

THE DIFFICULT PATH TOWARD AN INTEGRATED UNIVERSITY AND COMMUNITY COLLEGE SYSTEM IN VIETNAM

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(The author wishes to say that this article was written in fond memory of his beloved birthplace and its former higher education system. Looking back, in time and space, scenes and events of the past and from afar reappeared one after another before his eyes. He apologizes for any possible omissions and errors.)

Transition

On March 9, 1945, around 9:00 P.M., gunfire erupted in the quiet *Cité Universitaire* (student housing village) in the outskirts of Hanoi (Hà Nội). Japanese soldiers rushed into the dormitories and announced the replacement of the French colonial administration by a Vietnamese provisional government. They said they had gathered the French university staff into one villa, and asked the students to cordon and guard the villa. This *coup de force* ended the *Université de l'Indochine* which enrolled about 1,500 students drawn from a population of more than 30 million from Cambodia, Laos, Cochinchina, Annam and Tonkin; the last three resulted from the division of Vietnam by France.

Beginning with the *Université de l'Indochine* experience, the Vietnamese adapted and developed a dual system, north and south, with limited resources and in response to the rising expectations of the people. In addition to the Chinese and French influences of the past, the country was now open to new cultural currents from many eastern and western countries. Vietnam has suffered great pains of growth and many other problems during the last half century of political turmoil and economic crisis, many of which still persist today.

Long Tradition of Elitism and Literary Dilettantism

Higher education in Vietnam is traced back as far as the eleventh century. During 1,000 years of Chi-

nese domination (111 B.C. to A.D. 939), the conquerors brought An Nam (pacified south) into the fold of Chinese civilization. Vietnam inherited three principal philosophies and beliefs from China that prevail in the Vietnamese mentality, namely, Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism. Confucianism pervaded all activities; the birthday of Confucius was celebrated solemnly even in the 1960s.

Nine hundred years of independence followed the liberation from China. The Vietnamese emperors developed a system of education that was not far removed from the northern origin. The most striking feature of the system was that higher education was developed by the government to recruit the best scholars as mandarins whereas the lower levels of education were left to private initiative. The literary tradition was well represented by the *Văn Miếu* (Temple of Literature) established in A.D. 1070 in Hanoi.

The goal of education was the inner-improvement characteristic of the *quân tử* (Chinese 君子 kiun-tseu), that is, the honest man or the gentleman, as opposed to the *tiểu nhân* (小人 siao-jen), that is, the vulgar man. The *quân tử* has a desire to predominate the concern of his dignity over his apparent interests. He is the type of man capable of governing the people, of being “father” of the people.

The curriculum, essentially literary, included philosophy, ethics, poetry, rhetoric, history, and political science. Not until the fifteenth century

was it suggested that the curriculum incorporate mathematics and other practical subjects. The learning method was memorizing in order to be faithful to the thought of “masters.” Critical thinking was excluded.

The medium of instruction was the *nho* 儒 (learned) characters which were Chinese characters pronounced in the Vietnamese manner (Fig. 1). This writing was not accessible to the masses. Around the 10th century, a demotic script combining the simplest elements of Chinese writing was invented to transcribe the vernacular language; it was called the *nôm* 喃. Although many historical records and literary masterworks were written in *nôm*, its structure was cumbersome and often caused contradictory interpretations. The *nôm* was not appreciated in high society as was the *nho* which was the official script. The *nôm* has recently drawn new interest among the world’s scholars (Fig. 2). A computer character encoding standard is available that converts documents recorded in *nôm* into electronic form (Đỗ, Ngô, & Ngô, 1993).

Evaluation of scholar’s literary knowledge was administered through different levels of competitive examinations: *thi hương* (provincial examination), *thi hội* (general examination), *thi đình* (royal examination). These examinations, also known as “triannual examinations,” were given in a special vast enclosure (the size of a football field) called *trường thi*. They essentially included an essay on Chinese classics, a composition in verses or in rhymed prose, and the draft of edicts or ordinances.

Before A.D. 1075, the year of the creation of the first examination, the mandarins were chosen among the candidates presented by Buddhists monks. Since then, access to the mandarinship was made possible in two ways, either through the examinations or through enrollment in the *Quốc Tử Giám* (College for Wards of the Nation), an aristocratic institution which excluded students deprived of titles or honorific grades. In the beginning of the nineteenth century, under the Nguyễn Dynasty, a college was established in Huế (central Vietnam) where princes and sons of man-

darins had peers who were the best students selected from the masses.

A National Script Adopted from the West

One of the precious instruments the West contributed to the Vietnamese culture is the Romanized writing called *quốc ngữ* (national language). Catholic missionaries from France, Italy, Portugal and Spain adapted the Roman alphabet in a new script that phonetized the Vietnamese language. Alexandre de Rhodes, a French Jesuit priest, wrote a Vietnamese-Portuguese-Latin dictionary around the middle of the 17th century. The invention was first used for religious printing and teaching, and because of its simplicity compared to the cumbersome *nho* and *nôm* characters, the *quốc ngữ* became increasingly popular. Unlike China where Romanization gained little success, the *quốc ngữ* was accepted in Vietnam as an instrument for intellectual liberation and cultural dissemination. After World War II, the *quốc ngữ* was adopted as the country’s official writing system and was used as the medium of instruction from elementary school to the university. About 400 daily and periodic publications in *quốc ngữ* are circulated today among the Vietnamese refugees in America.

Limited Opportunities under Colonial Rule

The first French admirals who conquered the country in the 1860s were concerned with the establishment of an *École des Interprètes* (School of Interpreters) and a *Collège des Stagiaires* (School of Trainees) to train a core of natives to help communicate with and govern the oppressed people. Time and again there were contradictory measures concerning the development and limitation of education. Like the Chinese in the past, some French governors dreaded higher education for the native intelligentsia. By the 1920s, only 200,000 out of two million of school-age population received any instruction. Parallel to the dissemination of the French language and culture, every effort was directed toward dismantling the Vietnamese education system. French and, to a lesser degree, the *quốc ngữ* were gradually incorporated into the old examinations. The abolishment of the

latter in 1919 was the final death blow to the traditional education. The *quốc ngữ* was soon minimized. In the author's third-grade class, pupils had to pay a fine if they were caught speaking Vietnamese. Reading from the French history book, they recited aloud, "our ancestors are the Gauls!"

Suppression of the traditional culture and obstruction of education increased resentment against the oppressors. Revolts were frequent. Some French governors promoted, therefore, what they termed the "moral conquest" by opening more educational opportunities in an attempt to calm down nationalistic attitudes and possible movements. They realized that if they did not provide higher education there would be an exodus of Vietnamese students who might come under foreign influence and become politically dangerous for the colony. The French feared that students might go to Japan, Hong Kong or elsewhere.

The first university did not come until 1907. The institution, established in Hanoi and named the University of Indochina was actually a group of occupational schools to train auxiliaries for all of French Indochina. The new schools were soon closed in reprisal for political unrest in mountainous area close to the China border and were not reopened until 1918. A School of Medicine and Pharmacy was later added to the original School of Administration and Law, the School of Forestry, Agriculture, and Veterinary training, the School of Public Works, the School of Fine Arts and Architecture, and the School of Commerce. The School of Science began not long before World War II. The word "School" was later changed to "Faculty" for Medicine and Pharmacy, Law, and Science.

Administrators and professors were almost exclusively French. The requirement of the French doctorate for professorship reduced the indigenous to the role of assistants, because that high degree was accessible only by those who could afford to go to France. One of the first indigenous professors was mathematician Hoàng Xuân Hãn, whose native scientific lexicon stimulated the use of Vietnamese as the medium of instruction, a sign of nationalism.

Higher Education Birth and Fast Expansion Despite Turmoil in The South

When the French returned to Indochina following World War II to replace the British army in the South and the Nationalist Chinese army in the North, they reopened the university in Hanoi. In 1946, they improvised some temporary facilities in the South which had been denied higher education previously. Law classes were held on the premises of the former *École Maternelle* (pre-school), science was taught in the laboratory of a French *lycée*, the Mixed Faculty of Medicine and Pharmacy operated in a French villa. These programs were administered in Saigon (Sài Gòn) as an annex of the University of Hanoi under the supervision of a Vietnamese Vice-Rector, whereas the French Rector oversaw the whole institution from Hanoi, the seat of the former Governor-General of French Indochina. Around 1950, when it appeared that the French army would regain control of the entire country, major equipment, the library, and staff of the fledging Saigon higher education establishment were transferred to Hanoi, leaving in Saigon just enough resources to conduct the first year of higher learning.

After the Geneva Agreements ended the Indochina War in 1954, one part of the university was transferred hastily, from Hanoi to Saigon, to strengthen the foundation of the National University of Vietnam (Republic of Vietnam). In 1957, the institution was renamed University of Saigon when a second state university was established in Huế (central Vietnam). The Catholic University of Đà Lạt opened in 1958. The Buddhist Vạn Hạnh University was established in Saigon in 1964. The public University of Cần Thơ started in 1966 in the rich Mekong Delta. Since its inception, this university strove to blend technical studies with academic disciplines. It included Science, Letters, Law and Social Sciences, Pedagogy, and Agriculture. Other private universities were authorized to open: Hoà Hảo University in An Giang, Minh Đức University in Saigon, Cao Đài University in Tây Ninh, Cửu Long University in Saigon. All of these institutions were under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education.

Dichotomy Between Academic and Technical Education

In the south, the University of Saigon was the oldest and largest, thus by far the most complete and prestigious institution. It included eight faculties: Letters, Science, Law, Medicine, Dentistry, Pharmacy, Pedagogy, and Architecture. The engineering schools—Civil, Mechanical, Electrical, Industrial, Chemical, Electronics, Merchant Marine—formed a separate National Technical Center located in a Saigon suburb. Another entity was the National Agricultural Center (including Forestry and Animal Husbandry). The Institute of National Administration was directed by the Office of the Prime Minister.

Dichotomy between academic and vocational education existed before the French administration. The image of the traditional scholar who received the highest status was not completely erased from the Vietnamese mind. The *nhà nho* (man of letters), a virtuoso in rhetoric and calligraphy, derided manual labor of the hands and treasured long finger nails to mark his honorific distinction. When western culture was introduced through a system of *culture générale*, social distinction was kept intact between white collar and blue collar workers. The literary elite considered business and industrial activities to be inferior.

A System Survey and Loss of the Survey Team

The rapid expansion of the higher education system created a host of problems due to limited financial and human resources. While public universities relied heavily on foreign assistance, which was declining drastically toward the end of the Vietnam War, the private universities pressured for more subsidies from the government. None of these institutions had a well designed master plan for long-range development. Staff development was almost nonexistent. The small pool of instructors, mostly from the University of Saigon which was the principal purveyor, were over solicited by other institutions. Instructors became moonlighting “flying professors” who used Air Vietnam to hop from campus to campus and

deliver accelerated lectures. The virtual absence of libraries forced both teachers and students to use lecture notes to prepare for the annual examinations. At the Faculty of Law and the Faculty of Letters of Saigon, attendance was not required. The failure rate was excessively high. In the year 1970-71 the Faculty of Law enrolled 10,268 freshmen, 3,666 took the annual examination (24%), only 898 passed (8%). Only 17 of the 698 graduate students passed (2%).

Due to these shortcomings, the government invited a team of American university educators and administrators in 1967 to make a survey of the entire system and make recommendations for reorganization. The team was headed by the president of Wisconsin State University, Stevens Point campus, and six other members coming from Harvard University, the State University of Minnesota, the University of Illinois, and the University of Wisconsin. Beginning their site-visit in January 1967, the seven-member team and the higher education advisor lost their lives in an aircraft accident during their visit to the University of Huế, in April 1967. The data they collected were compiled in a voluminous report that deserves the attention of all Vietnamese education planners (Wisconsin State University, 1967).

Planning for Postwar Reconstruction

Peace negotiations took place in Paris in the late 1960s. In Vietnam, all sectors, public and private, drew plans for reconstruction. In higher education, reforms had to be carried out to reduce the waste of material and human resources and to develop staff for reconstruction. Shortcomings of the existing system and the pressure of preparation for peace-time reconstruction served as catalysts for reform and innovation. It was within that context that two new concepts were introduced: the community college and the polytechnic university.

The Community College

The concept of the community college, with a comprehensive curriculum responsive to the needs of the community, was accepted with enthusiasm by the common people. The plan was to

convert military installations and underutilized local educational facilities to a new higher education system able to equip technicians with adequate skills required by the industry, to retrain millions of soldiers for a return to civilian life, to provide general education for an intelligent citizenry to live in a democracy, to serve as a community center to preserve and develop the cultural heritage, to relieve pressure on the university by delivering a more effective education for freshman and sophomore. Never before was a concept of education as widely presented in public forums. The various functions of the community college were explained to a cross section of people: the transfer function, the occupational program function, and the general education function, among many aspects (Đỗ, 1972).

The community college charter was approved by the government in 1971. The first three institutions were: Tiền Giang (Upper Delta) College in Mỹ Tho in the Mekong Delta, Duyên Hải (Coastal) College in Nha Trang in central Vietnam, and Phú Thọ Technical College in Saigon next to the National Technical Center. Local people also requested conversion of two technical high schools into community colleges: Quảng Đà College in Đà Nẵng (central Vietnam), and Long Hồ College in Vĩnh Long in the Mekong Delta.

The concept gained the interest of the religious community which wanted to establish private junior colleges. Regina Pacis College for girls was established in Saigon in 1973. The Hoà Hảo (in the West) and the Cao Đài (in the Northeast) religious sects also wanted junior colleges in their territories, in An Giang and Tây Ninh. The rapid growth of the system was reminiscent of the “junior college blossom” in Japan during the 1960s.

The Thủ Đức Polytechnic University

Established on March 29, 1973, this institution of higher learning was the culmination of more than a decade of travail on the part of many educational leaders in the Republic of Vietnam. The resulting institution represented a marked deviation from the early plan conceived by the former proponents. It responded to the urgent needs for devel-

opment in the postwar period and the needs of a devastated country in a fast changing world.

The eight colleges of the University of Saigon were scattered around a crowded and noisy city. In 1961, President Ngô Đình Diệm wanted to bring them together onto a campus environment more conducive to learning. He was impressed by the splendor of an American university campus that conveyed the “spirit of the place.” He chose a rubber plantation of 1,500 acres located in Thủ Đức, 10 miles from Saigon, along the modern Saigon-Biên Hoà highway that linked many industrial parks. To motivate the faculty to accept the new site, the Thủ Đức University Village was developed between the campus and Saigon. Professors were each allocated a lot of land to build custom houses with low-interest loans from the government that made them the envy of the people. Next to the village, the German-Vietnamese Technical High School and the Technical Teacher’s College were built using funds from West Germany and the United States, respectively.

Architect Ngô Viết Thụ, *Prix de Rome* (laureate, Rome Prize for Arts), was commissioned to draw the university master plan. A model of the campus was dispatched to Paris to help the Vietnamese delegation to UNESCO obtain international assistance. The petitions for support were hindered. However, for political reasons, UNESCO referred the matter to the World Bank which in turn referred it to the International Development Association in New York. In the meantime, the Faculty of Science was built in 1962 with a donation from New Zealand, followed by the Faculty of Pedagogy donated by the United States of America. Attached to the latter was the Demonstration Comprehensive High School and school buses were provided.

A *coup d’état* mounted in 1963 by young army rebels was followed by much governmental and societal instability. As the war intensified, the rubber trees at the site were decimated, and the green landscape was laid barren. For ten years, the modern buildings constructed for the University of Saigon were rarely utilized due to staff apprehensions with security. Weeds and the inclemency of

the tropical weather began to deface the modern architecture.

Younger faculty, who were from the National Technical Center and the National Agricultural Center, were more receptive to the new integrated concept, accepted the move to the new site because it offered more opportunities for development. They formed the foundation of the Thủ Đức Polytechnic University.

Thanks to a grant by the Asia Foundation, a Boston architectural firm with experience in higher education planning, was commissioned to work with Vietnamese architects to redesign the original plan to accommodate the polytechnic university. With assistance from the US Agency for International Development, the buildings for the Thủ Đức College of Agriculture and a cafeteria were constructed in 1974. Construction was underway for a dormitory, the College of Engineering, and the Administration Center.

The first phase of development of the Thủ Đức Polytechnic University included the College of Arts and Science, the College of Agriculture, the College of Engineering, the College of Education, the College of Economics and Management, the College of Urban and Regional Planning, and the Graduate School. Also included in the plan were features mostly nonexistent in Vietnamese universities: Computer Center, Language Center, Learning Resources Center, University Extension Center and University Press, and Student Personnel Service Center.

The mission of the university was to contribute to the nation's reconstruction and development. Its goals were: (1) to provide programs which train leaders and specialists for economic and social development; (2) to promote research and expand useful scientific and technical knowledge; and (3) to contribute to the design of projects and implementation of plans for economic development, especially in the domains of agriculture and industry.

Thủ Đức was a great departure from the former model of the University of Indochina. Based on practical and national development needs, the curriculum was amenable to adjust-

ment and expansion after the model of a multidisciplinary university. General education was provided in a two-year core curriculum. The students were provided with more flexibility in their studies through the semester and credit system. Problem-solving techniques and inquiry types of learning were emphasized. Classroom and laboratory learning were reinforced by practical training, gained in work-experience programs, in demonstration schools, on experimental farms. Students were not expected to memorize lecture notes and regurgitate them in one final examination at the end of the long academic year. The campus was unified and the administration was centralized to avoid the duplication and inefficiency of the current autonomous "faculty" system. Experience and formal training in school administration were required of the management staff.

To seek additional funding, the Vietnam Foundation for Education was formed by public and private initiatives, with the following objectives: (1) support all educational activities pertaining to elementary, secondary, and higher education; (2) promote the development of education, the exchange of knowledge and experience in education; and (3) sponsor research toward the development of education (Vietnam Foundation for Education, 1973).

Echoes from Today's Vietnam

All of the above institutions, developed during the three decades after 1946, served more than 70,000 students from a population of 18 million (4%) in the South. They were dismantled and assimilated into a unified "network" when the country was unified into a socialist state in 1975. This network today serves 161,691 students out of a population of 70 million (2.3%). According to the Director of Higher Education, Lâm Quang Thiệp, the 2.3% ratio is too small compared to 15.6% in Thailand and 26.6% in the Philippines. In 1992, there were 102 universities and superior schools, not counting the military and security schools; all public, except the experimental private Thăng Long University in Hanoi. In 1991, the largest, the Polytechnic University of Hồ Chí Minh City, enrolled 6,750 stu-

dents; the smallest was the Superior Normal School of Child Development and Kindergarten of Hồ Chí Minh City with only 40 students.

The network is poorly funded, fragmented and divided into ten groups: Comprehensive Basic Sciences; Technical (many of the technical group are specialized in just one discipline, such as Architecture, Transportation); Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries; Economics; Foreign Languages and International Relations; Health, Physical Education and Athletics; Culture and Fine Arts. For teacher training, there are 8 Faculties of Pedagogy and 38 Superior Normal Schools. According to the World Bank, the overspecialization of technical education follows the “old Soviet model” (World Bank, 1993, p. 191). Also, the administration of higher education is fragmented. The Ministry of Education and Training directly controls 38 “major” universities. Some remaining institutions fall under the jurisdiction of ministries that provide pre-service training for their staff. The local administration is in charge of the Superior Normal Schools.

A survey of students shows that 75% of their studies were lectures without printed materials. Only 15.6% of the students used the library, 8% never went to the library, and 74% thought that the teaching needed improvement (Lâm, 1993). The failure of the unified system was admitted in a paper presented to a seminar co-sponsored in August 1993 by the World Bank and the Ministry of Education and Training in Hanoi:

“After the unification of the country in 1975, Vietnam decided to have a development plan built on a centralized economy model. However, that plan met many difficulties stemming from the uniformity of the economic system and the regional differences between the North and the South” (Lâm, 1993, p. 1).

Before 1988, instructional programs were rigid and inflexible. Students were locked into specialized courses of studies without a chance to expand their horizons into other disciplines. If they failed the academic year examination, they had to repeat the same curriculum from the beginning. Since 1988, many institutions have been experimenting with semester and credit systems. Courses can be

chosen according to the number of units of credit required by the college. The subjects are divided into “modules.” Each module corresponds to a number of units of credit. One unit of credit equals one semester lecture hour, or a number of hours of practical training, laboratory, seminar, term paper. A semester is 15 weeks in length (Lâm, 1993, p. 11). All of this resembles the Carnegie system of the United States.

The Ministry introduced in 1992 new measures to decentralize the system by:

- “experimenting with a ‘non-centralized’ system parallel to the existing ‘centralized’ system, with the same standards and quality.
- “developing a system of ‘open universities’ to raise the intellectual level of the people.
- “building a system of community colleges with transfer programs to the universities” (Lâm, 1993, pp. 12-13).

The Ministry recognizes that the system of small, isolated and fragmented institutions hinders the rational use of human and material resources:

“Vietnam does not have any big multidisciplinary university as in the developed countries... There are no organisms nor regulations to assess and evaluate the efficiency and quality of the universities at the national or local level... There is no legislation to determine the university-government relationship and to define the autonomy of the university” (Lâm, 1993, pp. 3-5).

The most acute problems are identified as:

- “lack of coordination between higher education and research, production and employment.
- “irrelevance and inadequacy of the organization, management and regulation of higher education.
- “weakness and shortage of instructional and management staff; inability to adapt to the rapid changes in the society” (Lâm, 1993, pp. 15-16).

To reorganize and strengthen the system, the Director of Higher Education recommended a number of “options:”

- “To reorganize the universities and research

institutions by (a) establishing big multidisciplinary universities offering many programs, (b) developing a system of community colleges to function as cultural, scientific centers in the community, and to meet the needs of the community, (c) establishing an articulation system between community colleges and universities.

- “To strengthen the statutes and standards, the evaluation and privatization of higher education.
- “To raise the quality of teaching and management” (Lâm, 1993, p. 17).

Instead of skills which are no longer in demand, such as Russian language, the World Bank recommended to promote “skills necessary to the manufacturing and service industries of the future, such as banking and finance, travel and tourism, data processing and software development, among others” (World Bank, 1993, p. 193).

Reflections from Afar

Is it possible to provide quality education in a nation with a fast-growing population held back by slow economic growth and a legacy of war and destruction? The Vietnamese population is doubling every 31 years. As of June 30, 1993, it is the thirteenth largest in the world with 70,722,400 people. Yet, the Vietnamese economy is among the weakest, with an average income that falls between US\$200 and US\$300 per capita. In relating the establishment of the private Thăng Long University in Hanoi, the *New York Times* reported in 1989 that “the highest salary of any professor at a state university is 75,000 *đồng* a month, or about US\$15.” Without foreign assistance, it is very difficult to improve the current status of education.

From the millennium-old aristocratic College for Wards of the Nation through today’s new system and unified country, higher education in Vietnam is evolving toward a more open, flexible and comprehensive approach to provide more access to the students. Vietnam has adapted a number of concepts and practices that were experimented with decades ago in the South, including the semester system, the credit system, the multidisciplinary university, and the community college.

Vietnamese educators are striving to reorganize their country’s educational system and are studying the best world models of higher education through the auspices of the World Bank, using expertise of many scholars from Asia, Australia and Europe. Hopefully, the reorganized system will produce qualified human resources necessary for narrowing the economic development gap between Vietnam and the NICs (Newly Industrialized Countries) in the Pacific Rim and enlighten the people to live with happiness in a prosperous democracy.

POSTLUDE

Writing the above, the author has tried to be as objective as possible. Documentation on South Vietnam was partially retrieved from a broader but unfinished inquiry, “Development of Education in the Republic of Vietnam from 1945 to 1975,” which was funded by the Ford Foundation in 1975 when the author reached the shores of the United States as a refugee. Information related to today’s “unified Vietnam” (Socialist Republic of Vietnam), came mainly from two unpublished documents: (1) a paper presented by the Ministry of Education and Training of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam at the Seminar on Options for Reorganization of Higher Education in Hanoi, August 1993, and (2) a report by The World Bank entitled *Vietnam: Transition to the Market*, September 1993.

Thanks to the editor’s encouragement, the author wishes to add (not without hesitation) some personal experiences and insights that may hopefully further illustrate the article. With the reader’s permission and to simplify the style, the first person will be in this postlude. *Le moi est haïssable* (the self is disdainful).

The 1945 Hanoi-Saigon Bicycle Ride

The distance between Saigon and Hanoi is approximately 1,800 km. Before 1945, South Vietnamese students took the railroad *Trans-indochinois* to go to the *Université de l’Indochine* in Hanoi. They formed a bicycle club to visit the best landscapes in the North. Away from the city, they secretly talked about liberation from France.

Anyone who by negligence used French words had to pay a fine.

The French colony was occupied by the Japanese army during World War II. The railroad was frequently bombarded and damaged by American aircraft. The Japanese *coup de force* of March 9, 1945, closed the university. Just three days later, together with five friends from the South, I rode a bicycle back to Saigon. Under the title, “The King Cyclist of Vietnam Officially Appointed President of Thủ Đức Polytechnic University,” a Saigon daily alluded to this bicycle trip as follows:

“1973, plenary session, by a 44-2 vote confirmed the nomination of Professor Đỗ Bá Khê, Vice-Minister of Education, as president of the Thủ Đức Polytechnic University. He was one of the first Vietnamese students who rode a bicycle cross country from Hanoi to Saigon after the *coup de force* in which the Japanese overthrew the French administration in Indochina on March 9, 1945. Khê will be also the first university president to go to work by bicycle in response to the campaign of energy conservation and national self-reliance” (*Tiền Tuyến (Frontline)*, No. 2665, December 29, 1973, Saigon).

Thủ Đức was lost. On April 24, 1975, I sat on a cot in a refugee camp in the Philippines. A group of Vietnamese students came by and ironically said: “Don’t worry! Here we are, president and students, together we will form a university in exile!”

The Thủ Đức Symbol

Vietnam is the only Southeast Asian country which is not influenced by India. Even Buddhism spread to Vietnam primarily through China along the Great Vehicle or Mahayana branch. Vietnam belongs to the sphere of Chinese cultural influence which also includes Korea and Japan. During World War II, Japanese soldiers communicated successfully with elders in the village by using Chinese characters. A professor at the University of Southern California humorously said that China, Korea, Japan and Vietnam form the “chopsticks culture!” Most people in East Asia use forks instead of chopsticks. According to one theory, the Indian culture expansion was stopped on the east

by the Annamese Chain, the long mountainous obstacle which stretches from Vietnam to Tibet (Hoàng 1964, Fig. 3).

Vietnamese literary works make frequent references to Chinese sources. To write well in *quốc ngữ* one should have some knowledge of *nho*. Vietnamese scholars borrow many scientific and technical words from Chinese. The symbol of Thủ Đức Polytechnic University is one example. It includes four features: square, circle, symbol and motto (Fig. 4). The square and the circle represent earth and the sky which were thought to make up the universe. The inscription at the bottom is the motto “national development.” The upper half-circle indicates the name of the university. The graphic symbol in the center suggests two interpretations. It is formed by a “T” on top of a “Đ” (with a bar in *quốc ngữ* alphabet) which denote the initials of Thủ Đức. But arranged in that vertical alignment it also could be seen as the *nho* character “bách” 百 which means one hundred. Adding “khoa” 科 (discipline) to the latter, the composed word “bách-khoa” 百科 means one hundred disciplines, or polytechnic, thus depicting the multidisciplinary approach of the university. Badges and T-shirts bearing this logo were displayed for sale at the International Conference on Children organized at the university from January 14 to 23, 1975. Delegates from Korea, Taiwan and Hong Kong had no difficulty in catching the meaning of the logo.

Construction Amidst Destruction

Media coverage of the war and its devastation eclipsed the South Vietnam’s constructive efforts in developing education with the western world’s assistance. UNESCO helped to establish a system of elementary community schools. UNDP (United Nations Development Programme) equipped the National Technical Center. New Zealand donated the building for the Faculty of Science of Saigon. France provided many professors, equipment and grants for staff development, in particular in the area of modern math. West Germany built and equipped a technical high school and assisted the Faculty of Medicine of the University of Huế, etc. But the main source of assistance came from the

United States. It can be credited with the construction of the National Normal School in Saigon and other normal schools in the provinces, 11,000 elementary classrooms in the so-called strategic hamlets (patterned after the “new villages” in Malaysia), 18 technical high schools, a medical center for the University of Saigon, a Faculty of Pedagogy with the attached demonstration comprehensive high school, a technical teacher’s college, a college of agriculture, an engineering college, a university administration center. The Instructional Materials Center developed teaching tools and produced millions of elementary and secondary textbooks. All these programs were carried out with the expertise of contract teams from various American universities. The Asia Foundation and the Ford Foundation provided assistance in a variety of programs. This list is based on personal recollection and is not exhaustive.

In Memoriam

This writing evoked the memory of a number of people that I wish to acknowledge for their dedication to higher education in South Vietnam. I wish to pay tribute to members the Higher Education Survey Team who lost their life in the air accident in Vietnam in 1967. The team was headed by James H. Albertson, president of the Wisconsin State University at Stevens Point, a young scholar and administrator with a very bright future. I met them at an orientation session in Chicago, not long before they went out to Vietnam for the survey. South Vietnam is indebted for their invaluable contribution.

I wish to express my sorrow for two colleagues and friends, Xuân and Huy, who died back in Vietnam after 1975 while their families were waiting for them overseas. From February 20 to March 18, 1975, responding to the invitation of the French Government, the presidents of the four public universities (Saigon, Huế, Cần Thơ and Thủ Đức) toured a number of French higher education institutions. They visited the universities of Rennes, Montpellier, Aix-Marseilles, Toulouse, Bordeaux, Vincennes, Compiègne, the *École Polytechnique*, the *École Supérieure d’Electricité* and a number of

technical colleges. When they came back to the University of Paris, they learned about the invasion across the demilitarized zone and the loss of a number of cities in central Vietnam and the highlands. Upon their return to Vietnam, they found the country in debacle. The coastal highway, Highway 1, was packed with people fleeing southward for their lives. Schools were closed to serve as shelters for refugees. The University of Huế attempted to evacuate its library and equipment to Saigon. The Thủ Đức Polytechnic University, with its spacious facilities, was one of the main refugee centers. The Asia Foundation provided subsidies to students who lost contact with their families in central Vietnam.

Nguyễn Duy Xuân, President of the University of Cần Thơ, accepted the post of Minister of Education just a few weeks before the fall of Saigon. He came to my office and asked me to be in charge of higher education. An economist and former Minister of Economy, he provided a strong leadership during his tenure at Cần Thơ. I respected him for his honesty and patriotism. An optimist, he chose to stay, believing in reconciliation. Unfortunately, he succumbed to the hardships of the so-called “re-education” center.

Nguyễn Ngọc Huy was president of the University of Saigon. He graduated from the Faculty of Medicine of the University of Indochina before 1945 with a rare distinction of *interne des hôpitaux de Hanoi* after a very competitive examination. He was a professor of cardiology since 1946. The constitution of the Republic of Vietnam mandated that the nominations of university presidents by the president of the republic be confirmed by the (nation’s) Senate. He was very disappointed with the first Senate hearing. We worked together to ensure his success at the second hearing in 1974. During the chaotic days of evacuation of Vietnam in April 1975, he missed the rendezvous where people were picked up by American helicopters to fly out of Saigon. It was reported some years later that he was killed in a motorcycle collision while riding a bicycle in Hồ Chí Minh City.

Speaking of War and Peace

In 1973, I led the South Vietnamese delegation to the UNESCO Intergovernmental Conference on Cultural Policies in Asia held in Yogyakarta, Indonesia (North Vietnam was not a member of the specialized United Nations organizations like UNESCO). The site of the conference was not very far from Borobudur, a Buddhist temple of about the 9th century A.D., which was restored with UNESCO assistance. The Japanese delegation discreetly alerted us that the socialist bloc introduced a resolution to condemn the United States and the Republic of (South) Vietnam for waging a war that destroyed the Vietnamese cultural monuments.

The alphabetical order protocol placed Vietnam next to USSR (Union of Soviet Socialist Republics) in the conference room as well as in official and cultural events. I had the opportunity to engage in casual conversation with Ekaterina Fartseva, Minister of Culture, head of the USSR delegation. I found her to be a very caring, intelligent and open-minded person. On occasions, we discussed topics which ranged from cock fighting in Bali to Tolstoi's *War and Peace*. I shared with her my vision about the role of education in postwar reconstruction.

At the plenary session, after a series of diatribes by delegates from some supporters of the draft resolution, I stood up to speak in defense of South Vietnam. I occasionally looked at the USSR delegate on my left when I alluded to the prospect of a long-lasting peace. Calling for a fair assessment of the causes of war, I emphasized that without foreign interventions, on both sides, the Vietnam conflict would have ended a long time ago. It was a pleasant surprise that the USSR chief delegate's speech was less critical of the United States and Vietnam than the discourses from other communist delegates. The draft resolution was defeated!

The war has ended. People are seeking progress in a new world. I have become an expatriate on this side of the Pacific Ocean, missing for almost two decades my beloved birthplace, *Việt Nam*.

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