Praise for *Vietnam at War*

"[T]his book will further solidify Bradley's well-deserved reputation as the historian leading the way toward understanding the Vietnamese war experience from a perspective that is simultaneously global and local."

*Journal of Vietnamese Studies*

"If [readers] open their minds and imaginations to a presentation that presents the Vietnamese at the centre of the Vietnam War, this is the book they must read."

David Hunt, *Cold War History*

"Consciously written to render the Vietnamese visible in ways too few American histories of the war do, Mark Philip Bradley's important history *Vietnam at War* mines Vietnamese novels, poetry and films, as well as a plethora of overlooked works of scholarship, to paint a more complete picture of the lived experience of the war for the people of Vietnam."

*The Nation*

"In this corrective study, Bradley... draw[s] on the war diary of a conflicted provincial physician, a novel about a paratrooper who is afraid to jump, irreverent peasant verse, playful proverbs ("The moon in China is much rounder than in the USA"), and the nineteen-sixties antiwar songs of the draft-dodging Trinh Cong Son."

*The New Yorker*

"What this book makes dramatically clear is that although the outside powers—the United States included—affected events, sometimes quite significantly, the war remained in essence a struggle among Vietnamese, and indigenous forces ultimately determined the outcome."

George C. Herring, *Journal of Cold War Studies*

"Perhaps the greatest success of Bradley's books is the sophisticated synthesis it provides of the ideas, identities and engagements of the Vietnamese with the wars for Vietnam and then, afterwards, with the struggle to define Vietnam in the context of its history."

*Journal of American Studies*

"Mark Bradley's keen observations on the past and present in Vietnam make this a book that deserves to be... the focus of many class discussions inside the academy, but also among those interested in the war and its contested outcome. It is the right book, at the right time." Lloyd Gardner, author of *Approaching Vietnam* (in H-Diplo roundtable)
Vietnamese relationship. Meanwhile, North Vietnamese and NLF forces drew ever closer to Saigon. They reached the city, now quiet, on 30 April 1975. About noon, a North Vietnamese tank crashed through the presidential palace to take the final surrender of the South Vietnamese state.

After War

Three decades of war against the French and the Americans were at an end. Like the French before them, the massive American military intervention ended in defeat. The North had won. The South Vietnamese state was quickly no more than a memory. From the perspective of the North, however, the war for Vietnam had always been about more than national liberation. Its twin goal was the socialist transformation of state and society. As one war came to an end, another began. But in this one the North Vietnamese leadership was unable to replicate battlefield successes: its ability to impose a socialist vision on a reunified southern and northern Vietnam proved to be elusive.

Surprised by the speed of the northern victory, Hanoi did not initially have a fully formed conception of how it would integrate the southern economy and society with that of the North. A go-slow policy that delayed formal reunification and permitted some free-market economic activity shaped initial post-war policy. But in July 1976 the country formally became the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, with many of the most prominent members of the National Liberation Front pushed aside in favour of a government headed by the Hanoi leadership, who had crafted the final victory in the American war. In part because of shortages of experienced southern-born NLF cadres, northerners were sent down to oversee the regional and local government in the South and their presence was often resented by the southern population. Several hundred thousand southerners were sent to re-education camps, largely those associated with the former South Vietnamese state and military whom the regime believed to be politically unreliable. Many others were under continual surveillance and denied employment because of their backgrounds. More surprisingly some members of the NLF whose ideological and class identities were seen as a danger to the establishment of the new regime were also put into camps. Conditions in the re-education camps were primitive and sometimes brutal, though the southern ‘bloodbath’ in the wake of the communist victory that American and South Vietnamese officials had predicted never occurred.39

In a broader sense, the new regime was keen to root out what it termed ‘bourgeois’ attitudes and quickly transformed the southern education system and curriculum along northern socialist models. Concerned about southern religious institutions, especially Vietnamese Catholics, who had been among the most loyal supporters of the South Vietnamese regime, the new regime sought to control Catholic, Buddhist, Cao Dai, Hoa Hao, and other organized expressions of religious faith. Officials also began to attack ‘the civilization of the dollar’ (van minh qua dong do la), which they believed had corroded wartime social values in South Vietnam. ‘One campaign banned the playing of “yellow music” (nhac vang), especially love songs like those of Trinh Cong Son (who himself was briefly sent to a post-war re-education camp) so popular in the South during the American war, because they evoked “in hapless listeners a gloomy, embittered, impotent and cynical mood towards life, an attitude negating youth’s desire to be cheerful, a sensation of being drowned in loneliness in a withered and desolate world”,40

These political changes were soon accompanied by a dramatic shift in economic policy. The war-ravaged Vietnamese economy suffered from low agricultural and industrial output, high unemployment, and, in the South, rampant inflation. Faced with an extremely harsh post-war economic embargo by the United States that was honoured by most of the developed world and by limited economic assistance from the socialist world, Vietnam was largely on its own to deal with these serious economic problems. In the immediate aftermath of the war, a few major industries and utilities were taken over by the state and the property of some wealthy business people confiscated, but middle-class southerners were encouraged to continue their economic activities. Household agricultural production
was also initially left largely alone. But in mid-1977 the Vietnamese state began to collectivize southern agricultural production, building upon efforts that had begun as early as 1974 in the North to reorganize and improve declining agricultural cooperatives. Along with collectivization, the state targeted the massive refugee population in southern cities, who represented the bulk of the unemployed, and northerners in overpopulated provinces for resettlement in New Economic Zones in the under-cultivated and underpopulated central highlands. And in March 1978 all private trade was quite suddenly outlawed in Vietnam in the ‘campaign to eliminate the comprador capitalists’ (diện dịch bái tru tu san mai ban).

The results of these policies were disastrous. The ban on private trade heavily affected ethnic Chinese, who had traditionally dominated major sectors of the southern economy; many of them, along with middle-class ethnic Vietnamese, fled on foot or by boat in the first of several major exoduses that involved more than a million people, who took with them much of the human capital that might have made the post-war Vietnamese economy work. Those sent to the New Economic Zones frequently found a harsh climate and little real governmental support for the development of agriculture. Many secretly returned to their home villages in the North and South despite limited economic prospects there, and those who remained eked out no more than a subsistence existence. By late 1979 the effort to collectivize agriculture in the South and improve it in the North had also failed. In the South there was open resistance, with some villagers lying down in front of the state tractors that ploughed collectivized fields. Others subverted the spirit of cooperatives by working in slipshod ways. Among those most resistant were rural southerners who had become middle peasants through the NLF’s land reforms of the 1960s and jealously guarded the economic self-sufficiency this position had brought to their households. Vietnam’s efforts at creating a socialist economy, along with its American-enforced isolation from the world economy, catapulted the country into dire poverty. Grain shortages forced the government to institute food rationing amid reports of spot famines. High unemployment persisted and grew larger.

International development indicators placed Vietnam as the third poorest country on earth in the early 1980s. These economic problems were intensified by the Vietnamese state’s post-war foreign policy towards Cambodia and China. April 1975 not only marked the end of the American war in Vietnam, it also brought to power in Cambodia Pol Pot’s Khmer Rouge, who quickly launched a genocidal terror that claimed the lives of as many as 1.7 million of its people. Tensions between the Vietnamese and Khmer Rouge centred less on the genocide, whose scope was not yet fully apparent, than on Khmer Rouge purges of Vietnamese-trained communists, massacres of ethnic Vietnamese living in Cambodia, and border raids into Vietnam. Tensions were heightened by the deterioration of Sino-Vietnamese relations. The Chinese were strong supporters of the Khmer Rouge and had been angered by Vietnam’s decision to align with the Soviet Union in the post-war period. In the summer and fall of 1978 Pol Pot, fearing a Vietnamese attack, made a series of pre-emptive strikes into southern Vietnam. The Vietnamese responded with a full-scale invasion in 1979, taking control of Phnom Penh on 7 January 1979. They put in place a puppet government and began what would become a ten-year military occupation of Cambodia. To punish the Vietnamese for attacking its Khmer Rouge clients, China invaded the northernmost provinces of Vietnam in February 1979. After seizing several provincial capitals and encountering heavy Vietnamese resistance, the Chinese withdrew their forces in late March. Both the war with China and the long occupation of Cambodia deepened Vietnam’s economic crisis. The Chinese invasion seriously damaged northern Vietnam’s industrial base, while the Cambodian occupation kept the military from undertaking economic reconstruction at home and diverted limited government revenues away from investments in infrastructure development, education, and public health. Moreover, many demobilized veterans of the Cambodian war and occupation returned home to face under- or unemployment, further increasing dissatisfaction with the policies of the regime, which during the American war had been so attentive to veteran concerns.
To arrest the stagnation and poverty that was engulfing the nation, Vietnam undertook a radical economic transformation in 1986 by adopting the policy of doi moi, or renovation. Abandoning socialist economics, but not the one-party Leninist state, doi moi marked the introduction of market reforms into the Vietnamese economy. Failing agricultural collective and state industrial enterprises were replaced by household agricultural farms and an opening up to foreign investment to build the industrial and service economies. Doi moi also brought a generational shift in Hanoi’s leadership. The northern-born stalwart leaders of the party and state during the French and Americans wars—including Le Duan, Truong Chinh, Le Duc Tho, and Pham Van Dong—left the political stage. This transformation was exemplified at the Sixth Party Congress, which adopted the doi moi reforms in the election of a new head for the party, Nguyen Van Vinh, who had been a leader of the resistance war in the South and oversaw some of the early reform efforts in Ho Chi Minh City.  

The aggregate changes in the Vietnamese economy in the twenty years since the policies of doi moi were adopted have been dramatic. Vietnam has reduced the numbers of people living in abject poverty—those earning less than one dollar per day—from 51 per cent in 1990 to 9 per cent in 2000. Its economic growth rate in 2007 was a remarkable 8.5 per cent. Among other things, Vietnam now produces and uses more cement than its former colonial master, France. With its new-found economic prowess, however, have also come problems: a growing gap between the wealthy and the poor, rampant corruption within the state and party over the spoils of the economic reforms, gender differentials in employment and political participation, and a significant deterioration in providing health care and educational access for all its citizens, what the Vietnamese socialist regime for all its peacetime problems did best. And while the party and state maintain their monopoly on political power without significant challenge, their ability to set the agenda for how individuals and families view their social and cultural well-being is fast waning.

Some observers have argued that the history of post-war Vietnam demonstrates that North Vietnam may have won the war but lost the peace. Revisionist historians in the United States go even further, arguing that the embrace of the market and the rise of a liberal capitalist economic order in Vietnam reveal that the United States in fact won the American war in Vietnam. After all, they ask, isn’t that ultimately what the US was fighting for? Leaving aside, as these revisionists do, the uncomfortable fact that the North did militarily defeat the United States and its South Vietnamese ally, there are considerable ironies in the post-war turn to the market economy. Not only did the southern middle peasantry in part created by the NLF resist the post-war collectivization of agriculture, their insistence on maintaining household production and selling surplus on the market presaged the contract system that underlay the collapse of agricultural collectives and the rise of family farms under the doi moi reforms. Diasporic Vietnamese, many of whose families had been closely associated with the South Vietnamese government after 1954 and were driven out of the country by the regime after the war, have become among the most important ‘foreign’ investors in the Vietnamese economy under doi moi. In 2004 the estimated 2.5 million overseas Vietnamese (Viet kieu) sent $3.8 billion to Vietnam through official channels, even more unofficially; total direct foreign investment in 2004 was just over $4 billion, making overseas Vietnamese remittances as important to the economy as top investors like Singapore, Taiwan, Hong Kong, South Korea, and the United States.

The ideological guardians of the regime’s history have had to turn rhetorical somersaults to offer their own revisionist accounts of the Vietnam’s post-war economic transformations. For many of them, doi moi posed not so much a conversion to capitalism as a recognition of the errors of the past in interpreting the still–central canon of Marxist-Leninism and Ho Chi Minh thought:

We are backward in many ways, especially in our understanding of socialist industrialization, of socialist transformation in production relations, of the
mechanism of management and of distribution and circulation. We were prejudiced against laws of goods production and actually did not recognize their existence. We failed to correctly apply the objective laws that govern the process of transition to socialism. We acted with subjectivism and voluntarism.47

Their reinterpretation of the correct path to socialism has also necessitated a substantial revision in portrayals of southern Vietnam, which has been the driving engine of the market reforms. No longer were southern peasants 'ensnared in the American way of life, namely the prostitutes, hooligans, ruffians, drug-addicts' and victims of the 'civilization of the dollar', as the North had argued during and immediately after the war. Now the regime draws attention to the 'spirit of close mutual assistance and assistance' in the South and to the presence there of a 'thriving commerce', a 'commodity economy', and 'extensive market relations' as early as the seventeenth century to offer an almost timeless imaginary genealogy for southern economic success after 1986, one that carefully glosses over any role the French and American presence might have played in the region's recent embrace of the market.48

Notwithstanding these ironies, the certainty that the end of history in either its liberal capitalist or socialist internationalist variants is close at hand in Vietnam is far from most contemporary Vietnamese sensibilities. Rather than closing down a sense of the ways in which the past informs the present, doi moi has opened up a space through which the Vietnamese at home and in the diaspora have advanced their own complex reassessments of meanings of the wars for Vietnam—and through it once again offered multiple and contested visions of what a new, post-war future might bring.
CODA

"The future lied to us, there long ago in the past," claims the narrator of Bao Ninh's *Sorrows of War* (*Nỗi buồn chiến tranh*). "There is no new life, no new era nor hope for a beautiful future." In this 1991 novel, the northern Vietnamese author, a veteran of the American war, tells the story of his anti-heroic protagonist Kien's transformational experiences of war from an eager young recruit as a boi doi, or ordinary soldier in the North Vietnamese army, to a hardened warrior and veteran deeply critical of the self-delusions of the military leadership, scornful of widespread corruption among party officials, and bitter that the sacrifices of war and revolution go unrewarded in the post-war period.

The sense of disillusionment and betrayal that hovers over Bao Ninh's novel, which emerged during a period of more relaxed state control of the cultural realm after the adoption of the doi moi reforms in 1986, was part of a broader challenge to the official narrative of sacred war and heroic self-sacrifice so carefully constructed by the North Vietnamese state throughout the wars against the French and the Americans. These state efforts persisted in the post-war period. Almost as soon as the American war was over, the state began to construct monuments to the war dead (*dai liet si*) throughout Vietnam. The monuments are visible across the Vietnamese landscape, usually tall cenotaphs with gold or red stars at their top and the words 'The Fatherland Remembers Your Sacrifice' etched upon them. The celebration of Liberation Day (*Ngay Giai Phong*) every April to commemorate the end of the American war has joined War Invalids and Martyrs' Day in the official calendar of war memory, with both holidays providing the opportunity for speeches, parades, and gifts to the families of
the war dead. The Vietnamese state created a new honorific of the ‘heroic mother’ (me anh hung) in 1995, venerating women who had lost at least three children in war and including them in ceremonies marking the sacrifices of war.

But however popular official commemorative practices remain for families of the war dead, the state under doi moi has increasingly lost the ability to control the memory of war. As it has, popular apprehensions of the past and future—expressed through contemporary fiction, film, and the visual arts as well as in a remarkable resurgence of religiosity and the modernist imaginings of the colonial era—have taken war memory as a starting point to offer not only sharp critiques of the state but alternative ways of being in the world in the post-war and post-socialist present.

The emerging contestations between local and state war memory as families and village communities began to stake their own claims to the war dead are at the centre of Dang Nhat Minh’s 1984 film When the Tenth Month Comes (Bao gio chọ den thang muoi). Set during the Vietnamese invasion of Pol Pot’s Cambodia in 1979, the film reflected the sceptical response of a war-weary population to the state’s efforts to render the Vietnamese invasion and subsequent occupation of Cambodia within the official narrative of war as patriotic self-sacrifice, particularly when the state appeared unable to find employment in the civilian sector for demobilized veterans returning from the Cambodian campaigns. It is likely that the Cambodian setting of the film, released two years before the rise of the doi moi agenda began to ease official control on artistic production, also provided the director with a thinly disguised parable to advance his critique of state memorializing practices in a manner that implicated but did not directly challenge the more sacrosanct claims of state narratives about the French and American wars.

When the Tenth Month Comes tells the story of the decision of a young woman named Duyen to keep the news that her husband has been killed in battle hidden from her husband’s family and village. By the end of the film Duyen comes to know that her behaviour is improper. Kneeling by her father-in-law’s deathbed, she cries out: ‘I haven’t told the truth...I’ve done wrong.’ From the state’s perspective, the nature of Duyen’s error would have been obvious: she prevented her husband’s memory from fulfilling its officially sanctioned commemorative purposes. At points the film does acknowledge the legitimacy of state claims on the fallen soldier’s memory. Early in the film Duyen’s father-in-law calls the death of his elder son during the American war a ‘patriotic sacrifice for the advancement of the national liberation movement and the socialist revolution’. Similarly, the final scene of the film, after the dead soldier’s family and village have come to know of his wife’s deception, appears to suggest that official order has been restored. As martial music swells, Duyen and her son, surrounded by children carrying party banners, gaze admiringly upward at the yellow star and red background of the Vietnamese flag snapping purposefully in the wind. But these rather perfunctory scenes are oddly disconnected from the larger narrative of the film, reflecting a nod to the real concerns of continuing state censorship rather than a full embrace of official commemorative practices.

Tenth Month concentrates on the impact of the war on the interior lives of Duyen and her husband’s family in a manner that subtly undermines the state’s monopolizing claims on the memory of her dead husband, particularly in its focus on Duyen’s failure to fulfill her filial duties to her husband’s family and his lineage and her moral obligations to his village. The film articulates its disapproval of Duyen’s actions in a crucial scene in which her husband’s family observe the anniversary of her mother-in-law’s death. At the culminating feast one family member reads a letter full of filial devotion purportedly written by the heroine’s husband. The letter, however, is actually fabricated, written at Duyen’s request by a village schoolteacher as a way of convincing the family that her husband remains alive. In using a death anniversary at which the soul of the departed ancestor is believed to be present to advance her deception, Duyen’s actions emerge as a particularly egregious violation of the traditional Vietnamese practices of remembering and propitiating the dead. The rites of the death anniversary, one leading scholar of these practices argues, are essential to affirming the primary familial
obligations of filial piety (hieu), 'symbolically joining the living, dead and yet to be born members of the family...in an intimate relationship of mutual dependency'.

In highlighting the feasting component of the death anniversary, *Tenth Month* also reinforces its focus on the claims of family and village, rather than the state, to the memory of Duyen's husband. The feast marking the anniversary, in which a family traditionally invited its neighbours to share, was among the central targets of the sustained campaign by North Vietnam in the 1950s against superstitious practices. For the state, the elaborate network of social exchange promoted through the feast incurred wasted expenditure better used for collective economic purposes, and represented undesirable feudal customs that reflected social inequality and competition for status. In its place, the state urged a simple didactic ceremony among the immediate family of the deceased that focused on the departed ancestor's contribution to the rise of a new revolutionary society. The inclusions of the feast in *Tenth Month*'s depiction of the rites of the anniversary, which reflects the return of such traditional ritual practices in northern Vietnamese society in the 1980s, pointedly places the memory of the dead within the village community and suggests that Duyen's deceptions violate familial and village more than state norms. In the end, the film suggests, at the very least the state must share the memory of the fallen soldier with his widow, his family, and his village.

*Tenth Month* anticipated a revival of ritual and religiosity in Vietnam in the 1990s, one that continues to the present, which eroded not only state claims to own the memories of the war dead but its broader efforts since the 1950s to control belief and practice. The explosion of local ritual and religious practice is evident almost everywhere in present-day Vietnam. It can be seen in overflowing Buddhist temples and Catholic churches, the enormous crowds attending religious festivals, fairs, ceremonies, and feasts, the profusion of religious display and altars in homes, the resurgence of family and local rituals, the lavish refurbishing of pagodas, churches, and shrines, and the pilgrimage of millions to shrines of gods and goddesses like that of Ba Chua Xu, the Lady of the Realm, in southern Vietnam. The intensification of religious sensibilities and ritual in part rests on the new wealth generated through the market reforms. At the same time, it addresses the cultural anxieties unleashed by them in some of the same ways that Buddhist modernism and expressions of popular religion in the 1950s sought to mediate the spiritual challenges posed by French colonial rule.

But this regeneration of religion and ritual is also bound up in efforts to make sense of the sorrows of war. Along with the return of more elaborate ceremonies and feasting for death anniversaries, the souls of war dead are increasingly installed in local Buddhist temples, themselves the object of renewed local attention and devotion after years of neglect under the state's wartime religious prohibitions, where they are believed to 'eat of the Buddha's good fortune' (*an may cau Phat*). Stories of wandering ghosts (*bạch linh*), those who died in war but whose bodies have never been recovered, and their power to do harm to the living are again prevalent as a means through which many Vietnamese make sense of the complex aftermath of war, as is a renewed reliance on spirit mediums (*nhapk xuc*) to locate the missing remains of fallen soldiers. Shifts in ritual kinship practices have become an especially important means through which families who lost sons on both sides of the American war have reclaimed their memories. Although having family members involved in multiple sides of the war was not uncommon, the post-war Vietnamese state offered no consolation for war dead who served in the former South Vietnam. Indeed, families often concealed these traces of their past. In recent years, however, they have been less willing to do so. The household family altar, a space once policed by the dictates of high socialism, can now display for veneration and propitiation the photographs of dead sons who served in the ARVN as well as in the northern army or the military forces of the NLF. In a language that reinforces the importance of the spiritual world and filial piety for Vietnamese apprehensions of the war, an older woman in Danang described to her grandchildren her decision in 1996 to return a long-hidden photograph of her younger son Kan, who was an ARVN soldier, to the family altar next to that her older son Tan, who served in the northern army:
Uncle Kan admired Uncle Tan. Uncle Tan adored little Kan. And the two were sick at the thought that they might meet in a battle. I prayed to the Fairies of the Marble Mountains that my two boys should never meet. The Fairy listened. The boys never met. The Fairy carried them away to different directions so they could not meet. The gracious Fairy carried them too far. She took my prayer and was worried. To be absolutely sure that the boys didn’t meet in this world, the Fairy took them to her world, both of them. We can’t blame the Fairy. So here we are. My two children met finally. I won’t be around, breathing, for much longer. You, my children, should look after your uncles. They don’t have children, but they have many nephews and nieces. Remember this, my children. Respect your uncles.”

This widespread religious revival is not the only challenge to the state’s ability to control the meanings of the contemporary moment in Vietnam. The re-examination of the French and American wars among some writers and artists also produced a critique of what they saw as the wider post-war selfishness and immorality of the doi moi era and a deeply felt sense that wartime promises of socialist revolution had gone unfulfilled. A damning portrait of society under market economic reforms shaped Tran Van Thuy’s 1987 documentary film How to Behave (Chuyen uu te). To set up its themes, the film-maker profiles several veterans of the French and American wars who barely eke out a subsistence living as cyclo drivers and bicycle repairmen and whose decorated service is now ignored by the state. It then asks if kindness (uu te), a term the film tellingly defines as ‘acting in the public rather than individual interest’, can still be found in Vietnamese society. Ultimately the film finds kindness not among party cadres or state bureaucrats—one of whom interviewed says, ‘No one has time for such outmoded notions these days’—but in a leper colony run by Catholic nuns, a particularly charged choice given the intense hostility of the socialist state in Vietnam towards the Catholic Church. If the devotion of the nuns to the lepers, as the film claims, rests on ‘faith’, How to Behave suggests that the callowness of society at large represents a loss of faith in the state’s socialist ideals. Pointedly noting that ‘the people’ (nhan dan) are ‘sacred words’ in

the state’s vocabulary as the objects of ‘sacrifice, devotion and generosity’, the film sets the difficult lives of ordinary people against the indifference of powerful party officials whose lives are marked by material ease to suggest that ‘the gap between words and deeds has become too wide’. The mixture of sorrow and anger through which How to Behave advances its sense of the post-war betrayal of wartime ideals emerges most sharply in the closing frames of the film. A quotation appears on screen, ‘Only animals can turn from the suffering of men and busy themselves preening their furs and feathers,’ to which the film’s narrator adds, ‘This quotation is not by my friend but by the venerated Karl Marx.’

In other films and novels, a gendered construction of war memory serves as the vehicle for a blistering critique of contemporary Vietnamese society. They pit a series of grasping younger women against the probity of war veterans whose virtuous behaviour stands in sharp contrast to the dominant ethos of corruption and selfishness at the heart of the market economy. This metaphorical dichotomy builds in part upon the traditional Vietnamese division of gender roles that contrasts women as ‘generals of the interior’ (noi tuong), who dominate the domestic sphere and oversee the family’s budget, with men who properly inhabit the public realm, where they conduct the more contemplative official business of family life and governance. By rendering the contours of doi moi society as a feminine landscape forgetful of the self-sacrifices of war, the symbolic vocabularies of these works suggest that the power of the market economy has dangerously extended the private domain of women into the masculine, public sphere and dislodged more traditional forces of moral order and authority in society.

Tran Vu and Nguyen Huu Luyen’s 1987 film Brothers and Relations (Anh va em) uses the lens of gender to explore the conflict within a northern family over locating the remains of a son killed in the American war. The problem was a common one in post-war Vietnam. The bodies of hundreds of thousands of soldiers who died in the war have never been recovered, and northern families regularly organize trips to central and southern Vietnam to search for the remains of the missing. In a scene at the beginning of the film, the
elderly mother says goodbye to the guests attending the anniversary of the death of her son. After the last guests depart, she collapses onto the floor crying and calls out for her family to assemble around her. Reminding them that their brother's bones are still lying in a military cemetery in the South, she implores them to bring his remains home so that she can lie next to him when she dies. Her son agrees, adding, 'Thank heaven my sister has so many connections.' His observation prompts an increasingly acrimonious exchange between his sister and his wife:

Sister: Shouldn't we all help? I'm busy with my husband's business trip to Singapore. You both have never seen Saigon. You could combine business with a little sightseeing.
Wife: My husband is busy with the shop and I'm taking care of mother. You have more time.
Sister: I'll talk straight. You joined this family. Help take care of it. You got my brother's room because he died.
Wife: And you got some of mother's gold. We don't get paid for taking care of her.
Sister: I had to borrow that gold to grease a few wheels.
Wife: Our family has special status because our brother got killed. That's why they let you pass your exam and get a job in Hanoi.
Sister: You're wrong. I got that another way. But it is through family status that they don't close your store.
Wife: Look at my husband. He can't go, I don't know my way around the South. How could we exhume the bones?
Sister: You think I'm good at it? It is hard enough to take care of my husband and his family. It's expensive to transport bones. Where would I get the money?

Offering a solution to this impasse, the sister suggests that her husband's brother, an unemployed veteran, could use the money and go on behalf of the family. The veteran agrees but refuses the money. The sister tells him, 'Stop living in the clouds. No one is like you now—doing something for nothing.' To which the veteran replies, 'Your brother died asking for nothing.' As the narrative of the film unfolds, *Brothers and Relations* juxtaposes the selfless virtue of the veteran, who collects and buries the remains of the fallen soldier, with the sister's single-minded pursuit of material advantage in planning the potentially lucrative business trip to Singapore for her husband that blinds her to her familial obligations.

In *The General Retires* (*Tuong ve huu, 1988*), a short story by Nguyen Huy Tiep, who is perhaps the leading writer in contemporary Vietnam, a decorated general and his daughter-in-law serve as the central protagonists in a narrative that disturbingly links societal amnesia about the war and the perils of the marketplace to gender. The general, a figure of quiet authority and simple tastes who is clearly devoted to serving the ideals of the state, comes to live with his son's family after he retires from military service. But he quickly feels out of place as he experiences the market-generated rhythms of life in the household. One day he discovers that his son's wife, a doctor at a maternity clinic, brings home aborted fetuses from the clinic to feed a pack of Ahatian dogs she is raising to sell as guard dogs to supplement the family's income. Appalled by her behaviour and devastated to realize that the spiritual emptiness he finds in the household pervades contemporary society, the general leaves the house to rejoin his elderly military comrades, among whom he dies. *The General Retires* uses the emasculation of husbands by their wives to foreground the corrupting seductiveness of the marketplace and its corrosive penetration into all realms of human relations. It depicts the son of the general as an impotent figure powerless to resist the moral transgressions of the market that his wife has introduced into the household. When the general points out to his son what his wife has been doing, implicitly calling upon him to reassert his authority and end the practice, he somewhat stiffly replies, as if to hide his embarrassment, 'I had known about this but dismissed it as something of no importance.'

These critiques of wartime legacies and the market economy are not ubiquitous in present-day Vietnam. For those born after 1975 the war and its meanings are increasingly remote from their consciousness. Over two-thirds of Vietnam's population is under 21 and many have fully embraced the market. Students are preoccupied with studying business, computers, English, accounting, and tourism in preparation for what they hope will be positions in the upper tier
of the new Vietnamese economy, and are more concerned with the newest music, fashion, and consumer goods coming into Vietnam from Asia, Europe, and the United States than they are with their elders’ stories about the war. The differences in generational sensibilities starkly emerged in Le Hung’s play Fable for the Year 2000 (Huyen thai nam 2000). In one critical scene, an old man and a young student are involved in a stand-off on a bridge. The old man insists he should go first because his generation produced everything of value in Vietnamese society: houses, roads, the contested bridge, even the young student. The student, angry and impatient that old men ‘occupy all the most important positions except in homes for the ageing’, proclaims, with a notable absence of Confucian filial piety, that he cannot wait until the old man ‘has walked his last step’, and criticizes the ‘pathetic’ legacy the older generation has left for him and his friends. Similarly, the slyly satirical paintings by the young Hanoi-based surrealist artist Nguyen Manh Hung such as A Group of SU 22 (see Plate 18) picture the Soviet-made fighter planes that Hung’s father had piloted during the American war; but any notion of gloriousness is undercut by the fat bright-orange carrots that serve in the place of the planes’ wheels.

For many diasporic Vietnamese, especially the millions who settled in the United States after 1975, the war remains a palpable presence. The traces of their own war dead and the former South Vietnamese state have been effaced in Vietnam itself. ARVN soldiers who died in the American war are not buried or commemorated in the war cemeteries constructed by the Vietnamese state. The monuments built to celebrate them by the South Vietnamese government have long been dismantled, and the ARVN cemeteries, many of them razed after 1975, lie in ruins. But the streets of ‘little Saigons’ in southern California, where the majority of Vietnamese-Americans live, remain decorated with the yellow flag crossed by three red stripes that flew over South Vietnam. Among an older generation, anti-communist sentiments remain high and 30 April 1975 is commemorated as a National Day of Shame (Ngay Quoc Han), rather than Liberation Day as it is in Vietnam. In the diasporic community too, however, generational divides about the war and its legacies have emerged. If some first-generation Vietnamese-Americans continue to yearn for a restoration of the South Vietnamese regime, the 1.5 generation (born in Vietnam but who settled in the United States at a young age) and the second generation (born in the United States) see Vietnam and the war quite differently. In 2003 a Vietnamese-American television network in southern California started to produce a lifestyle show for younger Vietnamese-Americans, largely concerned with social and cultural rather than political issues. One show, however, did a short feature on a soon-to-be-released documentary entitled Saigon, USA. The feature simply talked about the making of the film, but within hours the network was deluged with calls to say the documentary itself was filled with a pro-communist bias that the feature story had done nothing to criticize. Something, these callers said, needed to be done. In reaction the network cancelled the programme altogether, suggesting how charged memories of the war remain among the Vietnamese-American community.

And yet the sensibilities of the diasporic Vietnamese community in the United States and elsewhere are increasingly in flux, as are the attitudes of the Vietnamese state to them. Not only are overseas Vietnamese across the generations putting over larger amounts of money into the contemporary doi moi economy, a phenomenon increasingly welcomed and facilitated by the Vietnamese state, but more and more families, especially their youngest members, are returning to Vietnam. Some go for shorter visits, often around the Tet holidays. Others aim to settle permanently, or move back and forth between Vietnam and the West. For those younger generations who grew up outside Vietnam, coming to terms with the war and what it means to go home is far less about communism and anti-communism than it has been for their parents and grandparents. Their own complex sentiments about the Vietnamese past and future emerge in the work of several young diasporic visual artists. The Vietnamese-American photographer An-My Lê explored the war in part through photographs of re-enactments of the American war, an increasingly popular if somewhat strange summer pastime in the United States. The re-enactors, who sometimes had difficulty
finding people to play the ‘enemy’, asked Lê to play along: ‘they would often concoct elaborate scenarios around my character,’ Lê said in an interview. ‘I have played the sniper girl… the lone guerilla left over in a booby-trapped village… the captured prisoner.’ Despite the odd disjunctures—Lê was born in 1960 of Vietnamese parents in a Francophile home in Saigon and went to the United States in 1975—she saw herself and the re-enactors in a similar way: ‘many of them had complicated personal issues they were trying to resolve, but I was also trying to resolve mine. In a way, we were all artists trying to make sense of our own personal baggage.’

The war emerges in more elliptical ways in the works of Liza Nguyen and Dinh Q. Lê. Nguyen, born in 1979 to parents who immigrated to France in the mid-1960s, is a French- and German-trained photographer who travelled to Vietnam for the first time in 2000 to collect sacks of earth from well-known battlefields and sites of massacres from the French and Americans wars like Dien Bien Phu and My Lai. She photographed them in almost clinical fashion back in her Düsseldorf studio, spreading each into oval mounds and producing final images that were magnified to 5 feet high. The resulting collection of photographs, Surfaces (see Plate 19), does not so much speak directly to the war and its aftermath as raise more elliptical questions about the quotidian meanings of the simultaneously ordinary and extraordinary ground that forms the basis of her work. Dinh Q. Lê was born in South Vietnam in 1968, and moved with his parents to the United States ten years later. He returned to Vietnam in the early 1990s after completing his artistic training in California and New York City, and now lives in Ho Chi Minh City. Some of his work has engaged displaced memories of family and home for the overseas Vietnamese. For his Spending One’s Life Trying to Find One’s Way Home (Moi Coi Di Về), Lê sought out family photographs in Vietnamese second-hand stores (his own family photographs were left behind and lost when his family went to the United States). He juxtaposed them with texts from interviews with Vietnamese-Americans about their past lives in Vietnam and present ones in America to form a massive collage that aims to recover and evoke the texture of life in the 1950s and 1960s in southern Vietnam. More recently his work has shifted from an elegiac to a political register. In the series Vietnam: Destination for the New Millennium (see Plate 20), Lê sharply critiques the Vietnamese state for its efforts to reinvent Vietnam as an international tourist destination known for beaches and natural beauty in ways that efface the lingering traces of the war.12

In Vietnam itself, the generational differences over the meanings of the French and American wars and apprehensions of the present moment have sometimes recalled the rich legacies of Vietnamese modernist thought from the 1920s and the 1930s. Along with the re-emergence and reworking of spiritual belief and practices, the recent period has brought a rediscovery of 1930s reportage, long suppressed by the Vietnamese state because of its individualistic rather than collectivist inclinations, with classic works republished for a wide and appreciative urban readership. The editor of one of these collections pointedly noted, ‘People who write genuine reportage are always people who defend reason and justice.’ At the same time a new wave of contemporary investigative journalism that explored corruption and poverty, consciously modelled on Vietnamese reportage of the 1930s, filled the columns of the Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City press.13 As it had in the 1930s, reportage and what it signalled about the need for individual freedom and moral autonomy provided an alternative space outside prevailing orthodoxies for working out new relations between self and society. The resurgence of these sensibilities, the growing range of new local social organizations—from family lineage groups and mutual credit associations to spirit medium groups, Buddhist associations, pilgrimage fraternities, and ritual associations—and the more inchoate yearnings in the diaspora to engage in what it means to be Vietnamese have together introduced a ‘creeping pluralism’ into Vietnamese society that now shapes the texture of everyday life.14
‘I am looking for this,’ the young man Hinh, in the short story ‘The Prophecy’, with which I opened the Prelude to this book, asserts to the crowd gathered around him. As the story concludes,

The crowd continued on after Hinh departed, like a torrent in a stream, that never runs dry. They had no idea what ‘this’ was they were looking for, but still they hoped. A full stomach, a warm bed… no matter that it was a nebulous future possibility, it was still alluring enough that they poured after it like a stream of water…

Noon.

Then evening.

And still the multitude pushed and jostled in the midst of a flower garden called Spring.\

In a very real sense the crowd’s search persists. After three decades of post-war peace, the multiple worlds that the Vietnamese articulated and imagined over more than a century of colonialism, revolution, and war remain in the process of becoming.

FURTHER READING

PRELUDE