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Whose victory, whose defeat?
Spirituality In the aftermath of Vietnam's wars

Conventional historical wisdom has it that triumph is celebrated and defeated abhorred. Victories on the field of battle always translate into histories of the winners, and histories of the winners are always framed as a litany of success. While political history is conventionally written this way, the spiritual history of participants in the aftermath of such battles is rarely visited.

This paper presents a critical view of 'national histories' from the unconventional approach of spiritual experience; in this case, the spiritual life of an enormously influential figure in Vietnamese history. He was the key advisor in a Vietnam war uncannily reminiscent of America's war in Vietnam. The spiritual response of this man sheds another kind of light on the heritage of triumph in the wake of violence. This paper closes with some contrasts to the present day.¹

Standard histories, be they traditional dynastic or nation-state works, conform respectively to discourses of Confucianism or national liberation. Their stories never dwell on the uncomfortable questions that follow in the wake of war. The spiritual resources from which Vietnamese society commonly drew in the fifteenth century offered, however, a deeper well of support than those countenanced by Vietnamese socialism after 1975.

In the epoch-making struggle of the fifteenth century, Vietnam carried out a 20-year guerrilla war against enormously powerful Ming China. By 1427 the Ming had wearied of their fractious former colony and withdrew from the fray to lick their wounds and leave their opponents to rebuilt their shattered country. On the Vietnam side the war was led by a warrior-hero and Confucian-scholar duo. The warrior became king (Le Loi) and the scholar turned military adviser, Nguyen Trai, became his de facto prime minister. The king, Macbeth-like, began to see traitors in every shadow. At the king's early death the official Nguyen Trai was left to care for the young royal heir amidst treacherous political shoals at court. The subsequent years found Nguyen Trai disillusioned with life at the pinnacle of politics. In the tradition of the loyal Confucian scholar, he withdrew from the public arena, returned to his native village and alleviated his suffering in spiritual meditation written in poetry. What were the sources of his inspiration? The Daoist, Buddhist and spirit

¹ e.g., Bao Ninh, *The Sorrow of War*, London: Secker and Warburg, 1993 and examples from other Hanoi writers

beliefs of the country permeate his work as does spiritual malaise with the affairs of the world, so much at the forefront of his life til then.

Where are the sources for his inward journey? They exist in a number of poems and some literary works he left behind. These materials, from the period after the euphoria of victory, are rarely if ever called to witness in the histories of Vietnam.

What does this inquiry show? It is possible to write other kinds of histories from contemporaneous sources, histories that not only challenge the conventional wisdom, but suggest quite different, deeper motives for subsequent social and political changes, than those routinely ascribed to Realpolitik and nationalism alone.

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