses looking uglier than the ugliest beasts and lying in fetus positions with only straw mats instead of burial clothes as covers

makes people feel ashamed of their human condition.”

“...The atrocious famine in the years 1944-1945 that took the lives of almost two million victims in the North – from Quảng Trị northward – was the inevitable outcome of a two pronged policy:

– Politically, it killed off a large portion of the population and kept the rest in the throes of hunger. It was also used as an effective way to dampen down the nationalist fervor of the Vietnamese youth that the politically astute Monsieur Chauvet, the French Gouverneur Général of North Vietnam, sensed very well.

– Economically, it gave a free hand to the French and Japanese conglomerates Denis Frères and Mitsubishi... to monopolize the purchase of millions of tons of rice at fire-sale prices. At the same time, they found it easier to hire the indigenous laborers for their rubber plantations and mines in the New World or Nouvelle-Calédonie, a French Colony in the southwest Pacific Ocean, east of Australia.”

The Japanese Experience.

From André Gaudel’s book ‘L’Indochine Française en Face du Japon’ we learned how from a position of being the all-powerful masters of Indochina, the French woke up an early morning to come face to face with the Japanese and quickly became a tool in the hands of those new occupiers.

The text books used in Japanese schools included the following passage about the Asian military theater during the Second World War: “Japan sent its troops into Asia not to loot but to deliver the people of Asia from the slavery imposed by the White men”. This is the very line of propaganda the Japanese militarists propagated not only to their own people but also to the world’s public opinion.

Nevertheless, to the more enlightened and conscientious Japanese scholars, the story takes on a different color. As noted by author Katsumoto Saotome in his book entitled “Ký Lục/ Nạn Đói Hai Triệu Người Chết Ở Việt Nam”.

After giving an account of rice shortages in wartime Japan, he tells how rice taken from Vietnam (then under Japanese rule) precipitated a famine that some believe may have claimed over 2,000,000 Vietnamese lives. In addition, the author also noted that while Japanese rice requisitions were a major factor behind the famine, the disruption of rice transport as a result of American bombings was also a contributing factor. (Ogura Sadao, *Monogatari Betonamu no Rekishi/The Story of Vietnamese History*, Tokyo: Chuokoronsha, 1997, pp. 345-346.)

In addition, historian Furata Moto is assiduously doing research on the historical context of the famine of the Year of the Rooster through the eyes of surviving witnesses like Mr. Yoshizawa Minami and observed in his work:

“...The situation in Vietnam poses a special case due to the permanent presence of 80,000 of our troops and their 200,000 support personnel. Consequently, the economic conditions in this country became extremely chaotic...”

...Indochina was a major food supplier for Japan. Besides the ordinary import destined for domestic use, this country also needed an additional large amount of food to feed its expanding war theaters in Asia and the Pacific. This was the very root cause of the famine that exacted a death toll of almost two million Vietnamese in 1945.

... It must be reiterated that because the Japanese military could not transport on time the coal needed to run the electric generators situated at strategically important locations, they had to resort to the rice they bought in record time in the South to operate them.

... The scenes of starving Vietnamese who died and lay in great number in front of overflowing granaries guarded by Japanese infantrymen was related by Mr. Kawai, the manager of the granary in Nam Định: “at a Roman Catholic district, the warehouses were brimming with rice. Seeing people dying of hunger on the road from Nam Định to Hanoi I tried to persuade the economic chargé d’affaire at the Japanese Embassy to release the rice but he turned a deaf ear to my plea...”

... It should be noted that those compassionate words came from the same person who also uttered this unforgettable statement: “Those Vietnamese are a bunch of beggars”.

The famine of 1945 is the inevitable outcome of the ruthless decision by the Japanese to rule the Asian Pacific with a policy of terror. The stories of a famished Vietnamese man being hung by Japanese soldiers for stealing from a truck transporting rice or a Vietnamese woman being buried alive inside the bowel of a horse for having mixed saw dust with bran to feed the horses and caused their death were not imagined but real. It showed that the Japanese rulers intentionally wanted to cow the local population so that they could govern more easily.

The Vietnamese Experience.

The April 12, 1945 issue of the newspaper Bình Minh published the article “Mưu Sinh Của Thực Dân Pháp Ở Xứ Đây / The Real Design of the French Colonialists in our Country” by the famous Vietnamese author Khải Hưng, a main figure in Tự Lực Văn Đoàn /the Self Reliance Movement in the 1940s.

Here are excerpts of the things he wrote:

“...in the first class cabin, sitting opposite us were two French men. They carried on this exchange:

– *That would be a good measure to keep this country under our control.*

– *You're right. Very right...if this people become well off, they will only think of rebelling. Idleness is the mother of all sins you know.*

– *Right! Now and then we need a drought, a break in the dyke system, or a famine to keep them occupied with their daily life necessities like food and clothing instead of thinking about opposing us."*

... In his book "Chuyện Cũ Hà Nội/ The Old Stories of Hanoi", its author Tô Hoài had this to say about the famine of 1944-1945: "The words I wrote were quivering as if they were about to be blown away by the wind. It's so horrible! While at the outskirts of Hanoi people were dying en masse, that city's residents stayed terrified of the encroaching famine. Fortunately, those people were spared because both the French and Japanese had to deal with world opinion. They wanted to present a placid facade of the streets in Hanoi to the outside world and allowed its residents to buy rice with their ration cards. Even so, the face of death was present everywhere. In spite of the desperate efforts of the French police and Japanese soldiers, starving people still managed to enter the city and succumbed on the sidewalks. Night and day, convoys of carts rolled down the streets on their macabre mission to pick up the dead bodies."

... Then we also have photographer Võ An Ninh who captured those horrible scenes of death from January to June 1945 through the lens of his camera. Regardless of time and space, anybody who looks at those unforgettable pictures would shed tears of rage and sorrow. All one could see were corpses and corpses. Those shown still on their feet were nothing more than walking skeletons. A woman who was at the threshold of death gave birth right on the pavement. She did not have the strength to shed a tear for her still born infant knowing full well

that she was about to join him in the next world soon afterward. From those photographs taken within the city limits of Hanoi, one could detect the smell of death emanating from the dead as well as the living. All day long, buffalo-drawn carts picked up their gruesome loads to transport them to the Hạp Thiên cemetery where they will be dumped like garbage into mass graves and buried.

... Moved by the morbid event, Vietnamese composer Văn Cao whose works include Tiến Quân Ca, which became Vietnam's national anthem, immortalized his feelings in the plaintive song "Chiếc Xe Xác Qua Phường Dạ Lạc" or The Death Cart Moving through the Hamlet of Dạ Lạc":

*Áo thể hoa rũ rượi lượn đêm trường
 Từng mỹ thể rạc hơi đèn phù thế
 Bóng tối âm thầm rụng xuống chân cây
 Tiếng xe ma chở vội một đêm gầy*

Clothes like faded flowers strolled forlorn in the night
 Every single beautiful body looked drained of its life
 energy
 The shadow of night silently dropped down to the foot
 of the tree
 The death cart hurriedly took it away in the thick of the
 night.

... A report from a newsman in Saigon noted: "In the years 1944 and 1945, the means of communication were still very primitive. Even though the famine had unfolded in the North, the armed conflict between the Americans and Japanese prevented the news from reaching the South immediately. Not until a young man named Chu Hương Mậu arrived by foot in the South with his gloomy photographs. I conducted an interview with him and ran it on the front-page of a daily newspaper managed by the Publisher of Tín Đức Thư Xã along

with the pictures. They struck a chord with a good section of the public and news media. A “*Phong Trào Cứu Đói*” or *Food Relief Campaign* was started and spread like wild fire thanks to the wide support of the intellectuals, businessmen and general public. Contributions poured in and shipments of rice by boats started to head north. Due to intensive American bombing, the transportation of food by roads could only be intermittently effected while the use of trains was completely out of the question. Regardless of the means of transportation used, the young people who went along on those shipments did show proof of exceptional love as well as bravery and sacrifice. Sad as it might be, not one single relief shipment reached those unfortunate people because either the boats were sunk on the way, their cargoes confiscated by the Japanese or the inefficiency of the distribution networks. As for the money, it was seized to enrich the resistance’s war fund. The experience of the Food Relief Campaign during the Year of the Rooster taught me that there is a vast ocean separating a call to action and the facts unfolding on the ground.”

... A live witness from the family of Vũ Kiên of the Institute of History in Hanoi. The province of Thái Bình in the Red River Delta was where the famine hit the hardest. Here the land was scarce but densely populated. It also served as the dynamic cradle of the revolution. In Vũ Kiên’s words: “Our Vũ clan consisted of a large number of households with many mouths to feed while the rice paddies allocated to us were small in size. There was not much of a gap between the rich and the poor in our village. When disasters hit, if the rich subsisted with thick rice gruels then we made do with thin gruels mixed with banana bulbs and vegetable. But the famine of the Year of the Rooster in 1945 hit us with the force of a hurricane. It could partly be blamed on Mother Nature. The day after the rice stalks were in bloom, the farmers woke up in the morning to find their fields covered with white rice stalks devastated by insects. Poor harvests were not that uncommon throughout history. But when the poor farmers were forced to hand over to the occupiers even their last

reserves of rice and to switch to growing jute instead of the traditional crops, their very chance of survival was in jeopardy.

Even though we wished to extend a helping hand to each other, we had nothing left to share. My family comprised of my two parents, five siblings and two nephews or nieces. Not wanting to be a burden to the entire family, I took leave of my parents and foolhardily headed for Hanoi to look for a way to earn a living. I could never erase from my mind the sight of countless corpses lying everywhere in the countryside as I continued on my way. Once in Hanoi, I was greeted by the same scene. To survive, I became a jack of all trades: I worked as a servant, hired hand, sold sandwiches, newspapers or took any jobs I could lay my hand on. When the French attacked Hanoi, I joined the Tự Vệ Thành or the Capital's Militia. On the day I returned to my village, not a single person in my family survived the famine."

Later Kiên enlisted in the Bộ Đội or the Vietminh military and fought the French for nine years. He was accepted into the Communist Party before the conclusion of the battle at Điện Biên Phủ. Thanks to his good service and ability, he was awarded a scholarship to study in the Soviet. After earning a doctorate degree in history he returned to Vietnam and became one of the few outstanding members at the Institute of History in Hanoi. Kiên maintained a very close relationship with General Võ Nguyên Giáp who was acclaimed as the Red Napoléon by the French press.

The wheel of history continued to grind on leaving behind it separate tracks for Kiên and Mr. Như Phong to follow. They luckily lived through their individual sagas and by pure coincidence their paths crossed at this faraway place named Aix-en-Provence. At a late stage in their life, together, they tried to decipher the full meaning to the many enigmas of their Vietnam Experience.

Forty years after the literary trial known as Nhân Văn Giai Phẩm,

Kiên finally shook free of his ties to the communist government and turned dissident during a trip overseas. He was granted political asylum and awarded a one-year grant from the Council of Europe on Culture to do research in Aix-en-Provence on a topic of his choice.

Kiên did not jump on that occasion to point an accusing finger at his former colleagues but wisely kept a low profile instead. Even now, he is unfairly dismissed by some who reside abroad as an opportunist or some kind of a “beast” that wishes to play the part of the “beauty” during the closing act of a play. Actually, people like Vũ Kiên and other long standing communist party members of thirty years or more are fully aware of the communist system’s shortcomings for quite a time already. If they did not do anything it is because - as the writer Nguyễn Tuân puts it - they have learned how to “fear to survive”. As things stand now, it’s time for the surviving wise rats to abandon the sinking ship.

The famine in the Year of the Rooster is a real tragedy. The two common and easily discernible reactions are either to overdramatize it or to sweep it under the rug. To blame it all on the Japanese is not plausible because at that time the French administration was still in place and functioning. To accuse the Americans and Allied bombing for the complete shutdown of the food relief sent from the South to the North does not say the whole truth since rice shipments from Saigon did reach Nam Định in the North where they were stored and left untouched in jam-packed warehouses. Natural disaster did have a role in causing this disaster but could not explain why multitudes of people were dying of starvation while the warehouses controlled by the Japanese were brimming with rice? And there were also the granaries owned by the Vietnamese while the famine was raging. One of the owners living in Thái Bình confessed: “We still had plenty of rice at our place, had my mother not...”

The Conference on the Ecology of Southeast Asia

It was the first time this Conference was held at Tây Đô Cần Thơ in the Mekong Delta with the participation of the member countries in the Mekong River Commission. Long gone is the time for people to talk about a “Threatened Mekong”. Now is the time for them to discuss the “Cooperation on the Preservation of the Ecology and its Development” centering on three main issues: (1) water quality conservation, (2) water management and (3) application of biotechnology in cultivation.

Several days prior to the Conference, a group composed of myself, Dr Xuân, Dr. Chamsak of the Thammasat University in Bangkok, and an Economic Attaché at the Vietnamese Embassy in Thailand conducted field trips to choose a location for the first Eco Watch station to be built far north of the river. It will serve as a link in the Environment Monitoring System of the Mekong Basin.

Urged on by me, Xuân was able to persuade the Foreign Minister to assign attachés in charge of the combined functions of ecological and economic affairs to the Vietnamese embassies located at the countries in the Mekong Basin.

In my opinion, the hamlet of Houei Sai sitting next to the Sino-Lao border to the south of the Yunnan Industrial Zone and 2,000 kilometers from the University of Cần Thơ would be the ideal location for the first Eco Watch station.

Before 1954, the French built an outpost named Carnot at this hamlet. A few mortars left on the ground to rust with the weather and time are the only reminders of its military past. Nowadays, Houei Sai has been transformed into a thriving commercial center on the bank of the Mekong. On one of its hills sits a Buddhist temple while on another the former clinic built by the famous Dr. Tom Dooley.

Commerce in the Houei Sai Hamlet is not only geared to the city

of Chiang Khong across the river but this hamlet also acts as a transit point for big ships sailing down from China on their way to Luang Prabang and Vientiane. Local stores spring up like mushrooms and their shelves are packed with made-in-China goods. In 1997 a project was under consideration to build a movable bridge across the Mekong to connect the Houei Sai Hamlet with the town of Chiang Khong in Thailand. Regrettably, it was shelved due to the financial crisis in Asia at the time.

The topic I presented at the Conference in Cần Thơ this time is “*The Price of Pollution and How to Conserve the Purity of the Water*”. In the late 1950’s, the villagers of Minamata in Japan suddenly woke up to unusual phenomena: for no apparent reasons, cats went into convulsions as if struck by seizure before they dropped dead. Soon afterward came the turn of humans. Women gave birth to monsters. Those who survived had innate deformities and did not live long afterwards.

This ecological disaster of the last century was so unexpected and came so suddenly that nothing could be done to ward it off. The culprit was the chemical company named Chisso that discharged industrial waste laced with mercury into the Minamata Gulf. This irresponsible practice gave birth to a contamination cycle beginning with the sea weeds, aquatic plants then shrimps and fish. It later spread to animals like cats. At the end of the food chain were humans who became indirect victims on account of their consumption of sea food that contained toxic levels of mercury.

Damning evidences abounded yet Chisso stubbornly refused to admit guilt. That is not until the shocking photographs taken by Eugene Smith were produced to the public in 1972 creating a wave of horror and consternation in the court of world opinion.

Tomoko Uemura – this 17 year old native of Minamata Village could be considered the typical victim. Besides being blind and deaf

mute, he was born with a body deformed beyond recognition. He lived in a vegetative state and totally depended on his mother for his care. The humility and patience shown by this extraordinary lady belied her immovable determination to fight for the dignity and survival of her son. Over those years, this beautiful soul never failed to spoon feed and bathe her son until he breathed his last. It is worth mentioning that before the advent of that calamity, Tomoko's parents and the other villagers were all in good health.

Eventually, Chisso was forced to accept responsibility and pay for the clean-up of the gulf. More than half a century had passed (1997) before the water in Minamata Gulf regained its original purity. However, the victims like Tomoko had all passed away at least twenty years back.

No More Minamata

To revisit the Minamata tragedy is to remind the inhabitants of the Mekong Basin of the sad lesson they should never forget as they have to live every day with the industrial waste being discharged from the huge industrial zones in Yunnan and Thailand.

No sooner had I stopped talking than a question was raised by a person in the audience:

– The issue you just discussed is of colossal dimensions. What can we do about it? It is hopeless to try to put a halt to the Chinese construction of the eight dams in the series of the Mekong Cascades in Yunnan. Beijing will press ahead with its program of dam building regardless.

– As a country located downstream all we can do is to implement a three-phase preventive program. The best and most pro-active stage is called Primary Prevention. It allows us to remedy the source of the problem right from the start. Unfortunately, we are unable to do anything

in this stage. We are not even allowed to have a look at the factories in the Yunnan industrial zones. The next stage is known as Secondary Prevention. Its aim is to help us detect the earliest signs of ecological degradation and issue alarms to try to stop them on their tracks. This is not the best approach to the problem but that's what we can do. I will dwell more extensively into this topic when we discuss the setting up of the Environment Monitoring System. The Tertiary Prevention would be the third and also the least desirable stage. We have to wait for a tragedy like that at Minamata to unfold before any remedial measures could be taken. By then, a high price in human lives and suffering may have already been incurred not to mention an enormous amount of resources spent to take care of the physical damages.

In the Secondary Prevention stage, we have the ability to monitor the rate of discharge and the movement of pollution from China's industrial plants with the help of machines installed at the various Eco Watch stations downstream. In the early years of the 1960's, Doctor LeLand Clark had invented an electrical membrane capable of timely and accurately measuring the level of oxygen in the water. This method had been widely applied in the United States. It later was used by many industrialized nations resulting in the preservation of the quality of their water.

To carry it a step further, many environmentalists claim that it is not sufficient to keep an eye on only one or two parameters. As a result, a more advanced long-term multi-parameters monitoring equipment has been designed.

This machine is a light and compact model capable of testing and measuring different types of water: fresh water, seawater, or even polluted water. It can monitor up to 9 parameters at the same time: pH level, temperature, salinity, turbidity, conductivity, dissolved oxygen (DO), ammonia, nitrate, oxygen reduction potential (ORP) at non-vented depth. All the collected data can be transferred to a PC using an

Eco Watch application for Windows.

To take water samples for monthly testing is an outdated process that can lead to a misevaluation of the degree of degradation in a water source because of its constantly changing condition. It is now been replaced by the Real-Time Data Collection method that results in a quasi-instant detection of pollution in the water.

In the initial phase, six Eco Watch stations will be built with the northernmost one located at the Houei Sei Hamlet in the vicinity of the industrial zone of Yunnan. The second one is planned for the city of Kratie, south of the Khone Waterfall, near the Cambodia-Laos border. The third and fourth are projected for Tân Châu (the Tiền River) and Châu Đốc (the Hậu River) respectively. The last two located downstream the Mỹ Thuận and Cần Thơ Bridges will be assigned the additional duty of monitoring tidal movements.

Data collected by those Eco Watch stations will be forwarded to the Departments of Ecology at the University of Cần Thơ in Vietnam, the Royal University in Cambodia, the University of Vientiane in Laos, and the Thammasat University in Thailand. Two thousand kilometers separate the Houei Sei station in the north from the University of Cần Thơ at the southern end. This distance, though considerable, does not pose any problem for our modern electronic technology or the Internet. Experts in ecology at those institutions of higher learning will analyze those data and combine their findings in order to issue early warnings or propose remedial measures as needed.

The meaning of a few indexes applied in the EMS/ Environment Monitoring System: the normal level of pH in the Mekong is 7.0. If for any reason, for instance industrial waste, it drops below 5.0 in acidity or rises higher than 9.0 in alkali content then the fish, shrimps and some other types of living organism will not be able to survive. The safe level of dissolved oxygen (DO) in the water ranges from 7.5 to 8.0 mg/L.

Should the organic substances released by pollution into the water cause it to dip below 6.5mg/L the living animals in that water may die of asphyxiation. As an example, at some sections of the Saigon River, the DO level had been recorded at 3.5 indicating that the shrimps and fish had disappeared from those waters. Portable instruments can also be used to detect toxic metals in the water.

Dr. Chamsak, member of the International Water Management Institute (IWMI), was responsible for the presentation on the second topic concerning the Application of the IWMI Integrated Eco-Hydrological Database Information System in the Lower Mekong Basin

He rose up to address the Conference:

– At the threshold of the 21st century, what we are seriously confronted with is not a land but water crisis. It is apparent to all of us that though the world population is growing at an exponential rate, our food supply only increases at a non-exponential or arithmetical one. The pressure to boost food production requires an enormous quantity of water that our planet is unable to provide. To make things worse, in some areas, farmers are abusing the use of irrigation water causing the underground water levels to drop entailing a collapse of the land above at an alarming pace. We must rectify this unacceptable state of affairs without delay if we do not wish to perpetuate the squandering of this diminishing natural resource.

After studying the demand for water from the farming regions of the world in the coming century, experts from the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR) also arrived at the same conclusion. They are embarking on a project to use computers to observe and analyze the areas that can be turned into arable lands. This organization is also funding the IWMI to design a synthesizer named World Water and Climate Digital Atlas to provide data concerning the weather and water reserve in any particular area with a pixel resolution

accurate enough to show details at a scale of half a square mile. Any users, from governments to private farmers, can download the information from the Internet or CDs provided by IWMI.

In simple terms and without resorting to mathematical models, if the circumference of the earth is divided into 360 degrees, then at the equator each arc of one second is equivalent to 0.2 mile. The clarity level attained to date is 2.5 minutes or 3 miles, sufficient to provide the needed data for a region as large as the basins of rivers. The final objective set by IWMI is to increase the clarity level or the resolution by 30 seconds or about half a square mile enough to cover small areas in the delta like Đồng Tháp Mười or Plain of Reeds / Plaine des Jongs where the characters of the soil are constantly changing.

The synthesizer will be continuously updated with data pertaining to the weather and water reserves combined with other variables enabling the farmers to rationally choose what land, crop, season to plant without wasting the precious water.

The third and also last paper was presented at the Conference by Doctor Martina, the guest speaker who came from Stanford University. It is entitled “Devoid of Biotechnology... Humankind Will Starve”. In it she advocated the use of technology to usher in a prosperous future for all the countries in the Mekong Basin.

On his lecture trip to the University of Cần Thơ this time, Duy succeeded in persuading Dr. Martina, his close and long-time colleague, to join him and give that presentation. The two were so close that at one time it was thought that they would tie the knot had Duy not met Bé Tư.

Duy chose to offer a bouquet of camellias to Bé Tư on their wedding day as a reminder of their trip to Yunnan over two years back. From the time they first met, Bé Tư was captivated by the brilliant ideas propounded by Duy, a rising star at Stanford. Through the eyes

of a professor of genetics, Duy believes that the young and still virile “cultural” genes in the South will make the Mekong Delta the new cradle of the Vietnamese culture during the next millennium. It will replace the existing culture of the Red River in the North whose “cultural” genes are now old and defective.

Though she is now Duy’s wife, the less formal Western style relationship Duy maintains with the beautiful women around him at times makes Bé Tư feel jealous. A case in point is Dr. Martina, the attractive Italian American blonde, who is also the Director of the Biotechnology Program at Stanford University.

On this Eco-Tour of the Mekong Delta, Dr. Martina was also invited to speak at the Department of Agriculture and Ecology of the University of Cần Thơ on the application of biotechnologies to agriculture.

She chose a direct and lively introduction to address the teaching staff and students of various departments in the large auditorium:

– Let me begin to thank Dr. Duy, my colleague at Stanford University, for giving me the opportunity to visit Vietnam for the first time. Especially for my interesting Eco-Tour in the Mekong Delta. What moved me most in this trip is my conversation with a remarkable journalist who told me about the famine in the year 1945 that took the life of almost two million Vietnamese. The unimaginable thing is that it happened in a country considered to be the richest rice bowl of Asia. Let us pause for a moment to commemorate those unfortunate victims.

With that short introduction, Dr. Martina instantly captured the heart of her listeners. She continued:

– In fact, from time immemorial, famines like epidemics happen with different degrees of severity and at different places like in the nations of Africa or North Korea whose next door neighbor is the prosperous

South. As we enter the Era of Globalization, we still have to find ways to feed and clothe a rapidly growing population. We do it to stave off starvation but on the other hand we also must minimize the detrimental impacts our actions visit on a fragile ecology that is being degraded at an alarming pace. The forests keep on shrinking, fertile lands being eroded, deserts rapidly expanding. We cannot go on cutting down the rainforests in Cambodia and Laos or infringing on national parks like Cúc Phương without eventually bringing famine on our heads.

With Duy's flawless interpretation, there was no breach in communication. So, Dr. Martina went on speaking in the impeccable accent of a BBC radio announcer:

– In fact, biotechnology is very different from the conventional farming methods. It helps us avoid the nefarious impacts on the ecology that up to our time are unavoidable. Once they mastered the handling of DNA, recombinant DNA, genetic engineering, micro-organisms, and catalyst... scientists are able to multiply manifold the food production with high levels of nutrients as well as vitamins, anti-oxidants, and fibers...

Molecular biotechnology has become a universal science during the last decade of this century. A good example of this is The International Rice Research Institute (IRRI). Studies are being done at this institution to come up with a super miracle rice with very high yields, resistant to insects, and adaptable to droughts or the hot climate of West Africa. As a result, farmers will no longer be dependent on chemicals like fertilizers or insecticides...Biotechnology has shown its tremendous potentials to preserve natural resources and restore the viability of the polluted environment with the use of micro-organisms in the disposals of garbage and waste.”

Mr. Nhu Phong was overwhelmed listening to those things which appeared so new to him. He felt as if he was stuck in the past while standing at one end of the Càn Thơ Bridge. Meantime, the future is

beckoning to him at the other end. He was reminded of a phrase written by Jean Paul Sartre “*La vie humaine commence de l’autre côté du désespoir/ Human life begins at the reverse side of despair.*”

CHAPTER XXII

IN SEARCH OF THE LOST PARADISE IN THE EAST

*Chauvinism, religion, ethnicity, ecology...
the Mekong Delta embodies all the causes for unrest.*
Ngô Thế Vinh

Paradise in the East

We took the same flight from Bangkok to Vientiane. From there we parted company with the understanding to meet again in Saigon. I headed north to the Houei Sai Hamlet where the first and most crucial Eco Watch station of the Environment Monitoring System was to be located.

As for Duy and Bé Tư his wife, they planned to go on a field trip to the south in the company of a group of Englishmen from the Worldwide Fund for Nature. On this occasion, Duy had the joy of seeing old friends he met for the first time in Phnom Penh two years before. At that time, together, they defied the dangers posed by buried mines to search for an extremely rare species of wild cow named Kouprey. This creature was first spotted by biologists in 1939 and was chosen by Prince Sihanouk

as the animal symbol of Cambodia in 1963. Feared to be extinct, there was only a slight hope that a small number of this creature could still be living in the jungle of Pailin to the west of Cambodia. This area borders Thailand and was once used as a military base by the Khmer Rouge. After months of arduous search, the team returned empty handed but safe.

On this second expedition, the same group met with better luck. They came across two totally new species of bird in the rainforests near the Lao-Vietnamese borders and attributed their good fortune to the presence of Bé Tư in their midst. Of particular interest, is their discovery of an exceptionally rare species of rabbit outside the tiny village of Balak to the west of the Trường Sơn Range. This rabbit had not been seen anywhere else. Its back is covered with yellow furs and black stripes and its hips with red furs. Christened the Trường Sơn Rabbit, it bears a close resemblance to the striped rabbits of Sumatra in Indonesia that are now extinct.

In the trained eye of a geneticist, Duy surmises that if DNA sequencing later confirms the similarities between those two animals then this would be additional evidence that the ancient Southeast Asian Subcontinent, formerly a part of the super continent Sundalan, was at one time connected to the islands and archipelagoes such as Indonesia. In prehistoric times, rises in the sea level caused the low lying parts of that topography to become submerged under water leaving only the present day islands and island nations standing above the ocean.

Furthermore, the Đông Sơn bronze drums found in the countries and islands of Southeast Asia offer proof of the close kinship between the various cultures that are separated by a vast ocean.

Some time ago, Duy was dumbfounded when he held in his hands a rather voluminous book written not by an archeologist but a medical doctor from England. In it the author had systematically and

convincingly shown that what he had believed so far to be just a theory may turn out to be well founded after all.

The author, a pediatrician named Stephen Oppenheimer specialized in tropical medicine. His research on malaria in the islands of Papua New Guinea in the South Pacific led him to the study of genetic mutations. What he learned persuaded him that massive migrations from Southeast Asia had taken place at the end of the last Ice Age.

For two decades, Oppenheimer tirelessly roamed the Far East, the Asian continent, and the Pacific islands to look for evidences indicating that “the founder cultures or humanity’s culture” originated in that part of Southeast Asia now lying under the ocean.

He brilliantly argued his case in his book *“Eden in the East”* [24] that was published in July of 1999. Academic works done on the origins of world cultures for the most part failed to mention those of Southeast Asia. Scholars totally disregarded the oldest and richest cultures on this planet. This omission stemmed from the misconception that they are only byproducts of the Chinese and Indian cultures.

Actually, at the end of the last Ice Age, Southeast Asia by its own right was a continent occupying part of a huge land mass known as Sundaland. After the glaciers had melted in three distinct phases, the sea level rose by 130 meters submerging all the cultural centers on that continental shelf. The inundated area was as large as the North American land mass. About 8,000 years ago, the glaciers at the North Pole suddenly collapsed causing a fissure in the earth crust. The gigantic tsunami that ensued brought about the last flood of biblical dimensions on this planet.

As the Sundaland became inundated, the local inhabitants went on a mass migration by both land and sea routes. Some marched northward to distant China. Others sailed eastward toward the Pacific Islands,

westward toward the Indian Ocean or southward to Australia.

In recent times, after the sea level had somewhat subsided, archeologists were able to dig up from under layers of mud the vestiges of ancient cultures in Southeast Asia, China, Mesopotamia, Polynesia, Melanesia, and Oceania.

There are also indications from gene markers suggesting that the indigenous peoples of Southeast Asia had migrated to as far away as the islands in the South Pacific, the Middle East and even the American continent.

Studies of comparative mythology revealed that the “great flood” mentioned in the myths of the Southeast Asian islands and South West Pacific can also be found in those of the Middle East and Europe.

In summary, recent findings from oceanography, archeology, linguistics, genetics, and studies of folklores build a strong case suggesting that the cradle of human civilization started not in the Middle East but in the submerged Sundaland of present day Southeast Asia.

Gliding on the Brown Highway

On the last day of their trip to Laos, the couple Duy and Bé Tu returned to Saigon. They spent a night at the hotel Kim Đô on Nguyễn Huệ Street so that they could leave on time the next morning for Duy to deliver a lecture at the School of Medicine of the University of Cần Thơ.

Surprisingly, on that day, Lê Lý Hayslip was also staying in the same hotel, on the second floor. She is the author of two memoirs: *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places: A Vietnamese Woman's Journey from War to Peace* (Doubleday, 1989), and *Child of War, Woman of Peace* (Doubleday, 1993). It was not until the release of the

1993 film *Heaven & Earth*, based on her life and directed by Oliver Stone, that she became well known and a controversial figure within the Vietnamese communities overseas. As an activist, Lê Lý Hayslip founded two charitable organizations: *East Meets West* and *Global Village Foundation* to offer humanitarian assistance to the needy in Vietnam and other countries of Asia. She was honored with a California State Assembly award for her works for postwar reconciliation in Vietnam.

Duy and Bé Tu woke up at the crack of dawn to take their favorite “continental breakfast” at the hotel’s restaurant which consisted of rice gruel, salted duck eggs, and fresh fruits from the Mekong Delta like bananas, papayas, pine apples, water melons, and the dragon fruits that tasted refreshing but a bit sour. On my recommendation, they opted for the river route and boarded a Soviet made hydrofoil run by *Vina Express*, a joint venture between Singapore and Vietnam.

The deserted section of Nguyễn Huệ Street, between Lê Lợi and the Saigon river bank, at day break, was converted into soccer fields or badminton courts for young and old alike. At that time of the year, this street was not used to hold the annual flower fair. Young ladies jogged on the clean sidewalks while large groups of people – mostly elderly – practiced Tai Chi at the river embankment. On the other side of the river, large bill boards stood shoulder to shoulder to advertise beers, alcohols, or electronic products manufactured by the Dragons of Asia like Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, or Singapore.

Saigon Harbor In Search of Lost Time

Before long, the French Mekong Expedition left Saigon harbor with two Navy gunboats on June 5, 1866 in search of a trade route with China. It was an emotional departure because the seven explorers of the group had no idea how long they would be away from the colony of Cochinchina. Eventually, they spent two years and twenty-four

days on a perilous expedition struggling through dense rainforests, insurmountable rapids and tropical diseases. Finally, by way of Shanghai, the disillusioned members of the expedition with Lagrée's coffin in tow reached Saigon on June 29, 1868.

From the bar "*Pointe Des Blagueurs*" /The Joker's Point Bar built in the early 1900's French colonial style for the use of sailors in transit one could watch ocean liners of the company Messageries Maritimes (M.M.) sail by toward Cap Saint Jacques (today's Vũng Tàu) or ships arriving from the sea travel up the Saigon River to the harbor. The docks and M.M. building were immortalized in the semi-autobiographical novel "L'Amant" by Marguerite Duras, winner of the 1984 Prix Goncourt in France. It was later made into a movie directed by Jean-Jacques Annaud. In it Duras related the tumultuous affair between an adolescent French girl and her Chinese lover. The set was life on the fringe of Saigon in the 1930s in Indochina during the waning days of France's colonial empire.

Hydrofoils that looked imposing and intimidating like submarines were moored at the harbor waiting for their passengers. Those high-speed boats were used to transport travelers to almost all the major river locations in the Mekong Delta. They were air-conditioned and equipped with bars. Charming attendants dressed in their graceful "áo dài" and looking like airline stewardesses catered to the needs of the passengers or offered them free newspapers.

The craft weighed anchor at exactly 7:30 AM from the Bạch Đằng Quay. It sped down the Saigon River between rows of lush mangroves. During wartime, those were the favorite hiding places for RPG B40 gunners to lay in wait for the Navy ships and blow their hulls to pieces with their deadly projectiles. The speeding large hydrofoil left on its wake waves powerful enough to capsize smaller crafts that dared get too close. After the first few fatal encounters with those menacing Soviet vessels, the small boats learned their lessons and had since kept

a safe distance at their approach.

True to my promise, I returned on time from the Houei Sai Hamlet in northern Laos to meet Duy and his wife. As usual, I did my homework so that I could be the perfect guide for the couple. This time, to be prepared for our river trip, I was able to get hold of a trove of useful information for my friends and a “*Mekong Delta Tour Guide Map*” used by the participants of the Francophone Summit, the first summit of French-speaking nations held in Hanoi on Nov 14, 1997.

Our boat did not continue on to the Soài Rạp Mouth to enter the high sea. It turned instead into the Nước Mặn Canal then proceeded toward the Vàm Cỏ River. From there, it navigated down the Chợ Gạo Canal to go into the Tiền River. The familiar thatch huts lining the banks of the rivers and canals kept on receding to the back of our craft as it sped forward.

*[Cây] Mắm trước, đước sau, tràm theo sát
Sau hàng dừa nước thấp thoáng nhà ai?*

*Mắm trees in front, mangroves to the back, jute trees
close to the rear
Behind those rows of Nipa palm trees, whose home is it
my dear?*

Standing in front of those dwellings were women dressed in bright attires in sharp contrast to the dominant green shades of the trees and dull red color of the water in the landscape. The young girls of the Mekong forever look so lovely! They live in a land crisscrossed by canals whose water is dyed dull red, the color of bricks, all year round. As mothers, they dutifully take care of their families and are usually blessed with a good number of children.

I had gone back to the Mekong Delta, all the way to Năm Căn

and was greeted by a jungle of TV antennas erected on the rooftops of the thatch huts. This new entertainment form may be the reason why families in the South of the country are having fewer children now. Leading a life constantly close to nature allows the local folks to remain down to earth and easy going. This trait of character is so beautifully depicted in this proverb:

*Ra đi gặp vịt cũng lùa
Gặp duyên cũng kết,
gặp chùa cũng tu*

*If I meet leaving my hut
A flock of ducks I'll herd
A lovely girl I'll wed
A pagoda I'll shave my head.*

The couple arrived at Mỹ Tho before 9 o'clock in the evening. A large fleet of fishing boats “*Biển Đông /East Sea*” was idling away at their dock under a full moon. Because the fishermen catch the fish by luring them with the light on their crafts, they had to wait for the end of the full moon before they could set out to sea. On this trip, Duy and Bé Tư learned that unlike the boats that ply the rivers, sea faring ships do not have the eyes of the mythical Naga serpent painted on their bows.

I did not share the thrill of a tourist taking a boat ride on the river because I had done it so many times before. Being an ecology engineer, my mind was burdened with more serious thoughts.

The population of the Mekong Delta keeps on increasing at an exponential pace while Eco tourism continues to attract hordes of tourists to the region generating a larger quantity of waste being discharged into the water. On top of that, the mammoth hydroelectric dams built upstream not only reduce the current's flow rate in the affected rivers but also cause additional quantities of industrial waste

to be dumped into the water. Worse yet, the likelihood for the earth's temperature to rise by 3⁰ centigrade during the next century would see to it that the Spratly and Paracel Archipelagoes as well as a good part of the Mekong Delta to be submerged under the rising seawater. What remains of the basin will be severely threatened with salinization by the encroaching seawater.

Mekong Sea Dyke Initiative

We are now being confronted with a gradual rise in the sea level engendered by climate change and global warming. Consequently, the Mekong Delta, the rice bowl of the entire country, is being threatened. Should the sea level rise by only 1 meter, then, 75% of the Mekong Delta will be submerged under seawater. Vietnam has no other alternative but to implement a mega-project that calls for the construction of a multi-purpose dyke [MSD] to prevent seawater intrusion.

The strategic implications and long-term benefits of the MSD are manifold: prevention of seawater intrusion and preservation of the ecosystem in the Mekong Delta; ability to control floods and droughts and solve the problem of fresh water shortage; revitalization of the economic production in the basin by introducing a new economic infrastructure into the Delta; raising the quality of life for the inhabitants in regards to its cultural, educational, and health aspects which are sliding down the dangerous road of degradation.

Another source of considerable revenue that should not be overlooked is the development of ecotourism offering land sports like biking or water sports like waterskiing, boat racing, fishing...

Last but not least, it also holds strategic implications in matters of transportation, economics and defense - especially at this time when the East Sea is in turmoil due to the ongoing conflict pitching the Chinese

giant in the north against its Southeast Asian neighbors.

The MSD is still in its conceptual phase and technical studies are being done jointly by Ngô Minh Triết, a structural engineer and Phạm Phan Long, P.E., of the Friends of the Mekong Group. Since the early 1990s, Phạm was the first to sound the alarm concerning the harmful impacts caused by the construction of hydroelectric dams on the Mekong. He was a cofounder of the Viet Ecology Foundation. This group relentlessly advocates the preservation and betterment of the ecology in order to ameliorate the living conditions of the inhabitants of not only Vietnam but of the Mekong watershed as a whole.

On the Polluted Brown Highway

A few clumps of purple hyacinths in bloom and a bloated carcass of a decomposing animal drifted down the river littered with nylon bags. In addition, other refuse like human and animal excrements, fertilizers, insecticides, waste from the cities and hospitals continuously floated down the current to rendez vous at the mouth of the river.

On the Tiền and Hậu Rivers, when all this waste arrived at Mỹ Tho, Vĩnh Long, and Cần Thơ, it could not reach the open sea as it was held back by the incoming tides. Consequently, the water backed up and swirled around in endless circles creating an unpleasant and unsanitary environment for the local inhabitants.

Results from a recent test at the Eco Sanctuary in Cần Thơ revealed that the level of microorganisms in the water was recorded at almost 20 times the safe level. Nevertheless, this alarming number failed to move anybody into action because, as the saying goes, “*chưa thấy quan tài chưa đổ lệ*” or “*only a burnt child dreads the fire*”. Furthermore, another line of argument says: if harms do come they have not come my way yet, so why should I care? Bewildered, I watched children

frolic merrily in the current and grownups mindlessly use the water to wash vegetable, cook or take care of their household needs.

The coming of the inevitable day

The inevitable day will come when an entire eco-system becomes inexorably devastated because the rivers in the Mekong Delta have turned irreparably polluted... they are sharing the same fate of all the rivers on this planet as forewarned by the World Council on Water for the 21st Century.

Tourism is being developed into an industry. Universities set up Tourism Departments with an eye for adding hundreds of thousands of new jobs to service the tourists and bring in foreign exchanges. An ambitious goal is set to attract two million tourists to Vietnam by the year 2000. “*Du Lịch Sinh Thái*” Eco Tours in the Mekong Delta are expected to play a key role in the effort to reach that objective. In addition to the natural setting of rivers, lush green orchards and tropical fruits, is it really necessary to introduce Sex Tours “*à la Thaïlandaise*” offering the young girls of the Mekong as baits to the tourists?

Could it be that after half a century of warfare, those who survive are adopting “a popular culture tolerant of all kinds of behavior” as long as it “helps one survive”? An application of the motto “the end justifies the means” to the real world?

My immense joy of rediscovering the 8,000-year-old culture of the Sundaland and witnessing the renaissance of the dynamic 300-year-old *Civilization of Orchard* was short-lived. Disturbing signs emanating not from natural disasters but from human hands in the form of an ecological catastrophe or a HIV epidemic are in the making. They are powerful enough to destroy our “Rediscovered Paradise” in its entirety.

The craft turned into the Chợ Lách Canal that connects to all the

tributaries of the Tiền River. Soon afterward, it entered the Măng Thít Canal then navigated upstream to go into the Hậu River. Finally it berthed at Bến Ninh Kiều on the right bank of the river at 1:35 PM. With a depth of 10 meters, this riverine port is deep enough to easily accommodate large ocean-faring boats.

Ordinarily, the tide would have peaked in September. Though it was then November, the tide was still high. On a full moon, the water overflowed the riverbanks and inundated the port all the way to the city market. The non-stop travel time by hydrofoil was shorter than by car because no time was wasted waiting for the barges. The cost of ten dollars for a ticket on the hydrofoil was quite reasonable for a tourist but still steep for the wallets of the inhabitants in the basin. The price was high probably because, unlike the buses, the hydrofoils did not carry cargoes with them.

The city of Cần Thơ sits on the right bank of the Hậu River, 166 kilometers southwest of Saigon. Its population of over a million is still growing to keep pace with its unique hybrid economic system in the so-called “*kinh tế thị trường theo định hướng xã hội chủ nghĩa /socialistic free-market economy*” of the Renovation era.

Works are under way to upgrade the Trà Nóc local airfield into an international airport and Air Mekong is developing plans to fly foreign tourists to the city. Besides being the transportation hub connecting Saigon to Sóc Trang, Bạc Liêu, and Cà Mau; Cần Thơ also serves as the destination point for traffics originating from Châu Đốc, Long Xuyên, Hà Tiên, and Rạch Giá. Furthermore, it is at the confluence of seven channels looking like a wet star that one finds the largest floating market in the south named Phụng Hiệp constantly teeming with boats of all size.

Under the French, Cần Thơ was called the Western Capital of the Mekong Delta. The local girls are so pretty and charming that journalists

from the National Geographic Journal wrote about them. Situated in the center of the rice bowl and orchards of Vietnam, Cần Thơ acts as an economic as well as cultural center.

The University of Cần Thơ and its Faculty of Science and Agriculture rank second only to the IRRI [International Rice Research Institute in Los Banos] for research done on the Miracle Rice grown in the Mekong Delta. For years, before and after 1975, Xuân is a prominent figure of the department. He is very popular and much admired by the local farmers who affectionately call him “Teacher Xuân”. To the international community, he is known as “Dr. Rice” for his success in introducing new, higher-yielding strains of rice to the farmers in Vietnam’s Mekong Delta.

Duy and Bé Tư decided to stay in Cần Thơ. As for me, I chose to continue on to Châu Đốc and Tân Châu in the following day.

The Funan Kingdom and Óc Eo Civilization

Over 10,000 years ago, the Mekong Delta was still a stretch of submerged land on the Sundaland mass. In the beginning, the iron in the alluvia combined with the sulphur of the seawater to form a pyrite composite which was continuously deposited on the sea bed. Eventually, the present day delta emerged from the ocean floor. This is the reason why this new land is relatively low lying. There are areas in the Đồng Tháp Mười depression that are only half a meter above sea level. With time, a new civilization took root and flourished on that land.

In the 1930’s, while building the Ba Thê Canal at the Óc Eo area of the Thoại Sơn District in the An Giang Province, workers dug up vestiges of an ancient sea port. Archeologists believed that they have discovered the ruins belonging to the Funan Kingdom in the Mekong Delta that existed about 18 centuries ago. This thriving maritime civilization had maintained an advanced commercial fleet that traded

with India to the west and China to the north. While the Funanese culture was profoundly influenced by those two trading partners, the Indian influence was assuredly more marked as evidenced in the Funanese practice of Brahmanism and Theravada Buddhism.

The remains of a large network of canals and roads at Óc Eo demonstrate that Funan's society had reached a high level of organization and division of labor.

The French archeologist and historian Louis Malleret named that civilization the "Óc Eo Civilization". Found in this area were: gold coins from Persia and Rome with the head of emperor Marcus Aurelius (121-180), statues of Brahman deities and even of the Buddha.

In the north of Vietnam, due to Chinese influence, statues are mostly made of wood. The more one travels south, the more one finds they are carved in stone pointing to an influence from India.

Under the French, the Museum of History located in Saigon's Botanical Garden was known as the Musée Blanchard de la Brosse and the respected Mr. Louis Malleret was its curator. It is the home of two famous exhibitions: the pre-Angkor Khmer and the Funan collections that consist of pottery made using the turntable technique, musical instruments, bronze implements, and jewelry made of gold and precious stones showing a high degree of intricacy.

Besides blaming natural disasters, no other acceptable hypotheses had been proffered to explain the sudden demise of such an extraordinary civilization that had flourished for a time in the fertile Mekong Delta. The Funanese inhabited a region that still remained a wilderness covered with swamplands at the time of the Southern March. Nobody has any idea whence they came and where they had gone. This enigma still begs for a clear explanation. Archeologists also showed a lack of interest in the other civilizations of the Mekong such as the presence

of huge stone jars in the Plain of Jars in Laos. Researchers will have a field day studying them in the next century.

However, in recent years, novel ideas like those of David P. Chandler have been advanced. This scholar suggested that: *“It is possible that small chiefdoms / small principalities occasionally banded together and called themselves a kingdom for the purposes of sending tributary goods to China or of seeking Chinese help against their neighbors.”* [p.15, David P. Chandler, *A History of Cambodia* 1992]

Prior to Chandler, the British historian Oliver W. Wolters propounded that the term “mandalas” best describes the territorial extents of the “kingdoms in Southeast Asia”. According to him, the genesis of a kingdom began with the advent of a strong tribe acting as a center of power. Its influence kept on expanding to embrace or subjugate its weaker neighbors. The rise and fall of this kingdom depended on its good or bad fortunes. Furthermore, the conquered tribes were constantly striving to secede and establish new kingdoms of their own. Consequently, there never were kingdoms of Funan, Chenla or Lan Xang that can be represented with clear cut borders on our modern day maps.

Going into the 7th century, this region fell under the control of Water Chenla but still remained a wilderness sparsely inhabited by the Khmers. These people led a contented life in their hamlets and depended on primitive farming methods to survive. Many centuries had passed before they came into contact with the Vietnamese marching down from the north during the Trịnh-Nguyễn War in the 16th century.

The influx of Vietnamese pioneers into this new frontier had begun. They did not come as an organized expeditionary force. By sheer dynamism, they succeeded to settle the land and turned it into the fertile Southern Basin it is today.

The conquest of Central Vietnam was marked by centuries of ferocious warfare against the indigenous Chắm. On the contrary, in the Mekong Delta, the Vietnamese did not meet any fierce resistance from the Khmers- not like the case of the White settlers and American Indians. The Khmers chose to withdraw to the dry highlands and eventually became an ethnic minority in their own land.

The Khmers in the Mekong Delta

Nowadays, only 900,000 Khmers live amongst nearly 20 million Vietnamese in the Mekong Delta. The “Mùa Thỏ Dậy” (Uprising Season of the Khmer Krom) will remain forever a terrifying obsession for the Vietnamese living in the western provinces of the south. In the early 1970’s, these Khmers Krom also joined the FULRO and formed the Front for the Liberation of the Mekong Delta.

The vast majority of the Khmers adhere to the Theravada Buddhism that stresses the sole worship of the Buddha and self-reliance on the way to enlightenment.

They congregate mostly in the cities of Trà Vinh, Sóc Trăng, and Châu Đốc where they live isolated from the local inhabitants in “phum” hamlets or “sóc” villages (of 10 hamlets). They dwell in simple structures sometimes made of thatches and typically raised on stilts for protection from annual floods. In contrast, they erect imposing golden pagodas for the monks, their spiritual leaders. Not far from the pagodas are the stupas containing human ashes of the cremated dead thus accounting for the absence of cemeteries in Khmer villages.

In the Mekong Delta where large communities of Khmers can be found, it is a familiar scene to see monks file out of their pagodas in their brilliant yellow robes to start on their morning walk to beg for food.

In the Renovation era, the monks no longer hold their wooden bowls

in their hands. More often than not, young novices follow them in close step carrying shiny aluminum containers with multiple compartments to store the food donated by the villagers. Our monks are allowed to eat any food they receive, be it vegetarian or meat. This practice is frowned upon by the Mahayana Buddhism branch, literally the “Great Vehicle”, in the North that observes a strict vegetarian diet.

The Two Eco Stations on the Border

Since he had to chair the Conference on Agriculture, “teacher Xuân” could not keep me company but sent an engineer named Thuận to take his place. This young man is the son of “comrade” Mười Nhe, a member of the Province’s People Committee who, not long ago, was only a member of the People Committee of the Tam Nông District. Soon after his promotion, Mười Nhe was voted into the Party’s Central Committee. Such a fast advancement in Mười Nhe’s political career was seen as a sign of the growing influence of the conservative faction.

When asked about the support the local authorities reserve for the Environment Monitoring System, Thuận, a recent college graduate, answered with a saddened voice:

– The members of the Province’s People Committee are not enthusiastic about it. On the other hand, they also do not openly voice their opposition since the system is viewed by the Party leaders as a matter of national policy. So! They do not offer much actual assistance either. In their mind there are more immediate and pressing issues to take care of like the food and clothing for the people. The environment? They relegate it to the back burner.

This is exactly the point of view held by “comrade” Mười Nhe, Thuận’s father. It appears as if my field trip to find a site for the first Eco Station was not destined for a good start.

Signs of thriving economic activities abounded as one drove along the right bank of the Hậu River from Long Xuyên in the direction of Châu Đốc. Houses stood shoulder to shoulder on both sides of the national route. Vehicles of all size, including huge cargo trucks, hustled for space on the road. When approaching a crowded section, they blew their horns frantically to warn the pedestrians including children on their way to or from school. Sitting in a 15-seat Minivan with a seasoned driver at the wheel, I did not feel safe. I thought I was not up to driving in such traffic even though I had driven thousands of miles on all types of roads in the United States, interstate highways included.

No matter how fast the speed, it took almost two hours for me to reach this strategically located border town that used to be a well-fortified place under the Nguyễn Shoguns. When the French came, Châu Đốc went through an extensive expansion as many a beautiful villa surrounded by lush gardens was built. The city sits at the head of the Vĩnh Tế Canal that runs all the way to the Hà Tiên estuary forming a man-made border with Cambodia.

Thanks to its rich history, Châu Đốc is endowed with famous monuments like the Châu Phú temple commemorating Commander Nguyễn Hữu Cảnh whose name is closely associated with the Southern March, the tomb of proconsul Thoại Ngọc Hầu on the Sam Mountain, the Tây An Pagoda, and the shrine of Bà Chúa Xứ. Activities at these sites add an air of festivity to the city all year round.

The once famous floating market Ngã Ba on the Châu Đốc River no longer meets. This did not prevent, however, the largest farm of fresh water fish in the Mekong Delta from being located there. In addition, Châu Đốc has earned the reputation for being the home of the best mullet fish paste in the country. The well-loved Vietnamese poet Tản Đà once equated culinary art with culture. It is not surprising then to hear people talk about the Cự Đà Soy Sauce Culture in the Red River Basin being replaced by the Châu Đốc's Mullet Fish Paste Culture in

the Mekong Delta. One does not need the scholarly jargon of Dr. Duy, the geneticist, to refer to the transition from one culture to another.

From the Khone Waterfall

At the approach of Phnom Penh, the Tonle Thom, the Khmer name for the Mekong, splits up into three branches. They later rejoin the main current to form a four way intersection named Quatre Bras by the French. In the Rainy Season, a tributary of the Tonle Sap River reverses its course and flows into the Great Lake. It later resumes its normal course during the Dry Season. The other two remaining branches are the Tiền River in the north and the Bassac River in the south. The latter is renamed the Hậu River when it crosses the frontier into Vietnam.

While flowing inside of Cambodia, the Hậu is a relatively narrow river because it is only a tributary of the Mekong. Once it enters Vietnam, it is joined by the Châu Đốc River and other canals bringing with them the water from the Tiền River. As a result, its flow quickens and its current widens considerably.

Thuận and I sat tight on the motor boat that dashed north on the immense current of the Hậu River whose water was dyed red, the color of alluvium. It abruptly made a turn into a canal that connects with the Tiền River then continued on toward Tân Châu at the Cambodian-Vietnamese border. This city is renowned for its satin, “lãnh Tân Châu”, which is dyed with the fruit of the “mặc nưa” tree making it sturdy and much sought after.

With water rushing down from upstream, the flow rate of the Tiền River hits alarm category number 3. The width of the current expands to more than 2 kilometers. However, the green trees on one bank are still visible from the other. The village of Vinh Xương with a population of 10,000 is considered the estuary closest to Om Xà No in Cambodia. Only about ten steps separate this village from the border where a

customs office and a couple of coffee stands are located. According to the government's plan, an International Border Market will be built here in the year 2000. It will cover an area of 11 acres and replace the flea market that is now a de facto preserve of smugglers.

In the middle of the current, a large iron boat of the coast guard dropped anchor at an imaginary demarcation line between the two countries. Since they were still locked in endless disputes, those two uneasy neighbors had come to a tacit understanding that any borderline drawn on the map was meant for "consultative" purpose only.

Navigating upstream the Tiền River were commercial barges overloaded with cabbages, vegetable, and fruits. Occasionally, one or two large oil tankers with hundreds of tons displacement would join the group. They were all heading toward Phnom Penh.

The days when traffic on this river was humming with boats sailing the East Sea and the Phnom Penh route was long gone. It happened during the time the United Nations sent the multi-nation force known as UNTAC into Cambodia to help stabilize this nation in the aftermath of the Vietnamese troop withdrawal.

We took a ride on a motorboat to visit the coast guard ship anchored in the middle of the river under the warm tropical sun. The waves our craft left in its wake rocked the tiny fishing boats nearby. Their owners were out to catch tiny "ba sa" catfish swimming down from the Tonle Sap Lake to sell them to the fish farms at the Ngã Ba of the Châu Đốc River.

It was projected that the first two Eco Watch stations would be built at the Houei Sai Hamlet and Kratie at the foot of the Khone Waterfall. The third and fourth ones would be located near the Vietnamese border, at Tân Châu and Ngã Ba on the Tiền and Hậu Rivers respectively as these rivers enter Vietnam.

More than six decades ago, upon graduating from the Public Works School, the Vietnamese scholar Nguyễn Hiến Lê went to work at Tân Châu as a young technician. At that time, he had only a very rudimentary water meter to work with. Nowadays, with a “compact sonde”, a communication technician like Bẫy will do fine. He is not only a border guard but also doubles as an Eco Watch’s team leader trained to ring the alarm at the first signs of pollution coming down from the north. In a way, Bẫy can be considered a member of the Friends of the Mekong Group in the fullest sense of the word. He is fighting for what a reporter of the French daily *Le Monde* called “une cause célèbre” or a worthy, famous cause.

The motto “For a Bright Future of the Mekong” means early danger detection, fast remedy determination, and last but not least immediate action. It is never too soon to act!

The Chăm Bhrâu – the New Chăm of Châu Đốc

Despite a seemingly bad start, the search for a potential site for the Eco Watch station went on smoothly. Thuận left early to take the equipment back to the University of Cần Thơ. As for me, I stayed at Châu Đốc to continue with my visits to the Chăm villages and further investigate an issue I believe to be crucially related to the future of the Mekong Delta.

Recently the daily *Le Monde* also mentioned the “*Songes indépendantistes dans l’Asie*” or the dreams for independence in Asia. People begin to pay closer attention to the movements for independence of the ethnic minorities. The Muslims in Asia, though small in number, are particularly active in promoting this ideology.

In his book “Rebels with a Cause”, Nicholas L. Krittie raised the alarming prospects of a political phenomenon in which “Religious extremism shows a potential to explode in full force. The most ominous

source of conflict in the future will come from political-religious extremism.” Of course, by nature religion is commendable but when mixed with politics it may turn into a “Dangerous Duo” as orthodoxy can become synonymous with extremism.

The two meetings held in preparation for the Conference of the Minority Groups of Indochina in San Francisco, were on the verge of collapse when a number of representatives of the FULRO voiced their determined and uncompromising demands. This group categorically threatened to withdraw from the Conference if the Vietnamese guests were allowed to attend. Those Vietnamese Americans were invited to speak in consideration for the research they did on the history of Southeast Asia at the University of California in Berkeley. Eventually, the conference was held with the participation of an international panel minus its Vietnamese members.

The acronym FULRO stands for “Front Unifié de Lutte des Races Opprimées” or the United Front for the Struggle of the Oppressed Races. It started off as a political movement in the 1960’s and was regarded simply as an uprising of the ethnic minorities residing in the Central Highlands of Vietnam led by Y Bham. In reality, it also included the Liberation Front of Champa, and the Liberation Front of the Mekong Delta (Kampuchea Krom). The behind-the-scene leader was a Chām named Les Kosem, a former senior paratrooper officer who was closely associated with General Lon Nol of the Royal Cambodian Armed Forces. Les Kosem was later promoted to the rank of major general. The main argument espoused by the more extremist elements of this movement ran along this line: *“The root cause for the collapse of the Kingdom of Champa could be attributed to the Southern March of the Vietnamese which in essence is expansionary as well as aggressive”*.

They added: “Although the Champa Nation is not represented on the map of the world, its people still exist as a multi-ethnic community. Their existence is not only evidenced through archeological vestiges

like stone steles or the ruins of their ancient temples but it can also be seen in two very dynamic minority groups: the first one comprises of 300,000 inhabitants of the Tây Nguyên region in Central Vietnam. The second one consists of 100,000 Chăms in Phan Rang and Phan Rí; 30,000 in Châu Đốc, Tây Ninh; and more than 150,000 living as refugees in Cambodia and Thailand.”

Actually, the leaders of the overseas Montagnards from Central Highlands do not recognize they are citizens of Champa but rather of a different country they call Dega. The home page of this group’s website claims that its own national flag has four colors with the picture of an elephant symbolizing strength or fortitude, the color green: the mountains and jungles, the color red: blood and struggle, the color white: peace, and the yellow circle: justice and friendship.

On the other hand, the more moderate Chăms scholars offered a quite different analysis: “Throughout history from the 11th to the 19th centuries there existed a constant schism among the Chăms people. It was this internal division which led to the demise of their Kingdom.”

Ironically, one cannot refute the historical truth that the Chăms were also victims of the civil war which unfolded in neighboring Vietnam. At that time, the rivalry between the Trịnh and Nguyễn “shoguns” threatened to tear that country apart. To ease the constant pressure coming from the Trịnh “shogun” in the north, the Nguyễn “shogun” had no choice but expand southward at the expense of the Chăms. When Nguyễn Ánh fought against the Tây Sơn, the Kingdom of Chămpa was once again turned into a battleground. Then, during the Lê Văn Khôi uprising against the Huế court, the Chăms got inextricably caught in this political maelstrom and ended up as hapless victims of merciless retributions at the hands of Emperor Minh Mạng (1820-1841). One can say that in 1832 the Kingdom of Chămpa was “wiped off the map.”

The Chăms population in Central Vietnam is currently reported at

60,000 living on a narrow and arid strip of land stretching from Phan Thiết to Phan Rí (Bình Thuận) with the highest concentration in Phan Rang (Ninh Thuận) famous for its sand, sunshine, and wind.

Champa was once a powerful kingdom with a magnificent civilization. Its territory extended from Quảng Bình to present day Biên Hòa. On several occasions, its battle hardened soldiers attacked Thăng Long and sowed fear in the heart of the Đại Việt's court. They also ransacked and occupied the capital city of Angkor and their feats were recorded in the reliefs of the renovated Angkor monuments.

Then, the Southern March started. In the 11th century (1069), under the Lý Dynasty, the Vietnamese reached Quảng Bình and Quảng Trị. Six centuries later, during the Nguyễn Dynasty, they stood at the door of the mini kingdom Panduranga in the southernmost region of the Champa Kingdom.

Most of the Chăm in Phan Rang (Chăm Ahier) are followers of Brahmanism. They still observe some forms of matriarchal customs, worship in their temples and cremate the dead. There are some Awal or Bani Chăm who practice Islam but not in the same way as the Muslims in Châu Đốc that they called Chăm bhrâu (New Chăm).

The Chăm Pani Panang (in Phan Rí, Phan Rang provinces) live in very distinctive villages which are invariably enclosed within fences made of dry tree trunks or bamboos. Their dwellings are surrounded by treeless yards because they fear that ghosts or demons can hide inside the tree shades. Those who claim to possess a good understanding of history have a different take on this. They assert that the Chăm do not plant trees around their houses because they want to discourage the Vietnamese from attacking them. They also claim that it was this village layout that inspired Mr. Ngô Đình Nhu to promote his national policy of building Ấp Chiến Lược (strategic hamlets) to fight the communist insurgents in later years.

The Chẵm women still wear long robes that hang down to their heels. They do not carry water jugs or baskets of goods on poles but on their heads to the market. Central Vietnam, particularly Phan Rang, is famous for ancient Chẵm Temples such as the Ba Tháp (9th century), the Po Klong Garai (14th century), the Po Rômé which is also the last one built in the 17th century. Even though those temples have fallen in ruins, their natural setting and the customs of the Chẵm survivors always prove captivating to the tourists.

Turning back the pages of history, prior to the fall of Champa, as if by fate, several waves of Chẵm crossed the Trường Sơn Range in the west and migrated to countries like Cambodia (Kompong Cham and on elevated lands along the Mekong) and Thailand (Ban Khrua in Bangkok, the ancient capital of Ayutthya, and a large Chẵm community on the bank of the Chao Phraya River)... When living in Thailand, they helped their host country build its royal navy.

When the Nguyễn Shoguns decided to settle the region of Châu Đốc, proconsul Thoại Ngọc Hầu was assigned the mission to build the Vĩnh Tế Canal. The local Chẵm were inducted into the “Côn Man” forces. Being fierce fighters they proved to be able defenders of the Châu Đốc Citadel and competent supervisors of the 80,000 Khmer and Vietnamese workers who labored night and day to construct the Vĩnh Tế Canal. This labor force worked for five straight years and paid a high cost in human lives to complete their work.

The Huế court was really satisfied with the completion of the canal and looked upon it as a great accomplishment. To reward the Chẵm for their service, Emperor Minh Mạng issued a decree to give them enough land to build 7 villages named Châu Giang, Phum Xoài, Lama, Katambong, Tam Hội, Bún Bình Thiên, Đồng Ko Ki. The emperor intentionally chose the number “7” because it traditionally bears a special meaning to the Chẵm. Later, villagers from Phum Xoài moved across the river to start the new village of Đa Phước specializing in the

raising of mulberry leaves and silk worms for the weaving of silk. For that reason it is called Koh Kaboäk or the Silk Island.

Through a very long period of uneventful but separate coexistence with the Vietnamese, the Chẵm are able to hang on to many aspects of their cultural heritage. Even so, it did not prevent them from growing different from their compatriots who are still living in their original lands.

Though they are the same people, after only 300 years of living apart, they have developed along different paths and nurture different aspirations. As the historians of the Chẵm people had correctly observed, dissimilarities and complex divergences do exist among the various Chẵm communities like the Muslim Chẵm bhrâu (New Chẵm) in Châu Đốc, Muslim Chẵm Awal/Bani in Phan Rang, and Brahman Chẵm Ahier.

At the end of the 20th century, the Chẵm people have opened the door to welcome a new future. After 1975, along with over two million Vietnamese, Cambodians, and Laotians, about 25,000 Chẵm left Vietnam to seek refuge abroad. Approximately 20,000 Muslim Chẵm from Châu Đốc chose to resettle in Malaysia where they were welcomed with outstretched arms. The rest, Chẵm coming from Phan Rang and Phan Rí, went to live in third countries like the United States, France, Australia, Canada... as citizens of Vietnam or Cambodia. Currently, the largest overseas Chẵm community resides in the state of California in the United States. They mainly keep to themselves and observe their own customs.

Though the overseas Chẵm communities do not represent the majority of the Chẵm population, their leaders are graduates of American, French, and Malaysian universities. They form a new generation of Chẵm who can look beyond the burden of grief and nostalgia that is known to define their national character since the

demise of their nation:

*Còn đâu nữa những ngày oai hùng cũ
Khi Tháp Chàm ủ rũ dưới màn sương*

Gone are the glorious days of old
Now that the mournful Chẵm stupas
Are covered by the fog's folds?

In the beginning, the Chẵm of the Diaspora lived in unconnected Chẵm communities without kings or leaders. Though speaking the same language they failed to come to a common understanding with each other. Now, things have changed. They have formed a group full of vigor and new ideas intent on bringing about a “Chẵm Renaissance”. They trust that the study of Chẵm history will help build a strong spirit of solidarity that will allow them to unite politically the domestic and overseas Chẵm communities. Most significantly, they were able to establish a working relationship with and receive support from wealthy Muslim states like Saudi Arabia, Egypt and nearby Malaysia.

We must also mention the French assistance to operate the École Française d'Extrême Orient and the generous aids from Japan. Both countries never give up their intention of returning to Indochina one day. As for Beijing, it has not shown any intention to get involved with the Chẵm not because it wishes to respect Vietnam's political or territorial integrity but rather because it has to mind the secessionist movements from its Muslim minority that is raging latently from Sin Kiang to Yunnan. This homegrown insurgency has been going on for a long time. Actually it already existed more than a century ago as reported by the French explorers Francis Garnier and Douglas de Lagrée during their expedition upstream the Mekong into China.

With such formidable backings, the desire to restore the Champa

Nation to its “glorious past” has undoubtedly crossed the mind of many a Chẵm militant.

... With his paddle, the boat’s owner maneuvered his small craft through the maze of fish farms and houses built on stilts on the Hậ̃u River. Finally, he took me to the Chẵm Koh Ka Boaak or village of Đa Phước across the river from the provincial city. This place is also known as the Silk Island. By a twist of fate, about 12,000 Chẵm were once “transplanted” to Châu Đố̃c in the past. The local people call them “Chẵm” and they practice an Orthodox sect of Islam very similar to that in Malaysia.

They dwell in clean and elevated stilt houses in near isolation from their neighbors. Though their women do not wear veils to cover their faces, they adorn their heads with scarves and rarely venture out of their homes. They work mainly in silk weaving for export to Malaysia.

In every Chẵm village of the region, one will find a newly built mosque with tall and imposing minarets. In the cavernous and brightly lit interior, no altars, images or statues are allowed.

The elders of the village told me that their mosque was constructed in 1992 with funds provided by the overseas Chẵm communities that are generously supported by Muslim countries particularly Malaysia.

On that day, in the Đa Phước Village where many historical relics can be seen, the village elders treated me to a meal in a stilt house decorated in Arabian style. It was also the first time I was introduced to the delicious Chẵm dish named “*tung lamo*”. It was a sausage stuffed with marinated beef, spices, and rice that was left to ferment under the sun. The mouth-watering aroma of the sausages being grilled over red burning charcoals filled the room. They were served with fresh vegetables, star fruits, and green bananas. The dish was not only exotic but above all quite tasty.

That afternoon before parting, I held three-year-old Karim in my arms. The baby's gentle and intelligent face brightened my heart. She belonged to the Chăm generation of the 21st century, the Globalization Era. I wondered whether Karem would grow up to be a Chăm still deeply attached to her heritage? If so, then what dreams and aspirations would inspire her heart? Truly the answer to those questions was not easy to fathom!

Definitely, at all cost, baby Karim must survive to keep that dream alive in an open and tolerant heart. In that way, the pains of the past could be forgotten and the hatred or doubts of the present neutralized to smooth the way for the coming of a harmonious and prosperous future in a clean natural environment. Her generation deserves to inherit such a future.

Nevertheless, such a prospect does not come easily by itself when there still exists a small but very active faction who stubbornly counts on the aids from foreign powers to establish a "self-ruled" or autonomous Chăm nation within "the context of a Vietnam which is fragmenting into pieces". Could this be a repeat of the "lesson unlearned" that befell the Montagnards a quarter of a century ago when they were mercilessly abandoned by their American allies on the "Tragic Mountains"?

With any luck, she will be allowed to enjoy complete happiness as a Chăm living in a Culture of Peace, humanity's Camelot, as we welcome the Third Millennium. To bid farewell to 20th century is to relinquish the Culture of War. This requires a total revolution in the manner of thought and behavior of every being on this planet. Imaginative nonviolence will replace oppression. Cultural creativity and constructive dialogues will take over from mutually destructive conflicts.

Karim must survive and grow up to keep alive the dream for a harmonious existence on this land of destiny which was the birthplace of our common ancestors and also the cradle of humanity's civilization over only 8,000 years ago.

CHAPTER XXIII

A NEW DAY IN LENIN PUBLIC SQUARE PARK

*It is true that liberty is precious;
so precious that it must be carefully rationed.*

Vladimir Ilitch Ulyanov Lenin

By the look, Mr. Nhu Phong must be past his seventies. The very thick glasses he wore did not prevent him from walking with youthful vigor. His hair with the color of pepper and salt blew in the wind as he progressed along two rows of Jaracanda trees boasting their purple flowers in full bloom. He felt happy in his heart knowing that many more warm and sunny days were in store for this region of southern California. Even though his body was suffering from a multitude of illnesses contracted during his long years living in different prisons and concentration camps, he gave the appearance of a sturdy Juniper pine tree that had weathered many tempests over the years. Under treatment for a severe lung condition, he decided to settle in the warm climate of California instead of the East Coast where the Big Apple is.

To him and many foreign artists or writers living in exile in the United States, New York City is like a furnace where they can come

to test their mettle. At this place, they would go through a selection process that will separate wheat from chaffs. For a time, he could not tell how long, he went through the routine of walking down the subway stations to board the trains that crisscrossed the tunnels dug under the city streets and rivers to take care of his daily business. This subterranean network is so vast it forms a separate city right under New York itself. How could such a feat be accomplished at a time when science and technology were not that advanced? In his opinion, New York was then a haven for innovation and daring pioneers. But the hustle and bustle of present day New York made him wonder whether the waves of courageous and enterprising pioneers are still braving the stormy oceans to disembark on the American continent?

That day, on his trip from New York to California, Mr. Nhu Phong made a stop-over in Washington DC at the time the cherry blossoms were in full bloom. He did not have the chance to watch them yet when he found himself standing motionless before the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. Looking across the park, Mr. Nhu Phong saw the White House where Clinton resided during his two terms. This American president was well-known for being a draft dodger and smoking pots without inhaling on the Oxford University campus at the height of the Vietnam War.

During that time the Hanoi Government spared no effort to send as many brave and innocent American GIs to their graves as it could. Meanwhile Mr. Nhu Phong was working as a war correspondent accompanying the South Vietnamese soldiers in their arduous operations in the marshlands and rainforests of the country's highlands. Twenty years later, on his second trip to the United States, he again stood in front the black marble wall of the Memorial on which were inscribed the names of over 50,000 American war dead. Unmentioned were millions of nameless Vietnamese who lost their lives in the conflict as unwarranted victims of human follies...

Each time he visited the monument, Mr. Nhu Phong was overwhelmed with emotion. An American friend who also worked as a journalist confided in Mr. Nhu Phong that it did not matter whether he chose to fight the Communists in the swamps of Vietnam or demonstrated against the war on the streets of America, the sight of the Memorial never failed to break his heart. Mr. Nhu Phong himself counted a number of friends among those names who were still groping for a meaning or some sense for this conflict as they breathed their last. They were never able to rest in peace because of that.

All of a sudden, he had the vague feeling of being suspended between a present that appeared a virtual reality and a too real past. How much longer would it take before he could realize that it was that very past that was the virtual reality he needed to break free from in order to walk confidently toward a brighter future.

After the long and lonely months spent doing research at the library in Aix en Provence in the South of France, by pure coincidence, Mr. Nhu Phong landed in Little Saigon on the 30th of April on the twenty fifth anniversary of the Fall of Saigon. In a jungle of flags, the cacophony of slogans sounded forceful and uncompromising as always. It is true that success has many fathers while failure is an orphan. He asked himself whether the Vietnamese on either side of the conflict had learned anything from the last bloody internecine war. There must be some sort of dignity that history reserves for the vanquished. Why not? That was the very reason why Mr. Nhu Phong attended an “off-the-record dinner” to introduce the young writers including Tà Linh’s “Avant-Garde” group to the American newsmen who had, in one way or another, a connection with the Vietnam War.

Tà Linh was a rising star of the “Post-Modernism” literary scene in Vietnam. Among his contemporaries born after 1975, with no connection to the anti-French and anti-American wars, Linh was acclaimed by critics as the leading figure of those young writers. They

called themselves the “Post-Beat” generation and were all under the age of 35. Success came their way right after the first publication of their collection of selected works named “*A Walk into the Passion and Love Ahead.*” Linh served as its editor-in-chief. It is interesting to note that while they were regarded as a group, in reality, all of them had very distinct individualities that set them apart from each other.

Through his works, the 32 year old Tạ Linh demonstrated that he was endowed with a solid and gifted pen. He gained instant notoriety with his first book which saw several reprints. The next two books he wrote were translated into English and also made into movies.

Tạ Linh and his father, a retired general, offered a perfect study-in-contrasts. It must be said that their relationship was at times quite stormy considering that a deep generational gap separated father and son. Like all generals, the father remained intoxicated with his past glory even if it was gained at the expense of thousands upon thousands of his soldiers’ lives. In Linh’s judgment, his father’s past still casted an oppressive shadow, a psychological burden, on the people’s existence now and in the coming days. It acted as an invisible barrier hindering the march forward of the whole nation. To keep an entire people in the grips of ignorance and misery in order to preserve an aura of heroism was not the correct policy Tạ Linh believed one should pursue. On his part, Linh set his sight on the future no matter how uncertain it might be. He absolutely did not have any intention of benefiting from his father’s laurels or claiming any part of it as his own.

Those young authors did not choose to voice their repudiation of both the prewar and existentialist socialist generations of writers through a manifesto or public declaration like the “*Nhóm Sáng Tạo/ Creativity Group*” before them did. They preferred to do so through their literary works instead. They lost faith in the traditional models. In their view, to pick either the war or the time the country was partitioned as the milestone to label the various literary movements was in itself a

tragic mistake.

Whether residing inside or outside the country and in spite of their different backgrounds, they all shared a common view: a genuine acceptance of the move toward globalization. They remained unperturbed to the accusations leveled against them for being Americanized, writing with computers, publishing their selected works on the Internet, surviving on fast foods at places like McDonalds, watching American movies, listening to MTV music.... In fact, they were the standard bearers of a new society in full motion, allergic to slogans yet extremely productive.

Their literature was reflected in their personal and simple lives - ordinary and apolitical lives. Politics in this instance should be understood in the disreputable way it was practiced in socialist and totalitarian societies of recent past. However, in "Post-Beat" Viet Generation, this politics played a dynamic economic role in a society that was still imperfect in spite of its huge highways, shopping malls, 5-star hotels, cable TVs, Internet cafés, traffic jams, and air pollution...

Those same young writers restored vitality to the spoken and written words that had for so long been robbed of their meaning and vigor. The financial success and literary influence that came in the wake of their appearance on the stage could clearly be felt. They were credited with ushering in a fresh breath, a new vitality into the literary scene. Unfortunately, they were also the target of vehement criticism from a conservative and increasingly irrelevant group of writers who accused them of belonging to the "Americanized degenerate youth". Mr. Nhu Phong believed that this animosity only showed that those detractors were caught in a psychological state of denial revealing an unwillingness to accept the fact that it was really them who were falling into oblivion.

Whether one wishes to recognize it or not, this new breed of writers

represented the voice of the Vietnamese generation of the 21st century. They were either born in the country's cities dotted with skyscrapers and slums, vast rice fields farmed with mechanized equipment or tiny lots tilled by plows manned by barefoot peasants as well. They wrote in a thoughtful and honest style mirroring the imperfect society they were a part of in the hope that their newfound freedom would be the launching ground for a brighter future.

At their age, they did not have anything to do with the blood-drenched years of the past. They did not hold any grudge, accept any victory laurels, nurture any hatred against anyone. They only wished to learn the truth from which to draw lessons and avoid a Second Vietnam Tragedy – No More Vietnams.

During the meeting, in his enthusiasm, Mr. Nhu Phong spoke in English to tell his audience that nothing exceptional can come out from the ordinary. Obviously, Mr. Nhu Phong wanted to refer to the transformative power of the pen in the building of a new society. His view might be ill-founded but Mr. Nhu Phong had lived by that belief through most of his professional life. Many of his young friends had asked him why he did not write an auto-biography. That thought had never crossed his mind. It never occurred to him to write an auto-biography just to record his past experiences. In his opinion, an auto-biography, like a smoke screen, is created to obscure the facts for the purpose of self-aggrandizement or self-justification. Nobody writes an auto-biography aimed at denigrating oneself. One needs to possess a good dose of honesty and courage to be capable of doing self-criticism or acknowledging one's mistakes.

Mr. Nhu Phong still worked as a free-lance reporter for several American publications specializing in Southeast Asia and in particular Vietnam. He had no doubt that this land of destiny would remain his inseparable companion until his last day on earth. Very early on, Mr. Nhu Phong tried to stay clear from adhering to any extreme positions.

He tirelessly searched for the truth while knowing full well that things in life could not be viewed in black or white but rather in different shades of grey. Consequently, he only strove to present the facts as objectively as he could and leave it to his readers to make up their own mind. Should the need arise for him to state an opinion, he never failed to qualify his observations with adverbs like “possibly”, “probably”.... instead of being arbitrary or doctrinaire.

It was his admirable personality - not any prestigious title - that earned him the esteem of his sources as well as readers. His warm demeanor and willingness to share his experience won him the heart of the younger colleagues who affectionately called him “The journalist of journalists”.

In this “information” age, Mr. Nhur Phong quickly adapted to the progress of science and technology. He did not have any problem making the transition from an “antique” Olivetti typewriter that had been his companion for so many years to a state-of-the-art light and compact laptop the Friends of the Mekong gave him. With the availability of high-speed Internet, fax, email... from now on, Mr. Nhur Phong could work from wherever he happened to be without being cut off from his virtual office. On this point, he felt very close to his colleagues who were two generations younger than him.

Blessed with a receptive mind, he eagerly read books covering a wide range of topics to keep up with the time. Deep inside, he was determined to screen out anything he believed to be “polluting” to his mind. He had been closely associated with this war throughout its duration. Consequently, he fully shared the misery and hardship endured by the brave South Vietnamese soldiers who, at the close of hostilities, saw their honor unfairly smeared, their sacrifice ignored. He staunchly stood shoulder to shoulder with them and fought mightily to give back to them the true role they played in the conflict. For him, this is a case of giving back to Caesar what belongs to Caesar regardless of

which side you are on. In some people's eye, he was looked upon as being an idealist in a world that had plenty of room for cynicism.

Mr. Nhu Phong, the youngest child in the family, was strongly influenced by his mother. This lady did not receive an extensive formal education but she certainly had a character made of steel. He inherited from her a sense of duty and sacrifice that on occasions compelled him to go beyond the expected norms. Only in his mature age did he realize that his mother's biggest regret was that her formal education was limited to the elementary school level. Being the oldest daughter of a large family, she had to stay home to help take care of her parents' bookstore on Trảng Thi Street while the rest of her siblings went on to college.

She used the spare time at the store to read any books she could lay her hands on. He could not tell how many times she read the "*Kim Vân Kiều*" novel but in later years its more than 3,000 poetry lines and those of the other classical works were still fresh in her memory.

Her frail health notwithstanding, her extraordinary fortitude allowed her to take good care of her family as dictated by the good or bad fortune of the country. She expected a lot from all her children but in particular from the youngest one. It was his love for his mother that motivated Mr. Nhu Phong throughout his life. His profession of a journalist and the trying times he went through occasionally landed him in precarious situations. During those uncertain moments, he always relied on his conscience to come up with the best course of action possible. The internal struggles he went through helped him find a meaning for his life and uphold those uncompromising principles he held dear to his heart. It was in this manner that he was able to keep his dignity as a human being intact.

Vietnam in the year 2015 is making its first steps toward democracy as demonstrated by the large body of candidates that participated in

the upcoming election. They hail from all political stripes, religious persuasions, parochial interests, indigenous groups.... Naturally, one cannot forget the opportunists and wheelers and dealers who hide behind the men of the cloth to serve their selfish political ends. Mr. Nhu Phong had coined a special name for those two: the “Dangerous Duo”.

Throughout his professional life, Mr. Nhu Phong was wary of them and considered them his sworn adversaries. “*Democracy cannot prosper under totalitarianism or religious absolutism*” and “There must be a strict separation between politics and religion” – those were indisputable articles of faith he tirelessly advocated in his book. In support of his view, Mr. Nhu Phong could point to the “1963 Revolution” that overthrew the government of President Ngô Đình Diệm. The short-lived euphoria that came in its wake was soon replaced by improbable scenes of priests and monks urging their followers including children to form angry mobs. They brandished knives and sticks and descended on Saigon’s streets. In no time, the “1963 Revolution” was turned into a “Lost Revolution”.

As a whole, the most interesting feature in this first and real election of 2015 is the contest between the Liberty Party and Scientific Socialist Party whose precursor was the Communist Party made up mainly of experts trained in East European countries and leaning toward Glasnost. Their leader was Sĩ Nguyên, a physicist. Very early on, he was expelled from the Party on account of his reformist views at a time when Socialism was still at its strongest. Meanwhile, the conservative communists also known as Red Capitalists already absconded in a hurry with their colossal stashes of US Dollars to lead comfortable lives in Western nations run by the still kicking “Colonialist-Imperialists”. They left behind a poor and underdeveloped country burdened with a devastated ecology and a mindboggling gap between the rich and poor.

The election gives birth to a new era of “*Letting a hundred flowers blossom and a hundred schools of thought contend*” in which the

numerous candidates were given free rein to compete with each other. Many of them are new comers to politics and complete strangers to an electorate that does not have the remotest idea about their political affiliations. Some are able to gain notoriety thanks to their wealth that enables them to use the media to conduct wide-ranging campaigns “à l’américaine” including the Internet to disparage their opponents. The appearance of those “telegogues” presents a new and worrisome phenomenon for this nascent democracy.

Among those unsavory characters one must count several individuals holding doctorate degrees from prestigious universities of the West like Harvard, Oxford, Sorbonne... Those people for years live isolated in their ivory towers and lack the insight into the realities of the country and its people. They continuously appear on TV showing themselves as perfect egomaniacs but endowed with the gift to mesmerize the public, impress the viewers with their rhetoric or ability to pounce on their opponents without being able to propose any plausible policy. Their intellectual prowess succeeds in attracting enough supporters to turn them into inspiring but ineffective members of the future national assembly.

Another sad truth is that this very negative campaign strategy when repeated over time still proves effective. Many a poisoned arrow had been supplied to the independent candidates for them to use against each other. The resulting dissension between those independent parties works to the advantage of the young and progressive Communists giving them the opportunity to retain the rein of power even though they could not win a majority of the seats. All this at a time when Marxist Leninism has been reduced to meaningless letters in books that had been gathering dust over the preceding century and the last arrogant statue of Lenin in Vietnam has been pulled down from its pedestal.

However, the most disheartening thing is the uncontrolled propagation of unrealizable promises. Rare are serious discussions

about what would be realistic prospects for Vietnam or about what would a Vietnamese Shangri la look like in the future? The unveiling of the “*Monument for the Nhân Văn Giai Phẩm Movement 1956*” commemorating a period known as “*Trăm Hoa Đua Nở*” Hundreds of Flowers Blooming in the North in the former Lenin Public Square Park, unexpectedly takes on the implication of a political movement.

Polls conducted in the traditional Western way show extremely conflicting results bringing into question the soundness of their methodology. Having lived long years under a dictatorial regime, the people are not yet ready to forget the bitter experience they went through. A personal remark about present or future leaders can land a person in hot water. Even in this 21st century, the majority of the Vietnamese do not own a home phone. Therefore, the answers they give to a poll taker who knocks at their doors do not necessarily reflect their true feelings. To determine who are the real winners or losers in this instance still remains a big headache to those foreign correspondents who claim to be old hands in Vietnamese affairs.

Then, out of the blue, amidst the chaotic and gloomy conditions of a country on the verge of crisis, people hear slogans calling for “*Freedom and Responsibility*” or “*Law and Order*” proclaimed not by the major parties but by Trần Lê, an independent candidate. He was relatively young compared to his opponents and did not hail from any political group, royal house, revolutionary lineage, scholar family or illustrious pedigree. On the contrary, he was a plain John Doe, a man of the street, whose parents and relatives were all self-made men.

The son of a humble high school teacher, he grew up in a strict, austere family atmosphere. He excelled in his studies and graduated from high school with the highest honors earning him a scholarship to study abroad. After obtaining a college degree in Information Science he lived overseas for many years but still retained his Vietnamese citizenship. Then he decided to return to the homeland to work as an

expert. Known for his long years of dedicated involvement in social works, he was also the founder and editor-in-chief of the Vietnam Forum Review. Many of his writings were published in foreign mass media and recently also inside the country.

His pronouncements are profound but clothed in simple terms that can be readily embraced by his listeners. As he sees it, the time is ripe for the wounds of the past to be healed not exacerbated. He envisions a new democratic Vietnam under the rule of law and based on the principle of separation of power according to which the executive branch will be entrusted to a lean and responsible government. Under such conditions, the people will be motivated to work with one mind and heart in the building of a common future with the active participation of all ethnic, regional, religious, and professional groups.

He is greatly disheartened each time he thinks about the existing political climate. Faced with the dismal threat of national disintegration, the bickering politicians are only capable of offering conflicting promises and unrealistic solutions. While they waste their energy assailing their opponents' past and burnishing their own image, he sets his eyes on the future.

He is not your normal political beast full of deceit and scheming. On the contrary, his good and kind nature leads him to believe, like a child, in the existence of a utopian system of government. On account of his straightforwardness people shower him with respect. Nevertheless, they cannot help wondering whether he would be able to survive in the midst of an uncertain future in this Asian continent drowning in intrigue and treachery. Being a man of action, he will not flinch from any challenges and people can count on him to bring hope to the darkest circumstances and solutions to the thorniest problems.

Trần Lê possesses a deep grasp of Vietnam's position within the global community. His prestige and close connection with the overseas

Vietnamese serve as a bridge connecting not only his compatriots living across the oceans with each other but also an isolated Vietnam with the other countries in the world. In that way, a brighter future would await his people. For that same reason, he is the unique individual who receives the support of the intelligentsia and professional groups both inside and outside the country. His power to persuade and ability to search for a common ground agreeable to a wide range of people help turn dissensions into consent, suspicion into trust.

Despite his prolonged stay in foreign lands, his down-to-earth demeanor is more akin to the awkwardness of a peasant living in the Mekong Delta, the descendants of the pioneers of the Southern March, than to the worldliness of an urban dweller. Trần Lê does not possess the charisma and craftiness of a politician. That explains why, at first sight people feel they can trust in and be reassured by him. No wonder, they easily lend an attentive ear to whatever he says. His name begins to be mentioned in the Vietnamese press as well as the leading newspapers abroad. The foreign embassies in Vietnam also pay close attention to his activities. His gift for leadership can be seen in the dynamic, competent, and united brain trust that he surrounds himself with.

A university professor specializing in Chinese affairs and a friend of Mr. Nhu Phong is among the first to discover this “concealed gemstone” and depicts Trần Lê as a blend between China’s Sun Yat-Sen and Poland’s Lech Walesa. Trần Lê’s support base comes not from a small group of wealthy businessmen but rather from the large labor class. The latter may have modest income but they consistently show a commitment to work for a better country and a willingness to shoulder their share of responsibility.

That professor further notes that this young leader displays a special gift to deal with people. Both the few talented associates and the people of the street who volunteer to work for him are made to feel appreciated for their personal effort and contribution. He believes that though these

people might come from all walks of life and follow different paths, they all share in the love of country and a readiness to go beyond the call of duty to work for a common future.

In a time marked by suspicion, people are astounded to watch an unending flow of resources and money pouring into the coffers of the organizations he heads. It may come in the form of a five dollar bill sent by an elderly lady in Orange County, a fifty dollar check from a hard working couple “*chồng tách vợ ly* or husband-technician and wife-assembler” who own a small electronic shop in Australia or the sizeable resources contributed by the Vietnamese Professionals Society of North America and Europe. All those people are convinced that only he can put those resources to good use for the benefits of the common people or the building of a stable Vietnam.

The very predictions he offered two decades ago are being gradually fulfilled. The three million overseas Vietnamese, Việt Kiều, who are committed to the wellbeing of their country never cease to facilitate the transfer of wealth, prosperity, and resources in the world to their motherland to ensure that the people would see a better day.

Sitting in front of the big-screen television set, Mr. Như Phong used the remote control to navigate the news channels. He felt like he was living a dream because with modern technology he could watch his favorite TV Free Vietnam channel, a Vietnamese version of CNN, or any other channels in the world. This 24/7 station that broadcasted in Vietnamese was fed by satellite and transformed this “S” shaped country of Vietnam into a world-wide village whose distant parts were kept tightly connected by an intricate telecommunication network. The households in that Vietnamese Village could easily keep in touch with each other even if they lived half way around the globe.

As usual, the day’s news was read by Anh Thu during the afternoon prime time hour. Making her debut as an announcer not very fluent

in Vietnamese for Little Saigon Television, she worked her way up to become the star anchorwoman of TV Free Vietnam. Anh Thu could be considered the typical representative of the second generation of Vietnamese youth in America.

The youngest daughter of a family of seven, Anh Thu escaped from Vietnam by boat in the late 1970s. At home, she was known as Bé Mỹ Tho. Of her six siblings four are medical doctors, two graduated from MIT, and she was well on her way to follow in their footsteps.

After she graduated Suma Cum Laude from Stanford with a Bachelor of Science in ecology she was offered a scholarship to attend medical school at Harvard. To everyone's surprise, she changed her mind and enrolled in the journalism program at Columbia University. Her father used to tease her saying that Uncle Nhu Phong has something to do with her decision. In a way, he was not very far off the mark since Anh Thu had always secretly viewed Mr. Nhu Phong as her role model. Her outward shyness belies a determined and self-assured personality. She takes it as a personal offense and does not hesitate to show her displeasure anytime she is called a Vietnamese Connie Chung.

Anh Thu has grown professionally through the years, but her sweet southern accent somehow could not suppress the emotion she felt reading the first news that afternoon:

“With the technical support from Beijing, financial aids from Thailand, the Lao People’s Democratic Republic has brushed aside the cautions coming from Cambodia and Vietnam and forges ahead with its decision to build the largest hydroelectric dam on the Mekong mainstream. It will at the same time redirect the river’s course to irrigate the arid fields in its highlands. As Vietnam lies at the southernmost section of the river, the Mekong Delta has to endure the harshest impacts emanating from the fourteen giant dams in the Mekong

Cascades in Yunnan and Thailand's Mekong tributary dams. To name a few: end of fish migration, weakened current flow, intruding seawater, and marked reduction in farming. In addition, the electricity generated by the dams makes possible the construction of industrial zones along the river banks. The toxic waste discharged by their factories will end up in Vietnam causing severe environmental pollution. Consequently, Vietnam has issued pronouncements and published a white paper calling on the United Nations, World Bank, Asian Development Bank, the governments of China, Thailand and Laos to immediately delay the mainstream dam projects pending the final assessments of their environmental impacts. Concerned overseas Vietnamese have demonstrated in front of the Thai and Chinese embassies in most major capitals of the world."

This turn of events greatly troubled Mr. Nhu Phong. He was saddened by the thought that Vietnam, a country that had not truly known peace for such a long time, has now found itself entangled in a web of challenges originating from what he called the "Chinese Connection": border clashes, sovereignty disputes over the Spratly and Paracel Archipelagoes in the East Sea, Chinese involvement in Vietnam's minority movements for self-rule, drug trafficking, and more recently the disputes over water and the environment. The potential loss of the rice granary that helped feed almost 100 million Vietnamese only proved that this country was at the mercy of China's new weapon: environmental pollution. The Chinese might find it convenient to profit by this occasion to break the backbone of the Vietnamese Dragon in Southeast Asia. Nevertheless, being a diehard optimist, Mr. Nhu Phong saw in this potential danger an occasion for the people to unite.

In an afternoon like any other afternoon in October of 1996, the dial on the clock appeared to be turned back a decade. Mr. Nhu Phong and about thirty of his young compatriots met in the Activity Room of the Press Center of Little Saigon, the "capital" of the Vietnamese refugees. The group was busy discussing the harmful impacts caused

by the building of hydroelectric dams on the Mekong. The meeting he attended with the Friends of the Mekong Group was still fresh in his memory as if it just took place the day before. The star of the meeting was Phạm Phan Long, a young environmental engineer who worked as a consultant with an electrical company in America. From that day on, this group silently worked in order to prepare the country for the inevitable “Mayday” lurking around the corner. The white paper of almost one thousand pages written authoritatively in Vietnamese, English, and French was the final product of their intellectual commitment and unbounded patriotism. In Mr. Nhu Phong’s eye, this young group of overseas Vietnamese holds the key to the future of the country.

Happily, Anh Thu switched to more cheerful news in the Activities Section. She reported that the Vietnamese high school students led by Professor Nguyễn Châu won the first prize in the team category at the Rome International Mathematics Contest. Meanwhile, the most outstanding individual prize for the first time went to a Vietnamese student of the Quốc Học School in Huế named Đinh Quốc Bảo Toàn. His innovative way of solving mathematical problems amazed the members of the jury who praised him as a virtuoso in mathematics.

Next came the news from Dalat: the Vietnamese Electrical Association of the Free World chose Vietnam to hold their annual conference with the topic “*The Electrification of Rural Areas*”. This was the 14th conference for them but the first one held in Vietnam.

Anh Thu then moved on to report live on the trans-Vietnam bicycle race from Saigon to Hanoi known as the “*Journey to Freedom*” organized by the Federation of Vietnamese University Students living both in Vietnam and the four corners of the world. During the tour, the participants stopped at every university campus they went by to attend workshops on the topics of development and democracy. On a more practical note, building on the experience gained through the years by the Vietnamese living in North America, they tried to set

up personnel training programs and computer networks to be used in Vietnam's upcoming legislative election. They volunteered their service but were not eligible to vote because they did not hold Vietnamese citizenship. However, their eagerness infused an invigorating influence on Vietnam's march toward democracy.

At each village, communal house, religious place be it a church, a pagoda, or "long house in Central Highland" one will unfailingly find a large screen TV. Besides the regular news and entertainment channels, it also showed without interruption programs to familiarize the people with the voting process and the use of punch cards. For the people, it was like "the past revisited" reminding them of the last free election they participated in several decades ago.

According to plan, the students would arrive in Hanoi on the inauguration day of the "Vietnam Culture Monument" the Memorial for the Nhân Văn Giai Phẩm Movement at the former Lenin Public Square Park. Ironically, the last standing Lenin statue probably in the world had been quietly removed from the park.

On this occasion, the Văn Nghệ Publisher introduced into both the local and foreign markets the entire collection of the Nhân Văn Giai Phẩm works. The press followed suit and issued a special foreign edition of their Vietnamese newspapers. It was also the first time in the history of mass media that a ship owned by the Transnational Media Consortium and anchored at the Saigon Harbor was used as a multimedia office for the printed press, radio, and television. Mr. Nhu Phong saw in this event the realization of a dream he had entertained for so many years. During all the time he worked as a journalist, Mr. Nhu Phong never witnessed such a remarkable event before.

An unexpected bomb threat was phoned in causing the ceremony to be delayed for two hours. Naturally, this represented a golden opportunity for the political parties to get on each other's throat. Security

measures were heightened. In spite of the danger, a large crowd showed up catching the organizers totally by surprise.

Đặng Thái Sơn, the gold medalist of the 10th annual Chopin piano competition, has a father who was implicated in the Nhân Văn Giai Phẩm trial. On that day, in lieu of the national anthems that had fallen out of favor with the public, he performed with the Philharmonic Orchestra of Hanoi the song “*Việt Nam Quê Hương Mến Yêu / Vietnam Our Beloved Country*” that richly embodied the heart and mind of the people and the flavors of their land as well. He then played the long ode cum musical piece “*Trường Ca Con Đường Cái Quan / Song Cycles of the Mandarin Route*” named after a road that runs along the length of the country from the Nam Quan Pass to the Cà Mau Cape then across the sea all the way to the Paracel and Spratly Archipelagoes. The piece’s lively melody transported the audience over the length of the country’s lovely and precious landscapes ending in a joyous and hopeful explosion of sounds from the rhapsody named “*Ngày Hội Lớn Dân Tộc / The Great Festival of the People*”.

The audience was then asked to keep a moment of silence to commemorate the dead to the accompaniment of the grave and drawn out song “*Người Về Đâu / The Uncertain Home*”. All the members of the Nhân Văn Giai Phẩm group had passed on to the other world. At one time in the past, people in both the North and South of the country found in this group the restive voice of their conscience as well as their source of inspiration. On that day, the gathered crowd felt the presence of the spirit of the group’s members moving in its midst: A breeze gently ruffled the leaves in the tall treetops under a warm and bright sun.

On the same day Mr. Như Phong sent to Asia Week an article entitled: “*Nhân Văn Giai Phẩm Affair Trial 1956: A Perfect Definition of the Word ‘Tragedy’ in Contemporary History of Vietnam.*”

The intermingled pains of the past and comfortable feelings

of the present plunged the crowd into a state of deep emotions and uncontrollable sobbing. They made a solemn vow never to trust the works of Marx, Lenin, and Mao Tse Tung again. The country's sacred spirits and genies found in the ancient capital of "*Thăng Long với Năm Cửa Ô / Thăng Long with its Five Gates*" a suitable place for them to gather and meet.

This Memorial speaks eloquently for the immovable love for Freedom of the Vietnamese culture. At the same time it stands as a reminder of the uncertainties awaiting the people in the days ahead. The participants gathered to celebrate the intellectuals of the Nhân Văn Giai Phẩm group and the humanism they cherished and trusted that their example would serve as a burning torch to guide the Vietnamese civilization on its march forward.

Mr. Nhu Phong believes that, like the phoenix rising from its ashes, the whole country is going through a renaissance period. He feels it's a miracle that he can survive for so long, beyond the seventies - that all-knowing age, to welcome the third millennium. Vietnam is still forging ahead toward a brighter future regardless of the urgency and danger that are awaiting her in the coming days.

The Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington DC was dedicated in 1982, 7 years after the end of the conflict. An American journalist observed that regardless of the stand he chose in regards to the War in the past, the sight of that black marble Wall always brings back heart wrenching feelings in him.



More than 40 years later, what do the Vietnamese of Generation Y think about the cost of the Vietnam War: South and North civilian deaths: 2 million; North Vietnamese and Vietcong soldiers killed: 1.1 million; South Vietnamese soldiers killed: 250,000; American soldiers killed: 58,000. Bombs dropped: 14 million tons or 700 nuclear bombs of the Hiroshima type. Agent Orange: 13 million gallons scattered over 2.2 million hectares with long lasting effects.

The “Thương Tiếc” statue by sculptor Nguyễn Thanh Thu, a memorial monument to the fallen ARVN soldiers no longer stood at the entrance of the Military Cemetery in Biên Hòa. It was taken down after April 30, 1975 by the Communists



Moving into the 21st century, only in Vietnam can one find such a huge statue of Lenin still standing defiantly in the largest public park in Hanoi.



The Vietnam War Memorial commemorating the Vietnamese and American soldiers of the Vietnam War in the heart of Little Saigon, California, the capital of the Vietnamese Refugees.

IN LIEU OF EPILOGUE

It is now October, the end of the Rainy Season, in Phnom Penh. However, starting since June, the melting snow in the Himalayas and the downpour of rainwater upstream the river bring about freshets of over 10 meters in height. At places, like under the Khone Waterfall, they may reach as high as 20 meters. An extraordinary phenomenon takes place in the Tonlé Sap River: the current reverses course then flows into the Tonlé Sap Lake causing its area to increase five folds from 300,000 hectares during the Dry Season to 1.5 million hectares equivalent to about 1/7 the total area of Cambodia. Large shoals of fish from the Lake swarm into the flooded forests to feed and spawn.

As the Rainy Season comes to a close, when the water in the Tonlé Sap Lake and the Mekong River reach an equilibrium – similar to what occurs when the “giáp nước/ sweet and seawaters interface” at the estuary in the Mekong Delta – the current in the Tonlé Sap River comes to a sudden stand still for a very brief moment before it abruptly resumes its normal flow. Then, the water and fish in the flooded forests start to migrate back to the Great Lake. From there, they will travel on the tributary Tonlé Sap River to finally enter the Mekong at the Quatre Bras thus repeating the age old cycle ushering in the lively “Mùa Nước Giũt/The Receding Water Season” festivals marking the start of the

fishing and farming seasons.

We are now in the year 2000, the threshold to the third millennium. It can be considered a hopeful sign that we can still watch these amazing natural processes unfold before our own eyes and write these final pages of the book about the Mekong with a positive note. For sure, the writing of this book can never come to an end considering that all along its current this river is facing threats and uncertainties to its future with each second ticking by.

How much longer can we delay the day the Mekong that has been known as the River of History, the River of Time, The Last River, the lifeline of millions of people, from being renamed the River of the Past.

The series of hydroelectric dams planned for the Mekong Cascades when completed will prevent freshets from flowing downstream creating an immediate disaster for the Tonlé Sap Lake. Like an ischemic heart that would stop to beat, the Lake would cease its normal functions entailing a catastrophic chain reaction for the entire eco-system of the Mekong including the Mekong Delta.

The sinicization of Tibet that may result in this country being removed from the world map notwithstanding, the seven countries bordering the Mekong's current though bearing different names share a number of common traits: a lack of democracy and a widening abyss separating the rich from the poor. The recent prosperity of the post-war years seems extremely fragile because it has been achieved at the expense of ecological pollution that future generations may have to endure for a long time.

On that land of destiny, all along the riverbanks, numerous groups of people with different cultures cohabit interdependently. Whether they thrive or not is entirely up to them. Regardless of time and space, on every section of the river, one must realize that "Everybody Lives

Downstream”.

What is missing is a Mekong Spirit that can serve as a rallying point for the millions of people whose fate is inextricably tied to the integrity of an undeniably degraded river to work together for the betterment of their livelihood. The crisis of trust is all pervading and characterized by an arm race paid for with the meager income of the region’s inhabitants.

The case in point is China, a giant in both land and population size. Although half the length of the river’s current meanders within its borders, this country consistently refuses to join the Mekong River Commission so that it will not be tied down by any restrictions and have a free hand in the exploitation of the river. This country’s ambitions are not only limited to the Mekong’s waters but also extend to the entire East Sea with the ultimate intention of monopolizing its oil reserves. The tibetization of the East Sea is a newly coined term pointing to the eventuality that the Southeast Asian nations may wake up one morning to find themselves falling under Chinese domination like in the case of Tibet.

Let us retrace our steps. The electrification plan upstream the Mekong will automatically be followed by the industrialization phase that will attract large numbers of people to Yunnan. Like all the other rivers in China, the Mekong will inevitably be transformed into a waterway transporting industrial and household waste.

On a smaller scale, countries downstream like Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam also discharge untreated waste into the river’s current. Since Cambodia and Vietnam are located at the southernmost part of the river, they will be the two countries that will suffer the most from the cumulative effects of that pollution.

The sad fact is that the Mekong, in addition to being occluded by the hydroelectric dams and the diversion of its water to irrigate arid lands, is at the same time being transformed into a giant sewer line.

Like gigantic sponges, the rain forests have been regulating the water flow in the river during the Dry and Rainy Seasons. Nowadays, those forests have been continuously cut down at an increasingly fast pace. According to an estimate published by the World Bank in May, 1998, those forests' natural resources will vanish by 2003.

Even the fish source that provides the main protein intake for the inhabitants along the two riverbanks is also being reduced. The root cause is the over-intensive fishing methods being used i.e. wasteful "search and destroy" fishing while the river is being increasingly polluted. As a result, we are left with the bleak prospects of seeing precious fish like the Pla Beuks and Dolphins, those indicators of the health status of the Mekong's eco-system, run the risk of becoming extinct.

Apparently, there is no single solution to the problems of the ecology. What is needed is a fundamental and comprehensive transformation of the social fabrics making a transition from Totalitarianism to Democracy.

Democracy will offer the opportunity for the people to be more informed so that they can become conscious of the problems the Mekong is facing and raise their voice in the defense of that vital lifeline.

The works carried out by previous researchers - mostly foreigners - and those done by the author clearly indicate that, unlike the case with the other rivers in the world, our knowledge about the Mekong proves to be quite limited. In the meantime, the Mekong is being degraded at an alarming rate making it impossible to record the fascinating ecological characteristics of the Mekong's ecosystem before it becomes too late. Ichthyologists believe that the 500 species of fish that have been classified and studied in the Mekong do not give the whole picture. Many more species of fish and other riverine animals remain to be detected or are already extinct - especially in the Khone Waterfall area.

How regrettable this is!

An efficient preservation of the integrity and wholeness of the Mekong requires a minimum understanding of its ecosystem.

A golden opportunity to acquire such knowledge had been squandered by Vietnam's communist leaders when they refused to allow the French explorer Jacques Yves Cousteau to sail upstream the Mekong in his submersible Calypso to carry out his research on the river's eco-system. Regrettably, Jacques Yves Cousteau is no longer with us.

Years have been wasted but fortunately the Mekong is still alive albeit in a degraded state. Yet, there is still time to save it.

Let's save the Mekong.

We are now engaged in a race against the clock. All the same, this represents an exciting challenge for the Youth of Vietnam, both inside and outside the country, who are brave enough to do research on this Sacred River, this Mother River of Honey and Milk that is running the risk of being drained dry.

To the Friends of the Mekong Group who have shown an early and unwavering interest in the Mekong, this book is dedicated to you in the hope that you'll find in it a source of inspiration and appreciation.

NGÔ THẾ VINH
California 2001

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A CONVERSATION BETWEEN
NGUYỄN MẠNH TRINH
AND THE AUTHOR NGÔ THẾ VINH
ON THE BOOK
THE NINE DRAGONS DRAINED DRY
THE EAST SEA IN TURMOIL

Nguyễn Mạnh Trinh (NMT)_ Văn Nghệ publishing house recently released one of your books. Can you fill us in on the details?

Ngô Thế Vinh (NTV) *Cửu Long Cạn Dòng Biển Đông Dậy Sóng/ The Nine Dragons Drained Dry, The East Sea in Turmoil* is the heading of a chapter in the book. It is also chosen to serve as the book's title. As indicated by the two parts in the title, the book deals with those two main issues. It has 648 pages of text and photographs and can be considered a faction – that is to say a work blending facts with fiction.

NMT_ The foreword calls Cửu Long Cạn Dòng Biển Đông Dậy Sóng a faction. This appellation is rather new, can you please explain.

NTV_ A fiction, by definition, is a product of the imagination. Nevertheless, in some way, it still reflects the realities of life. In a non-fiction, the fiction part may occupy a secondary role but it is still an

indispensable one in order to allow the author to make it a part of his work otherwise the end product will turn into a research paper. The term “faction” may sound strange but it is not completely new. It is a concise word in English denoting a combination of fact and fiction. Faction, in a way, can be understood as a fiction work based on facts or a documented novel. It is a form of literature or film making that treats real people or events as if they were fictional or in other words it uses real people, real events as essential elements in an otherwise fictional rendition. To put it more simply, it is a literary work or film that is a mix of fact and fiction.

This form of writing has been used by writers over the past decades. James A. Michener is a case in point. This American author / novelist made use of this technique in many of his monumental works such as Hawaii, Texas, Alaska, Mexico, Caribbean... To write his books, he devoted painstaking years of research and investigative works in the fields of history, geography, humanities and so on. Only the characters are fictional. He used them to lead the readers into the story he wished to tell! If you happen to go to Alaska, you should visit a small and ordinary house, like any others, that has become a tourist attraction. Michener stayed at that place to write his voluminous work on the history of Alaska from its inception to the present day – He wrote the book in the faction form.

NMT_ In the books you have published like “*Vòng Đai Xanh / The Green Belt*”, “*Mặt Trận Ở Sài Gòn / The Battle of Saigon*” you have incorporated many facts from everyday life. Is there any difference now with “*Cửu Long Cạn Dòng Biển Đông Dây Sóng*”?

NTV_ On account of my concern for the “ecology and development” of the Mekong Subregion and the Mekong Delta, I nourished the intention to write a book about this topic. Then I was faced with a predicament like when I was writing *Vòng Đai Xanh / The Green Belt* that deals with the issue of the Montagnards in the Highlands of Vietnam. Instead of

writing a research paper that would prove dull to the readers, I decided to go for a fiction. It took me a considerable amount of time and effort to finish the book. The difference is, unlike with previous works, with *Cửu Long Cạn Dòng, Biển Đông Dậy Sóng* the materials I used were for the most part factual. Fiction only played a very modest role in its writing.

NMT_ In this case, the book contains a lot of factual materials and details because you wish to tell not only the story of the river but delve into the numerous aspects that relate to the subject matter as well. How do you proceed to avoid turning the book into a boring and lackluster work to your readers?

*NTV_ If after long hours of arduous work at your job you look for a captivating novel loaded with drama to read then *Cửu Long Cạn Dòng, Biển Đông Dậy Sóng* will not work for you. From the first day I set out to write, I had no intention of writing such kind of novel.*

NMT_ Environmental pollution is now being widely discussed by the people in the whole world including the Vietnamese. When you chose to write about this subject matter, did you have any fear that you'd only be repeating what has been already been said before.

NT_ Over the past half century, people have been talking more and more about the fight against environmental pollution. We've witnessed the brandishing around of "slogans" more often than see actual actions, measures been taken to reverse the degradation of the ecology on our planet. Sadly enough, most of them are man-made rather than caused by Mother Nature. In this globalization era, there cannot be a pollution problem limited to Vietnam or China. The toxic gas billowing out from the smoke stags of outdated coal-operated factories in Yunnan not only destroys the lungs of the Chinese people but also those of the inhabitants in the entire Southeast Asian region. Probably you still recall the forest fires in Indonesia. The people in Singapore and

Malaysia also suffered greatly from the ensuing ashes and smoke... Thus, pollution of the atmosphere or of the water source poses a threat to the entire region, the entire earth and cannot be contained within the boundaries of any single nation. Therefore, the very meaningful motto “Everybody Lives Downstream” was adopted for the *World Water Day of 03- 22- 1999*. This motto applies perfectly to the case of the Mekong River, an international waterway that meanders through 7 countries with Vietnam at its mouth. Not a single country is able to preserve the section of the river that runs through its territory in the absence of a “Mekong Spirit” that requires a willingness from all parties to accept the responsibility to work together for the common good in an overall plan for a harmonious and sustainable development of the water and resources of the Mekong.

NMT_ Some people argue: “Isn’t it a contradiction to claim that the Mekong is being drained dry while it is flooding entire regions before our eyes?”

NTV_ It might appear absurd at the time the book was released. I was told of a religious who, while doing flood relief works, exclaimed upon hearing the title of the book being mentioned: “How can anybody say the Mekong is being drained dry while we are watching houses being carried away by the current, people drowned right before our eyes?” Your question and the shocked reactions coming from other quarters cause me to wonder. Floods and droughts, those two extreme phenomena that take place cyclically every year with “increasing degree of severity”, are looked upon by most people as natural disasters. However, in reality, they are caused by humans. We do it by destroying the complex and at the same time very fragile ecosystem of the Mekong. Some of the threats come from upstream the river like (1) construction of hydropower dams on the mainstream of the Mekong to retain its water or alter its course (most notably the series of dams in the Mekong Cascades in Yunnan), (2) suicidal destruction of the rainforests whose main function is to retain the water and regulate the flow of the

current during the Dry and Rainy Seasons, (3) destruction of the big rocks lying on the riverbed to open a transportation channel connecting Yunnan all the way to Lower Laos, (4) electrification, industrialization, urbanization, and dumping of industrial waste into the current as a result of the dams' construction. On top of that, we must point to the hydrological missteps committed downstream, right in the Mekong Subregion that will result in immediate catastrophes: bigger floods during the Rainy Season (It's happening now), more severe droughts during the Dry Season, the water in the river becoming more polluted and the seawater intruding deeper inland. Whether people consider themselves pessimist or optimist, in either case they still burry their heads deep in the sand in the face of impending dangers.

NMT_ In the book, there are many extremely interesting references to the travels and on-the-site surveys you made. How much time have you devoted to those trips to be able to write about them in such a way?

NTV_ Since the day I worked for the school publication during my college years, I still keep the habit of opening “a file” for the place I was about to visit. Consequently, I know beforehand what I need to look for on the trip. Understandably, all trips can spring fascinating surprises you have no way to foretell. Like recently, on a visit to Hậu Giang Châu Đốc at the Đa Phước village I met the “Người Chà Châu Giang” – they are not the Malay from Malaysia the local people mistook them for. Actually, they are the Chăm survivors of the defunct Champa kingdom. They are also the descendants of the Côn Man troops who ably assisted the mandarin Thoại Ngọc Hầu in supervising the Khmer labor force, day and night, to dig the 100 km-long Vĩnh Tế Canal all the way to the city of Hà Tiên. In appreciation, the Huế court allowed them to establish 7 villages in Châu Đốc province that still exist to this day. I did not go to the area as a tourist but on a “field-trip” - A trip in search of the old faces and old places of a long gone time. The talk I had with the barge conductor from Châu Đốc to the Cồn Tơ Lụa / Silk Island undoubtedly had helped him have a different view of the “Người

Chà” living in that Đa Phước village.

NMT_ Do you expect that after reading your book, the reader will become informed and willing to participate in the effort to “Save the Mekong”? Do you have a plan to give a wide distribution to your book?

NTV_ Before I finalize my works in the present book form, several of its chapters had appeared in magazines like *Đi Tới, Văn Học, Thế Kỷ 21*... I have received feedbacks from readers and friends. On a recent visit in July to Washington, I was introduced to a person who has read several of my articles in the *Thế Kỷ 21 Magazine*. He was under the impression that I was an expert working with the World Bank not in the medical field. In general, only a limited number of people read my works. However, those are informed individuals who share an interest in the things I write about. I very much wish to have an extensive readership for my new book especially among the young people. Widespread consciousness and concern about the threats the river is facing will eventually bring about actions in support of the effort to “Save the Mekong”. A while ago, you mentioned a plan to give wide distribution to the book. In my view, the book has received reviews in the newspapers, on the radios, the Internet websites and the conversation we are having now – all these things help bring it to the readers. Book-signing events will also help greatly.

*NMT_ Why is it that the Communist leadership in Vietnam does not pay attention to the salinization problem of the Mekong Delta? In your book *Cửu Long Cạn Dòng, Biển Đông Dậy Sóng*, you seem to expect the people living overseas to come up with a solution to this predicament. Have you lost faith in the people living in Vietnam?*

NTV_ I do not believe the leaders in Vietnam are uninformed about the catastrophic phenomena that are taking place in the Mekong Delta including the increased salinization that is intruding deeper inland by the day. The problem here is the way they perceive the problem and

how far reaching is their outlook during this era of Renovation. In the rush toward development, they are taking unsustainable measures that put the ecosystem at risk. And sadly enough, future generations will have to pay the price for their misguided actions. In their view, when faced with the immediate task to provide for the daily needs of the population, preservation of the ecology can be related to the back burner. We have a popular saying “*chưa thấy quan tài chưa đổ lệ / only a burnt child dreads the fire*” that aptly reflects the frame of mind of Vietnam’s present leaders. We should not make a differentiation between the Vietnamese overseas or back home as far as the preservation of the ecology is concerned. In order to achieve a sustainable and harmonious development, depending on his or her social activities, an informed individual should be cautious in choosing different ways and means to work toward a common goal that is “the preservation of the environment”. This concept of preservation should not be looked upon as an empty slogan, a worn-out cliché. It has a self-renewing meaning which is always proactive in the globalization age. An example is the Mỹ Thuận Bridge. Right after its inauguration in May 2,000, the bridge turned into a popular tourist attraction but just a few days later it became littered with trash. Those were the visible trash one could see on the deck of the bridge. How much more industrial and household waste is being dumped into the river from Yunnan and all along the current upstream? The trash at the Mỹ Thuận Bridge is only a very tiny phenomenon seen from a bird-view. It is imperative that we take a general, overall satellite view of an environment that is rapidly being degraded not only in Vietnam but throughout the entire Mekong Subregion.

NMT_ The characters in your book bear some likeness to actual persons in real life. Did you do it intentionally?

NTV_ If the environmentalists in Cừu Long Cạn Dòng, Biển Đông Dậy Sóng somehow resemble their counterparts in real life then shouldn't it be cause for us to rejoice? Those protagonists are not totally fictional.

They are based on the experts, scientists in the Friends of The Mekong Group, members of the Mekong Forum, independent experts from all countries of the world of all ages. Not a few of them are well past their seventies who had held important positions in the numerous organizations of the United Nations. Now, though living in retirement, early on in their careers they have tenaciously and continuously shown their concern for the environment, the eco-system of the Mekong from a geopolitical standpoint covering the 7 nations lying along that river's current all the way to the East Sea. They are the "gray matter", the staff, the "think tank" of the effort to conserve the environment and to implement a sustainable development of Vietnam today and in the future.

NMT_ Let's take a side step and talk about the protagonist Mười Nhe, secretary of the district committee (Ch. XV, pp. 194 - 197). Did you on purpose create this antagonistic character so that it stands in contrast to the characters living overseas?

NTV_ You have a tendency to point to a contrast between a Vietnam homeland and a Vietnam overseas. We have plenty of antagonistic Vietnamese living overseas. Mười Nhe is not a personage created "as an antagonistic character in order to put him in contrast with another character living overseas" like you're inclined to believe. But he is a "typical" character you often meet in Vietnam. He is not a "Red Capitalist" who has become degenerated and corrupted. Mười Nhe is a rare surviving "pure" communist who had gone through hard times and made sacrifices during the war. He lost one eye while fighting as a guerilla and now is the secretary of the Tam Nông district committee. He truly loves his birthplace Đồng Tháp. For him the term ecology is a synonym to "easy living" for the peasants under his charge. That goal justifies all the means that are being "indiscriminately" used in Tam Nông: cutting down of the cajuput trees with electric saws, fishing not only with nets but also with explosives and electric charges, hunting birds not only with traps but also with shotguns and telescopic sights... Mười Nhe's mindset of "instant gratification" resulted in the landscape

of a Tam Nông being transformed by the day: cajuput tree forests being cut down by stretches at a time; dead fish, regardless of their size, floating on the water; birds of all kinds, even endangered ones, being hunted for meat. In brief, “the five-year development plan” initiated by Mùrì Nhe brought about not only “easy living” but overnight prosperity to his people. Consequently, Mùrì Nhe can boast about the record-breaking statistics attained under his stewardship: a doubling of the population in his district, the cajuput tree forests being reduced by one third, in the bird sanctuary the red cranes that used to number in the thousands now stand at a mere 500. Understandably, in the eyes of his people, “comrade” Mùrì Nhe is the hero who has overnight transformed the flooded Tam Nông buffer zone into a thriving district... Never mind the hefty toll that is not apparent to Mùrì Nhe now. Like the irretrievable destruction of a marshland and a bird sanctuary that constitute an abundant biosphere, a breeding ground for fish and birds, mollusks and countless other organisms. In addition, it is also the center that regulates the water flow of the whole region during the Dry and Rainy Seasons. As you know, in Mùrì Nhe you can find the personification of the top-down “Renovation” policy whose only objective is “instant measures, instant results, instant wealth” even in the field of scientific research. No thought is given to what will happen to the natural resources of the country in the future.

NMT_ The underlying causes behind the threats of ecological pollution, drug problems in the Mekong Subregion, salinization in the Mekong Delta, and conflict over the oil-rich islands in the East Sea can all be attributed to the shortsightedness of the region’s leaders who only mind short-term interests while ignoring the massive catastrophes befalling their people in the coming days. Isn’t it so?

NTV_ The natural resources of the Mekong and the East Sea do not belong to any particular nation. Everybody understands that. Regrettably, the big country of China doesn’t conduct itself responsibly like a superpower should but wants to grab everything for itself. As for

the small countries, they don't behave any better. Instead of arriving at a common understanding, they try to work out the best deal for themselves at the expense of their neighbors. It's an "everybody for himself" melee. In other words a *Zero Sum Competition*. In lieu of a "Spirit of the Mekong", a "Spirit of Southeast Asia" what we witness today is a crisis of trust leading to an arm race paid for by an already meager per capita income in these countries. Their modest national developments achieved at the expense of environmental pollution and depletion of natural resources run the risk of being wiped out by a potential conflagration in the region – an Asian Armageddon.

NMT_ Some people propose that the root cause for this state of affairs is the existence of dictatorial regimes that show no respect for human rights and the ideal solution lies in replacing them with true democratic governments. Considering the present situation, don't you think that it's really difficult to achieve?

NTV_ A look at the countries in the Mekong Subregion from China, to Myanmar, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam regardless of the forms of government they have, will basically show that they are not democratic by nature. They are actually "social pyramids" as described by the Burmese sociologist Kyaw Nyein. At the top you have a governing minority and at the bottom the vast majority that is exploited and oppressed. At the close of the book I wrote in page 606: [Naturally there is no single solution to the problems of the ecology. What is required is a fundamental and all-embracing change in the fabrics of society transitioning from a "Totalitarian" to a "Democratic" system. With democracy one can improve the people's general awareness allowing the inhabitants living on both banks of the Mekong to become conscious of the threats the river faces and raise their voice in its defense because it is actually their lifeline. For me, human rights are defined as the equal opportunity to drink a safe glass of water, breathe clean air, and enjoy freedom. They can only be found in a true democracy.

NMT_ Pretending to be hard of hearing, China gives a deaf ear to the protestations from her neighbors or the international conferences about the river. What do you think can be done to force her to pay due consideration to the interests of her neighbors?

NTV_ Emerging from years of being exploited by the Western Powers in the wake of the Treaty of Nanking that China by the way considers a “national shame”, this country is at the present time rapidly growing into a superpower. The Chinese leaders are quite bright and fully aware of what they are doing and need to do with the water source of the Mekong as well as the strategic oil reserves of the East Sea.

NMT_ Do the conferences on the Mekong held by the concerned countries or the United Nations produce any useful contributions toward a solution to the above-mentioned issues?

NTV_ Every year, such conferences have been organized by the Mekong River Committee and its successor the Mekong River Commission. On her part, China continues to hold back any information she has while at the same time vigorously presses ahead with the construction of the series of hydroelectric dams in the Mekong Cascades mindless of any nefarious effects the countries downstream have to suffer. Since 1955, Beijing has categorically refused to join Mekong River Commission so that it can enjoy a freehand to act as it pleases and doesn't have to mind the concerns of her neighbors. When the need to make an announcement arises, the Chinese leaders never fail to proclaim “the benefits to be derived from the dams”. No matter the number of conferences you have, they will come to naught without the participation of China, a critical player since half of the length of the river's current meanders within its territory... After years of silence, on October 13, 2000, for the first time, Ms Phan Thúy Thanh, the spokesperson for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Hanoi government, made a pronouncement in reply to the article “The Mekong Choke Point” in the 10/12/2000 issue of the Far Eastern Economic Review that raised the concerns the

countries downstream the Mekong had pertaining to the construction of the dams over the mainstream in Yunnan. She called on China to guarantee that their dams will not cause damages to the ecology downstream and to maintain the integrity of the ecosystem of the entire river in observance of the equal interests of all the countries in the Subregion. The usual response that came from China was: dead silence and continued suppression of information. According to the old hands of Asia, China never had a good track record as far as multilateral cooperation is concerned. The case in point is her cooperation relating to the Mekong.

NMT_ Do you entertain any thought of having an English edition of the book in order to introduce it to the world's readers or at least to those in the 7 countries in the Mekong Subregion?

NTV_ An English version of the book? I had thoughts about it and very much wanted to have. However, I think I'd have an abridged edition of about 300 pages only. Instead of the distrust and division among the countries on the Mekong Basin we have now, I believe that an open exchange of information in an atmosphere of mutual respect and understanding will result in greater cooperation and creative competition. In that way, we will arrive at a "Spirit of the Mekong" that will serve the common good and allow us to exploit together and in harmony the rich resources of the Mekong like hydropower, hydrology, fishery, transportation including tourism. Those are the fundamental steps that will lay the groundwork for the establishment of a Culture of Peace as humankind welcomes the new millennium.

NMT_ Do you harbor any hope for a solution "To save the Mekong" or do you wish to say anything to our readers?

NTV_ I would like to share with you and the readers this meaningful motto: "*Extinction is forever, Endangered means we still have time*" from the Sea World in San Diego. If we are now sounding the alarm

about the threats facing the Mekong it means we still have the chance to act. Should the day arrive when the entire Mekong Delta becomes polluted and totally submerged by seawater then it would be the sad time for us to bid farewell to the Civilization of the Orchards and the Rice Bowl that feeds the 100 million inhabitants of our land.

Nguyễn Mạnh Trinh

11/ 2000

ON READING

“THE NINE DRAGONS DRAINED DRY, THE EAST SEA IN TURMOIL” BY NGÔ THẾ VINH

DOHAMIDE ĐỖ HẢI MINH

From the Editor: Prior to 1975, Dohamide was a regular contributor to *Bách Khoa Magazine*. His field of expertise is the history and civilization of Champa. In 1965 he published ‘*Dân Tộc Chăm Lược Sử / A Short History of the People of Champa*’ and in 2005 ‘*Dân Tộc Champa: Hành trình Tìm về Cội Nguồn / The People of Champa: A Journey to the Source*’. A graduate of the *Học Viện Quốc Gia Hành Chánh / The National Institute of Administration (Saigon, Vietnam)*, he also held a M.A. from the University of Kansas, USA. Growing up in the *Hậu Giang Châu Đốc* region, he is quite familiar with the ecosystem of the Mekong Delta.

“The High Water” And “The Low Water” Seasons In The Mekong Delta

For decades, the inhabitants of the Mekong Delta have been well accustomed to live together with its annual floods. They look at it as a natural phenomenon that occurs periodically. As a result, they build

stilt houses to dwell in with pillars high enough to keep the house floor dry during the Rainy Season. Except for the lunar years of the Dragon, customarily, when the floors of their houses become submerged by the rising water, people switch to a new lifestyle that goes with the impending flood. They raise their beds to higher levels so that they can sleep comfortably until the time the Low Water Season (called “nước giụt” by the locals) comes allowing their families to return to their normal activities. In that way, the common folks in the Mekong Delta are well adjusted to live with “The High Water Season” while the people in the North or Central Vietnam would consider it as the “Flood Season”.

The precursor signs of the flood in the Mekong Delta start mostly in August of the lunar calendar. Clumps of uprooted hyacinths or water morning glories, sometimes covering the entire width of the river, float down in successive waves from the fields in Cambodia. The water gradually rises until it overflows the river banks to inundate the surrounding lands. In the Delta, there is a type of rice seed named “floating rice” whose stalks can grow up to 7 or 8 meters depending on the rising water level. After the water recedes, the stalks would lay flat on the ground ready to be harvested. To reduce the force of the gushing water, a vast and complex network of canals had been dug in the Delta. The water in those canals is also used to wash away the alum in the soil to render the fields suitable for farming.

During the “High Water” Season, by the hour, people keep a close watch on the rising water in order to sound the alarm should it exceed the normal levels of the previous years. The moment the water flowing in from upstream begins to subside, the water level stops to rise then drops rapidly, and people say that the water “pulls back /nước giụt”, because they can clearly see the water level dips with their own eyes. The rising and lowering of the water level, however, do not occur simultaneously everywhere. As it rushes out to the sea, when the water recedes in Châu Đốc, then it rises in the Cần Thơ, Vĩnh Long regions... downstream

the water swells, overflows the banks, inundates the fields then ebbs – just like the way liquid moves in two connecting vessels.

In the murky current rich in silt, shoals of fish enter the fields to spawn. At the time the water “pulls back”, bands of small fish especially Siamese mudcarps follow the dark gold color water to flock out of the fields into the canals to eventually reach the main rivers. People are then at the ready to set up trap nets along the river banks. At its peak, the catch is so abundant that fishermen have to open the trap nets to release some of the fish and spare the nets from being torn. With the High and Low Water Seasons, the ecosystem in the Mekong Delta is thus naturally regulated and balanced. In years when the water rises above normal, people, in their popular belief, attribute it to natural disasters beyond human controls.

That natural balancing of the Mekong Delta’s ecosystem had become a feature of the past caused by a large population explosion in areas that necessitate the setting up of resettlement centers. The new settlers began to build dikes to retain water for rice planting and increase agricultural production. In the old days, previous generations that migrated to the Mekong Delta usually chose to live on high grounds called “đất giồng”. So, whenever the boundless fields where the egrets could tirelessly fly became submerged by water, the high grounds still remained safe haven to their inhabitants and snake population. On the other hand, over the last decades, the resettlement areas are mainly located in lands that are ready for cultivation. Consequently, during the “High Water” Season, their fields can lie up to 2 or 3 meters under water and the “natural disasters” that those people have to face would become more exacting and disastrous.

Moreover, over the past years, reckless deforestation has given rise to the loudest condemnations from environmentalists: lush forests that had retained large bodies of water in the ground upstream in the past have disappeared or have become too sparse. The rainwater is now free

to flow downstream and inevitably helps swell the current each time heavy rains come.

The Nine Dragons Drained Dry – A Contradiction in Terms?

Author Ngô Thế Vinh has recently released his new book with a rather catching title: “Cứu Long Cận Dòng, Biển Đông Dậy Sóng/ The Nine Dragons Drained Dry, The East Sea in Turmoil” published by Nhà Xuất Bản Văn Nghệ. It has received enthusiastic acclaim from readers especially from “the Friends of the Mekong Group”, as a major contribution to the efforts to preserve the ecology in the Mekong Delta. However, a question that immediately comes to mind is whether the book’s title would imply here a contradiction in terms? In fact from the end of September through October of 2000, the water gushing down from Cambodia to Vietnam had swept away countless dwellings including stilt houses along the river banks and drowned more than 300 souls. The Vietnamese communities overseas, in solidarity with their fellow countrymen at home, have wholeheartedly launched relief drives to help the unfortunate victims. Therefore, how can author Ngô thế Vinh assert in his book that “the Nine Dragons” is being drained dry meaning that there is not much water left in the Mekong?

Actually, the massive volume of water that comes gushing down from upstream to overflow the river banks then submerge the Mekong Delta is a natural phenomenon that takes place every year according to a set time schedule lasting for about two months at the most. In the long run, however, the problem is no longer the regular annual floods but rather the trend showing the water level is dropping incessantly until the day the river dries up completely. Then, we’ll have on our hand a catastrophe of unpredictable dimensions that will prove irreversible and relief funds meaningless.

Incidences of seawater infringing deeper inland in the aftermath of the annual floods have been observed by scientists in the basins of the Sông

Tiền and Sông Hậu Rivers. There are also evidences showing that fish living in brackish water have been reported in a number of areas where previously only freshwater fish live. The salinization effects are not limited to the river currents but spread widely to the surrounding lands rendering fresh water wells unusable. Evidently, the soil affected by seawater is no longer suitable for the planting of traditional rice seeds. To render the matter worse, at the present time, we do not see any prospect for a new type of rice seed that can grow in brackish water being engineered in the labs.

Under such circumstances, will Vietnam be able to remain the second exporter of rice in the world? Should conditions worsen in the coming days, will the Vietnamese people have enough rice to eat? With his skillful pen, the author leads the readers on an exploration and to an understanding of those fundamental challenges. The cause for the Mekong River being drained dry can be attributed – not to natural disasters – but actually to our own doing.

In fact, all the countries that border the Mekong belong to the developing group. In their quest for economic development, especially in the industrial sectors, they strive their utmost to produce as much electricity as possible. That dream was and continues to be the driving force behind their efforts to build dams and hydropower plants in the hope that this low-cost “white coal” would free them from being dependent on imported oil and would help save the precious foreign exchange.

As a rule, international laws usually require that nationals and goods crossing the established borders of one country to another have to observe certain regulations. However, water flowing in the current of a river is exempt from such requirements. To operate the dams efficiently, it is necessary to retain water and divert it into giant reservoirs from which it will be released as needed to run the gigantic turbines that will generate electricity.

This attempt to divert water in one country to meet its own needs gives rise to two immediate consequences: a change in the natural course of the river and a reduction in the centuries-old water flow from the source to the sea. In this respect, it's apparent that China holds the trump card because the very source of the Mekong lies well within its territory. In reality, over the past decades, this country has made the most of its advantageous location when it built a series of hydropower dams of the Mekong Cascades in total disregard of the interests of its neighbors to the South including in geographical order: Myanmar, Thailand, Laos then Cambodia. Located at the Mekong's estuary, Vietnam is the country that suffers the most.

Taking into consideration the above-mentioned facts i.e. the tremendous disasters caused by the flooding of the Mekong Delta and the vigorous relief efforts organized by the Vietnamese communities overseas, the publication of “Cứu Long Cận Dòng, Biển Đông Dậy Sóng/The Nine Dragons Drained Dry, The East Sea In Turmoil” may appear to be a complete oxymoron.

Nevertheless, when the Mekong is placed in a regional and long-term context – as it runs the risk of being drained dry – the publication of the book may then be seen in its proper perspective. In a nutshell, it represents an attempt to call upon the nations located in the Mekong Subregion to be concerned about the future and adopt a judicious geopolitical viewpoint encompassing enough to see the full potentials and limits of the exploitation of the Mekong's water in the service of their economic development in the face of an arrogant China, the hegemonic neighbor upstream.

The Nine Dragons Drained Dry, The East Sea in Turmoil

Up to this point, the readers may already have been correctly aware that the 645 pages-long “Cứu Long Cận Dòng, Biển Đông Dậy Sóng/The Nine Dragons Drained Dry, The East Sea in Turmoil” is not a

novel like “Mây Bão”, “Bóng Đêm”, “Gió Mùa”, “Vòng Đai Xanh/ The Green Belt”, “Mặt Trận Ở Sài Gòn/The Battle of Saigon” that had been published and had helped establish Ngô Thế Vinh as a serious and knowledgeable writer in the literary circles over the years.

The book consists of 23 chapters in addition to the “Foreword”, an appendix about the “Travels on The Mekong 1866-1873”, and the last pages reserved for the “Epilogue”. At the end of the “Foreword”, the author gave the location and date “Cà Mau Năm Căn 11/99” that may mislead the uninformed readers in thinking that the book was written in Vietnam. The geographical denotation “Cà Mau – Năm Căn”, however, only reflects the fact that, in the process of writing the book, the author had conducted fieldtrip studies right inside the country. The old photographs of ancient times along with the vivid and numerous ones taken of the author’s trips that are displayed at the end of each chapter amply bear witness to the time consuming efforts as well as the deep and extensive research done by the author.

To help the readers keep track of and relate to the historical events pertaining to the Mekong River, the author has included in the first part of the book, a chronological table pertaining to the 7 countries and covering from the 1st century to the year 2000 marking the completion of the building of the Mỹ Thuận Bridge over the Sông Tiền River. It shows the breadth of vision the author espouses in the writing of his book.

As far as methodology is concerned, the book “Cửu Long Cạn Dòng, Biển Đông Dậy Sóng/ The Nine Dragons Drained Dry / The East Sea In Turmoil” is written in a very interesting and unique form. In the Foreword, Ngô Thế Vinh confided that: “This is not purely a ‘fiction’ meaning a product of the imagination, but it is rather a faction – an acronym of Fact and Fiction – where a number of literary characters and fictional settings are combined to take the readers to the locations visited by the Mekong...”

The faction form preferred by Ngô Thế Vinh would undoubtedly be the topic of heated discussions and exchanges of ideas within the literary circle in the coming days.

It seems as if the real intention of the author is to introduce specific settings rich in details that force the readers to think and ponder about a larger issue that permeates his work: the Mekong River facing catastrophic threats emanating from the construction of hydropower dams by the governments in the region with the sole purpose of increasing the production of electricity. Claiming national sovereign rights, they build recklessly in complete disregard for the long-term nefarious effects on the environment and for the all-pervasive harms to the lifestyle of the local inhabitants.

Ngô Thế Vinh did not limit the discussion of the issues within the boundaries of individual nations but chose to sound the alarm about their effects on the neighboring countries and the dangers of taking a chauvinistic approach to the problems. Moreover, he also points to the age-old threats exerted by the Chinese giant in the north that is trying to ruthlessly overwhelm the countries downstream in regards to its use of water and its discharge of industrial waste in Yunnan province...

The title given to individual chapters, on the face of it, may appear poetic or lighthearted but in fact the issues being developed evoke in the readers severe and unforgiving condemnations. For instance, the title “The Missing Boat On The Mekong And A Selachian Fish In The Plain Of Reeds” given to Chapter XIV actually exposes in a masterful way the shortsightedness of the Vietnamese communist leaders who declined to give the green light to the world renowned deep-sea French explorer Jacques-Yves Cousteau to go up the Mekong in his tiny submarine *Calypso* with the purpose of collecting scientific data. Jacques-Yves Cousteau has passed away since and Vietnam lost a golden opportunity to enrich its already meager scientific knowledge of the Mekong’s ecosystem.

Chapter XXII “In Search Of The Lost Paradise In The East” piques the curiosity of the reader to lead him on, along the pages, in the discovery that the paradise in question is actually the ancient cultures of Southeast Asia as revealed by recent archeological finds, the rainforests in Cambodia, and the networks of canals and roads of the defunct Óc Eo civilization in the Mekong Basin.

From one chapter to the next, the author introduces the readers to the lands and cultures the Mekong visits starting from its source in Tibet through Yunnan, Myanmar, Thailand, to the Golden Triangle and the land of Laos with its Plains of Jars. While staying in Singapore, the author takes his readers to Cambodia and the Killing Fields under Pol Pot’s rule, before going to Bến Tre, Cái Bè, the Tam Nông Bird Sanctuary in the marshlands of Vietnam, our grief-stricken motherland. Then, he leads them back to Laos, Cambodia with the fascinating Tonle Sap Lake before returning to Vietnam once more.

Each chapter is earmarked for the analysis of a particular issue and its complex as well as varied facets. No chapter is alike. Though the chapters’ contents differ, the author makes it certain that they are all connected to a unifying theme which is the ominous picture of a Mekong being threatened by the countries in the region as they compete with each other to build hydroelectric dams holding back and polluting its water.

While working on the contents of each chapter, the author never fails to provide valuable data and information that are illustrated by decades-old photographs depicting the histories, cultures or civilizations of ancient lands like Funan, Óc Eo, Champa, Tibet... Throughout the book, Ngô Thế Vinh has consistently demonstrated a well-defined habit of delving exhaustively into any issue that he brings up by citing ample data or evidences that captivate the readers to the point they would not want to stop reading.

Still, in the middle of the exciting journey, when he deems that the

readers have had enough, Ngô Thế Vinh, abruptly switches lanes to a new topic without any hesitation. At a certain moment, to their utmost surprise, his readers are left dangling as they are ushered into new territories. Each time that it happens, the readers cannot help turning back the pages to allow them to recapitulate before venturing on to new discoveries.

Only then, can the readers appreciate the author's gifted style and assert that "Cửu Long Cạn Dòng, Biển Đông Dậy Sóng/ The Nine Dragons Drained Dry, The East Sea In Turmoil" is loaded with information that possesses historical as well as educational values. One cannot read it casually as if one reads a novel.

It is truly in cases like these that historical events of a long gone era concerning the Mekong become so striking and carved into one's memory like the story about the explorers Francis Garnier, Doudard de Lagrée sailing upstream the Mekong in search of a waterway linking Saigon to China or the near extinction of the rare fish Pla Beuks and Dolphins inhabiting the river's current...

Probably, the most extraordinary revelation is that although the Mekong is shown in all the world maps, one must wait until 1994 for the source of this river to be exactly located in the remotest wilderness of the Tibetan High Plateau.

The book's title plainly indicates that it deals with two main topics. The first part "The Nine Dragons Drained Dry" warns about the imminent dangers the Mekong faces if the countries bordering its current continue to construct hydropower dams to produce electricity without giving due consideration to the devastating effects on the environment and on the livelihood of the people living downstream.

Taking the stance of a humanist and environmentalist, Ngô Thế Vinh argues that from a national standpoint, the economic benefits to be

derived from the dams can in no way take preference over the ordinary lifestyle of the inhabitants in the entire region.

On this occasion, the author openly debunks the long-standing myth pertaining to the international financial institutions specializing in the funding of development projects such as the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank. He shone the light on the tragic fact that they have been working hand in hand with the world's authoritarian governments on the pretext that the latter can provide the needed political stability to implement the dam building projects. These projects inevitably require the displacement of the population living in the areas that will be submerged by the massive volume of water in the reservoirs.

In regards to the Mekong, the big country of China controls the source of the river and holds all the cards. It is quietly building a series of hydroelectric dams in the Mekong Cascades as well as over-polluting the river by the dumping of industrial waste into its current with impunity. Cambodia and Vietnam, the two countries that lie downstream are suffering the most from this environmental disaster.

In order to serve its selfish interests, China has consistently avoided joining the Mekong River Commission. The book also pointed out a fascinating discovery that has been long overlooked by world public opinion: China has destroyed huge boulders in the Mekong's riverbed in order to construct a waterway running all the way from its border to Laos.

The hegemonic aspirations of this country have been bolstered by its territorial claims in the East Sea – an issue discussed by the author in Chapter XV whose heading “Cửu Long Cạn Dòng, Biển Đông Dậy Sóng/The Nine Dragons Drained Dry, The East Sea In Turmoil” has been chosen to become the title of the book. In this chapter, the author exclusively delves in the second part of the title: The East Sea In Turmoil. He recalls the events of the Hoàng Sa (Paracel) in 1974 and

Trường Sa (Spratly) in 1988 that still remain an unhealed sore in the mind of every Vietnamese. He then expounds the various aspects of the quest for hegemony over Southeast Asia by the Chinese leaders.

Considering that the country's land and sea are under threats, the character named Hộ has undoubtedly stunned many a reader when he asserted: "For more than a decade, China has single-mindedly been building the series of 7 giant dams in the Mekong Cascades in Yunnan. In doing so, it has conducted an undeclared environmental war against the 5 countries downstream." For his part, to remind the readers of the indomitable spirit of the Vietnamese people, at the start of the chapter, Ngô Thế Vinh has cited king Lý Thường Kiệt's famous poem issuing a warning to any potential invaders:

*The Southern King reigns in the southern land
It had been so decided in the Heaven's plan
If you so dared as to invade our fatherland
Your ignominious fate is defeat at our hands
Lý Thường Kiệt [1019–1105]*

As stated in the foreword, the protagonists in the book are all fictional. Nevertheless, under Ngô Thế Vinh's artful pen, the readers are led to believe that somehow those characters do exist in real life. To name a few: Mr. Như Phong, a veteran journalist, who wrote for an American publication specializing in Southeast Asia and Vietnam; the individual referred to with the first person pronoun "I", a member of the Friends of the Mekong Group, who appeared in many chapters and held a broad as well as strategic view on the environment issue; Dr. Duy, a young Northerner who grew up in the South and a graduate of an American university whose many works were published in a well-known medical journal; and by his side is the young Bé Tư, a bright and insightful young girl, who was described by Ngô Thế Vinh as being in love with Dr. Duy to add a touch of romance to the story of the Mekong...

It is those characters that provide the unifying link connecting the events together. They may be committed activists; participants at a conference, a field-trip, or a seminar...through them the author expresses his knowledgeable views on the issues showing his masterful command of the topics under discussion. At times the views expressed may be pure observations or personal outlooks, at others they may represent expert or professional opinions deemed appropriate to the issues pertaining to the Mekong.

For the most part, those expert or professional opinions are presented in a civil, learned way. However, when necessary, the author shows he can be quite severe and to the point like in the case of the genocide under Pol Pot, the decapitation of the Vietnamese under Lon Nol in Cambodia, the negative aspects of the Renovation Era in Vietnam, the devastating abuses at the Tam Nông Bird Sanctuary leading to the potential extinction of rare animal species...While doing so, Ngô Thế Vinh has wisely moderated his tone so that individuals and more importantly the concerned authorities are amenable to listen to and agree with him.

A poignant observation about the present conditions in Vietnam is that the majority of the characters Ngô Thế Vinh depicted, whether of the old or young generations, come mostly from overseas. Even so, the author does not want the readers to think that those characters feel estranged while working in their country of origin just because they are subject to trifling regulations such as requiring them to report to the local police of the place they are staying at (the author did not mention this detail in the book). When they meet and work with foreign experts like the Thai professor Cham Sak in Thailand, they carry themselves just like committed environmentalists trying to preserve the environment and serve their homeland.

Trained in modern technology and equipped with their experience working overseas, upon their return to Vietnam, those experts bring with them a broad and farsighted strategic outlook as well as a scientific

approach to problem solving. Consequently, they may often differ or even clash with the parochial way of thinking of Mùrì Nhe, the typical communist cadre one can often encounter in the Mekong Delta. Ngô Thế Vinh deserves the credit for having so cleverly created this character.

The name “Mùrì Nhe” in itself conjures up a comical image leading people to think that this character has a constant smile on his face. Quite the contrary, he was described by Ngô Thế Vinh as “a communist cadre who is thin and small in stature...the pale color of his skin is indicative of people afflicted with chronic anemia... his bony and shiny face betrays past hardships and deprivations” In Mùrì Nhe we have the perfect stereotype of the rare “orthodox” communists who still walk the earth.

Nowadays, he holds the position of District Party Committee Chief of Tam Nông and has zealously implemented the Renovation policy named “Five-Year Development Plan” that resulted in doubling the District’s population and bringing about a prosperous lifestyle within a record time. Mùrì Nhe authorized the reckless cutting down of mangrove trees, fishing with nets and even with explosives, catching of shrimps regardless of their size – those too small to be sold were left floating on the water surface. With such irresponsible economic practices it did not take long for the people to become affluent. Unfortunately, the by-products were: the area of the famous mangrove trees was reduced by two third, of the thousands of rare red cranes only about 500 survived!

Needless to say, Mùrì Nhe was proud and happy of his outstanding achievements in the development of his District. (The author did not mention the slogan “fast and robust leap toward socialism”) But the question is how to make this old and conservative cadre understand the notion that the mangroves and bird sanctuaries represent an abundant biological treasure, a haven for the reproduction and growth of numerous fish and other animal species? Lack of education coupled

with fanaticism still remain “the scourge not only to humans but also to birds, animal and plants”. This is an aspect of the current drama threatening the Mekong that Ngô Thế Vinh has vividly brought to the consciousness of those who still care.

People found out that Mười Nhe had a son named Thuận who attended college in the city. He felt discreetly proud of his son but blamed him for “being too bookish to dare to talk with me about such things as the environment or ecosystem.”

Through Bé Tư’s support, Thuận was granted a scholarship by the International Crane Foundation to study abroad. He opted to go to America since it was the “in thing” to do and was trying his best to attain the required test score of 550 in English competency.

People around them now put all of their hope in Thuận and his young generation to take over from the old one that is gradually phasing out. In the future, it is expected that the young generation, both inside and outside the country, would hopefully be able to communicate with each other on the same wave length and work side by side harmoniously to deal with the ecological problems of the Mekong.

Unfortunately, it may take too long for that time to arrive. Characters like Bé Tư are purely fictional and created out of idealistic wishful thinking. Unless Bé Tư and Thuận come from the same social class the odds do not look favorable for the two of them to tie the knot.

Ngô Thế Vinh had in store a practical and fabulous way to change the working style of Mười Nhe: Sending a comrade from the Party’s central committee to revive in Mười Nhe the hatred of the enemy and the need to maintain military vigilance for the defense of the nation... For him to desist, he must be convinced that cutting down the mangroves trees is tantamount to destroying the bases of the resistance.

The book is 645-pages long, the paintings are done by Nghiêu Đê, its cover by Khánh Trường, and the presentation by Cao Xuân Huy. It is illustrated with an abundance of vivid photographs – a number of them carry high historical values. Ngô Thế Vinh’s work “Cửu Long Cạn Dòng, Biển Đông Dậy Sóng/The Nine Dragons Drained Dry, The East Sea In Turmoil” takes the readers on a long journey on the Mekong starting from its source in Tibet, going over whirlpools and waterfalls and the ups and downs of different countries’ history before entering the Delta and reaching its estuary that ends in the East Sea.

To sum up, written in the uncommon fiction form and a style unique to Ngô Thế Vinh, the book demonstrates that its author has done extensive research on each of the issues raised. It really shows a new height in Ngô Thế Vinh’s literary achievements.

The book’s intrinsic value lies in its ability to provide valuable data and first rate information about the eventful past of each land the Mekong meanders through. Building on that foundation, the author introduces the readers to and familiarizes them with the ecological issues facing the entire region to help them arrive at an overall strategic view devoid of selfish and parochial constraints.

The arrogance of big brother China induces that country to, on one hand, threaten and expand into the East Sea and on the other carry out a covert policy aiming at monopolizing the resources of the Mekong upstream. The Mekong is truly facing an uncertain future emanating from China’s policy characterized by the building of dams in total disregard of any consultation and coordination, a reasonable mutual desire to share natural resources, and a balanced approach in the preservation of the ecology with the countries downstream.

The book has shone the spotlight on a number of important issues and simplified complex technical knowledge in order to raise the popular consciousness about potential environmental disasters. Among them we

can cite the danger of the Mekong being drained dry and the seawater encroaching deeper into the countries downstream including Vietnam that is unfortunately the most affected.

Ngô Thế Vinh's book "Cứu Long Xuyên Dòng, Biển Đông Dậy Sóng / The Nine Dragons Drained Dry/The East Sea In Turmoil" sounded the alarm about the above-mentioned dangers. Hopefully it will be heard in the faraway corners of the earth, rally a growing number of concerned individuals, and mobilize the needed brainpower in the common effort of combating the ecological disasters that are threatening the Mekong, its Subregion and the Mekong Delta in Vietnam in particular.

DOHAMIDE ĐỖ HẢI MINH

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