Vietnamese-Australians want a role in Vietnam's future but they may want too much, too fast

The story of a failed delegation

Peter Bird Martin
ICWA/4 West Wheelock St
Hanover, NH 03755, USA

Dear Peter,

Everyone rises as the first notes of the South-Vietnamese anthem fill the crowded room. I stand too, facing the stage and the unfurled yellow banner with its three red stripes, the flag of the defeated Republic of South-Vietnam. A little girl next to me is trying her best but she misses half the verses. "We teach them," says Nguyen Hong Anh, editor-in-chief of a Vietnamese-language magazine published in Melbourne, Australia. "But they forget."

Anh and his daughter have gathered here with over 400 Vietnamese-Australians to celebrate the 49th anniversary of the South-Vietnamese Air Force. It is a cold July winter night out there but this Melbourne dance hall is warm. Waiters elbow their way through the crowd, carrying trays of Australian beer. Forty members of the defeated Air Force found refuge here in Melbourne after Saigon fell in 1975. Some were helicopter pilots; others were mechanics. About 20 are here tonight. They gather on stage to sing the song of the Air Force. There is a minute of silence "for those who died for the cause and those who died for freedom on the sea." Twenty years after the end of the war, the veterans I speak to say they "hate" the communists, and see no progress in recent years.

In the lobby, a young woman in a tight brown dress has a different view. A university graduate in business, Xuan speaks English with a strong Australian accent. She laughs when I mention it. "I am an Australian", she says brushing aside the long mane of black hair covering her fine Vietnamese features. "Tomorrow my whole family goes to Vietnam and I am excited. I want to get a job there, be paid an Australian salary, have a great lifestyle." Born in central Vietnam, 20-year-old Xuan remembers going to jail as a child after the family's first botched escape attempt. "I was scared and I had nightmares. I used to want to fight the Communists." As we speak, someone comes to see Xuan. It is her father, one of the men who said earlier he did not trust the Communists and would not go back. I get my first lesson in Vietnamese-overseas politics: What they say is not always what they do.

Carole Beaulieu is an ICWA fellow writing about the countries of former French Indochina, with a focus on Vietnam.

There are over 150,000 Vietnamese living in Australia today, about the same number as in Canada, a bit more than France (120,000). Most Vietnamese-Australians are refugees from the defeated Republic of South-Vietnam. Their number is small compared to the 650,000 living in the United States but they are no less active.

The leaders of their organizations are often heard on the Vietnamese-language broadcasts of the BBC or Radio France Internationale. Staunch critics of the communist authorities and passionate advocates of democracy, they want political pluralism and nothing less. Their newspapers publish no kind words for the Hanoi regime and a network inside the country keeps them informed of the status of political prisoners. Militants are out demonstrating whenever a Hanoi official shows up. They also have money and skills. Seen from Hanoi, the Vietnamese overseas are a force to be reckoned with. But are they really?

"Hanoi worries too much about the Vietnamese overseas," says a Canberra PHD student whose parents came as refugees to Australia. "The community is a tiger with no teeth. They talk loud, that's all. The refugees have roots now in their adopted countries; they are busy paying their children's college tuition and supporting the family back home. They will not sacrifice more for some new, hypothetical democracy in Vietnam."

Will they? As I walk out of the Melbourne dance hall I wonder about the role the Vietnamese overseas will play in the future of Vietnam. Since 1986 and adoption of *doi moi* (renovation policy), Hanoi has repeatedly invited the refugees to come back and help develop the country. Their skills and their money are needed. Many have gone back to visit, but according to Hanoi statistics few have stayed and invested. "I am not going back, you cannot trust the Communists," says 49-year-old Khuu Van Nghia, a helicopter pilot from An Giang Province. He came to Australia in 1982 after a few months of re-education camp and years in a refugee camp in Malaysia. "There are no laws in Vietnam to protect us. If they want to get you, they will find a way."

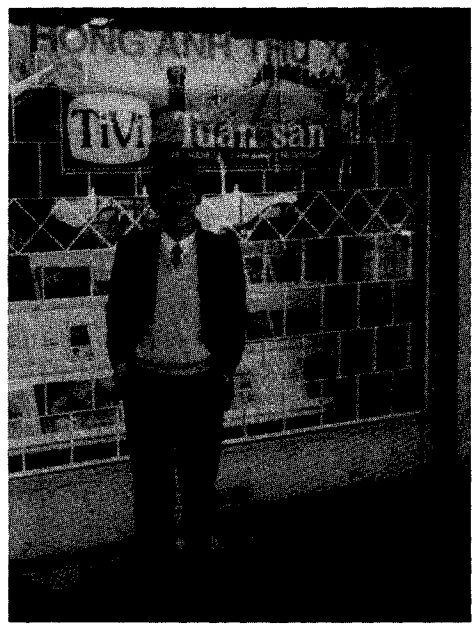
NOT A MONOLITHIC COMMUNITY

Not everyone is as scared as Nghia. The community is not monolithic. Some refugees are more militant than others, just as some are better educated or wealthier than others. "The intellectuals want to change the government," says Kin Ma, an ethnic-Chinese refugee from HoChiMinh City (then called Saigon), now working as a social worker in one of Melbourne's government-subsidized high rises. "They want free speech and a multi-party system. The ordinary people simply want their relatives back home to have a job, some respect, a chance to get an education. Others simply do not care anymore."

Stefanie Fahey, Vietnam watcher and head of Asian Studies at Victoria University in Melbourne, says the community has become more moderate in the past few years. "Once the American embargo was lifted, and many western countries had resumed aid and cooperation, the community had to adjust," she says.

Gone are the days when some dreamt of an armed rebellion to topple the communist regime in Hanoi. Gone too are the days when, on pay-day, refugees working at the Ford assembly line in Melbourne would be solicited outside the gate to support the cause. "We used to believe in armed rebellion," admits Anh, whose Melbourne news weekly has been a forceful advocate of democracy in Vietnam. "Now we know it is not possible. No one wants to loose more lives. Everyone wants change, but we want peaceful change."

Born in Hue, Anh worked in Saigon as an accountant during the war and came to Australia after a few years in an Indonesian refugee camp. "I am not anti-communist, I only want to have democracy in my country," he insists.



Anh in front of his magazine's office.

Today, most militants focus their energy on exposing Hanoi's violation of human rights. Some intellectuals meet to discuss the post-communist era and the role they will play in it. Many go and simply visit family and friends. "Ten years ago, people did not even tell their friends when they went to Vietnam," recalls 26-year-old Huy Anh Le, a successful Melbourne lawyer. "Now many go openly." Forums to discuss current events in Vietnam attract large crowds. "In the past no one wanted anything to do with the communists," adds Le. "Now we get mixed reactions."

RECENT PAINS - A YOUNG REFUGEE COMMUNITY

The Vietnamese community in Australia is relatively new, with fresh memories of the war. Refugees started coming to Australia in large numbers only after 1980. Most had spent time in a refugee camp in Malaysia or Indonesia. "The wounds are not closed yet," says 42-year-old broadcaster Ngoc Han, one of the boat people. "Years after they had arrived here, some people still whispered when they talked about the communists."

During my four weeks in Australia, I heard no praise for Hanoi's reforms and little confidence in Vietnam's development under the present communist regime. "There has been no change," says Vo Hoang Phu, President of the Air Force Veterans Association. "People are still poor in Vietnam. There are no jobs. The ones making money are the communist officials. Without democracy there will be no progress."

Many rave about Vietnamese mismanagement and corruption. "They have 300 people doing what we used to do with only 30," says the former district chief of a Mekong Delta province, requesting anonymity. Phong (not his real name) spent seven years in a forest re-education camp in the center of the country before escaping by boat

to Malaysia. Trained in the States, Phong says Vietnam needs a good clean-up of its local governments, citing the example of a friend who had to give 8% of the cost of a building project to local officials before getting all the necessary permits. Phong admits security procedures have been eased since his first visit four years ago. "But that's only because they want our money," he says.

There are dozens of Vietnamese organizations in Australia and the voice of the "organized" Vietnamese all oppose normalization with Hanoi until the Communists agree to political reform. Their assessment of the past year's efforts are harsh and unforgiving. "It is true there has been some development in the economy but the credit has to go to the people, not the government," says former South-Vietnamese diplomat Nguyen Trieu Dan, one of the most respected spokesmen of the Vietnamese-Australian community, heard often on the BBC. A delegate to the 1970's Paris peace talks, Dan was South-Vietnam's ambassador to Tokyo when Saigon fell and he found refuge in Australia in 1975. Now retired, he spends his time teaching multi-ethnic relations at the Police Academy and presiding over the Friday Club, a type of debating society whose members keep track of Vietnamese political prisoners and discuss developments in the homeland. Bright and well-informed, Dan speaks of his fellow refugees in a caring non-assuming manner. "The community has many political organizations," he says. "They are not always very practical but they fulfill an emotional need among the refugees. Their constituencies are here, not in Vietnam."

Dan's wife, Huynh Bich Cam, is not as gentle. Before letting me see her husband, she submitted me to more than half-an-hour of questions, ranging from who I was to whom I had seen in Australia. That afternoon, we drove in her brand-new red car, headed for the suburb where the family lives in a large suburban home with a garden and a pool. She spoke with scorn of my meeting with another exile in Melbourne, an ethnic-Chinese from Saigon who works with less privileged refugees. "The Chinese do not care about Vietnam," she says abrasively. "This man knows nothing. Why did you see him?" Cam's own view is clear: Hanoi should get no credit for the recent progress. "All they did was remove the fetters so people finally had a chance to work," she says. "They have no merit."

Many educated Vietnamese in exile argue that the reforms, usually credited to former Communist Party General Secretary Nguyen Van Linh, began before his time. "The changes did not begin at the top," insists Sydney-based broadcaster Quang Luu, also a former South-Vietnamese diplomat. "They began with the people. The Communist authorities could not stop them so they made them policy. It is a case of the leaders following the people, not the opposite." (In Australia, three professors are presently studying the hypothesis that reforms in Vietnam began before 1986, maybe as early as 1981. More on this in CB-25)

NO HUMANITARIAN AID BEFORE POLITICAL REFORM

In Australia, every Vietnamese organization I see opposes humanitarian aid to Vietnam. "We collect money for the refugees in the camps," says lawyer Huy Anh Le, vice-president of Victoria's Vietnamese Community, an umbrella organization for about 60 Vietnamese associations. "We would like to help the poor in Vietnam

but we cannot be sure where the money will go. I welcome the recent economic openness but I am worried that most of the money is channelled to the elite."

Nguyen Hong Anh, the editor of TiVi Tuan-San, a popular Melbourne-based television guide and news weekly, recalls the day with pride when he refused to run a public announcement for an Australian-based group raising funds for a new private university in HCMCity. "Sending money would only strengthen the government," he says.

NEW PROBLEMS OF DRUGS AND GANG WARFARE

But the Vietnamese community in Australia also has new problems to deal with. Gang warfare and drug-related offenses are taking their toll on the youngest generation. Once labelled the "hardworking immigrants", the ones whose children reaped the highest honors in school, the Vietnamese-Australians now make other kinds of headlines. In 1990, in Melbourne, over 25% of the residents of the city's juvenile detention center were ethnic Vietnamese. At the Saturday night Melbourne Air Force function, two solidly-built security guards watched the door. "It's the youth gangs we are worried about," says one of the two guards. "They come into places like this to rob the guests, take the valuables."

Cabramatta, a neighborhood located an hour from downtown Sydney by commuter train, is also known for its drug dealers, often working right in front of the main train station. In Cabramatta, there are signs in Laotian, Vietnamese, Chinese, and even posters from a local Serbian Youth Center. A newsstand sells over 10 Vietnamese languages newspapers, all published in Australia. According to city statistics, over 65% of Cabramatta residents were born overseas. Some of them made donations to the city to help build the Freedom Plaza, a pedestrian mall complete with ceremonial arches and granite sculptures of buffalos and turtles.

Stone turtle in Freedom Plaza.

In Cabramatta's post office, a sign tells customers to queue in English, Vietnamese and Chinese. Groceries are full of Asian products: lotus nuts from China, litchis from Thailand, mushrooms from Taiwan. Recently, some Vietnamese products have begun to appear. There is chili powder from Vietnam, rice sticks made in Vietnam and packed in Singapore,

nuoc mam from Phu Quoc. The Vietnamese products are cheaper and stores are beginning to sell them in increasing quantity. Vietnamese artists have not quite made it yet. In a music store near Freedom Plaza, my queries about Vietnamese "living in Vietnam" are met with a flat "no". One store sells videocassettes produced in Vietnam by Saigon Video. Even travel agencies are discrete. There is little advertising for trips to Vietnam despite the fact that one travel agent admits it is now a "big part" of his business.

Colourful fruit shop in Cabramatta.

The neighborhood looks innocuous, but an Australian colleague has advised me not to hang around alone in Cabramatta at night. "It's not as bad as it used to be," says lawyer Huy Le, an active member of the Vietnamese community who is troubled by the situation. "Many young boys came here alone. They were to stay with a relative and work hard to bring the rest of their family here. But the pressure was too high. The kids ran away and ended up on the street. We have acknowledged the problem and are facing it."

Slater and Gordon, the Melbourne law firm where Le works, is mid-sized and known to be "socially conscious". Close to 90% of Le's work involves Vietnamese clients, 30% is immigration related. His office is in Footscray, the city's area with the highest concentration of migrants. On the street below Le's second floor office window, there are Lebanese women wearing head scarves, Greek mothers in black skirts, Vietnamese teenagers wearing rappers clothing and baseball caps.

The street smells of fresh herbs, coriander and lemon grass. Store racks are laden with tropical fruits: custard apples, persimmons and rambutans. They come from Darwin or Queensland, but they smell

of Vietnam. Stainless-steel butcher stalls disappear under kilos of lean red meat. Often, clients and vendors are both Vietnamese and the market resounds with the yapping of the Saigonese dialect. At a small restaurant where I stop to order pho (rice noodle soup), the young waiter is angry. "You speak Vietnamese with a northern accent," he says. "I had to leave Vietnam because of the communists. I hate them. You must speak with a southern accent."

Footscray is one of three predominantly Vietnamese neighborhood in Melbourne. The others are Richmond and Springvale, areas that used to be the sites of "public housing flats", gloomy highrises where the government housed new arrivals, and where the Vietnamese communities grew. Today, most Vietnamese-Australians live in Melbourne or Sydney and the two cities boast Little Saigon's of their own, animated streets where stores sell more lemon grass than vegemite, the well-known black-yeast spread only Australians seem to have a taste for. Today, there are close to 3000 Nguyen in the Melbourne phonebook alone, more than the Johnsons, not quite as many as the Smiths.

I first met publisher Nguyen Hong Anh in Richmond. "Many refugees did not speak English but wanted to watch television," he recalls, explaining how he decided to launch a television guide called Tivi Tuan-san to earn a living. Today he owns not only the popular weekly magazine but also a bookshop.

The magazine's office is only a few blocks away from Victoria Street. Once a neglected thoroughfare of hamburger joints, the street has become one of Melbourne's most colorful and exciting areas. "The other immigrants, the Yugoslavs, the Greeks, left the street as soon as they could move out of the Housing Commission flats," recalls a local businessman. "But the Vietnamese stayed. They bought businesses and houses nearby. Their old parents stayed in the flats and the street got a new life."

Kin Ma, an ethic-Chinese from Saigon who served in Danang during the war, came to the Victoria Street public high rises in 1982, and has worked there since, as a community worker. "Most people want to go back to Vietnam one day," says 43-year-old Ma. "The old people miss it a lot, the young dream of going there to work." In the past few years Ma says he has seen "many gentlemen" go back to Vietnam to find a bride and bring her to Australia.

Ma believes Vietnam is changing for the better, albeit slowly. He is happy that the economic reforms are giving the people back home a chance to make it on their own instead of living off overseas remittances. As for him, he sees no reason to go back. His family's property was seized by the government after 1975 and his three young children are adapting well to Australia. "There are opportunities for the young, and for the people whose children are grown up, and their education paid for" he says. "Not for us."

OUT OF TOUCH WITH THE NEW BUSINESS RULES

Most Vietnamese-Australians agree that Vietnam offers many business opportunities but many doubt they can seize them. "Some tried and failed," says Ma, refusing to give names. "In Vietnam now, business

depends on connections. And we have been out of there for too long to have good connections."

Ma admits he has heard of some successes. A friend of his took some new technology to Vietnam and did well. Another started a profitable tea packaging business. A third one invested in real estate in Vung Tau, the coastal oil boomtown in the south. "He built 100 units and had to give 30 to the authorities, but the rest was enough to make it profitable," says Ma.

Corruption and the elasticity of Vietnam's new commercial laws are taking their toll on some daring investors. Melbourne lawyer Anh Le has already seen a few victims of the alien environment. "They come to me after having lost 40 or 50,0000 dollars," he says raising his hands in disbelief. "I have to tell them there is nothing I can do. It is a mine field out there and if you do not have a powerful contact, maybe you should stay home."

Former diplomat Luu Tuong Quang (known in Australia as Quang Luu) is harsh on those who go back for business, stopping short of calling them crooks. "They are not doing it for the country," he says. "They are doing it for themselves. They are in it for the quick buck, the speculation, not the long term. The best of us, those who care for the country, who want to see it develop politically, they are not going back. They are working for political reform."

Some others are more pragmatic, if not cynical. "The ones who were protesting the loudest 15 years ago are now the ones doing business with Hanoi," says Ma. "But they will not tell you."

Silence is golden in Vietnamese-overseas politics. No Vietnamese-Australian journalist has been shot for advocating cooperation with Hanoi - compared to five in the USA since 1976 (1) - but most people believe it is best to "lie low". "I often tell people to shut up and do what they think is right," says Sang Nguyen, a Saigon-born Vietnamese who is now secretary to Australia's Foreign Minister Gareth Evans. "It does not mean I am scared. Sometimes there is no right way to say something, but there is a right way to do it."

Sang was a teenager when he arrived in Australia, after 11 days on a boat. He remembers being called a "wog" (Australian pejorative term for immigrants) and a "ching chong", during those first years in Australia when he held a variety of jobs, from factory worker to dish washer to migrant liaison officer for a labor union. At 31 he ran for election in Richmond and became Australia's first ethnic-Vietnamese Mayor. In the meantime, he also managed to bring over from Vietnam the nine members of his family. Today, not yet age 40, Sang plans a career in Australian politics and still adheres to a quiet policy. "No Vietnamese in Vietnam support communism," he says, "but they have to live with it, make the best of it."

---

(1). According to a recent report by the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), 13 journalists were killed on US soil since 1976, five of them born in Vietnam. The five killings remain unsolved. Two were clearly linked to right-wing groups.

Some other exiles like broadcaster Quang Luu and former ambassador Nguyen Trieu Dan are not partisans of the quiet approach. They believe in speaking out and they do. Luu says the Communist regime will fall soon, just like other regimes fell in Eastern Europe. "It will happen in the next few years and it will not be smooth," he predicts. According to him, the level of violence will depend on the Vietnamese Army. "Any future development in Vietnam will involve the army," he says. "It is difficult to predict which side the military will take because of the commercialization it is experiencing right now."

Luu believes the Vietnamese People's Army is following the example of the Thai Army. As the old guard dies out, middle-rank officers push for an increased involvement in business. The military already has interests in mining gems, managing hotels, smuggling videos, real estate, and tourism. "Among the population there is still a certain degree of respect for the military but it is dying out fast," says Luu. [The police are already despised because of the high incidence of corruption]. As the army gets more into business, people will regard it as unfair competition."(2)

Luu and Dan predict a new form of government will soon emerge in Vietnam. "The Communist Party is not as strong as it appears to be," argues former Ambassador Dan. "The regime is on the defensive. It is not a socialist system anymore, only a totalitarian one."

Dan does not think China will get involved if Vietnam abandons communism. "China is going the way of a federation," he says, brushing away any possible Chinese threat. "No country in the world wants a strong China. Everyone supports decentralization and the Chinese will be too busy to care about Vietnam."

FOCUSING ON HUMAN RIGHTS AND DISSIDENTS

With the lifting of the American embargo, and the warming of the international community toward Vietnam, Vietnamese-Australian politics have increasingly focused on human rights in recent years. "It's the only card they have got left to put pressure on Vietnam," says an Australian professor.

Human right violations come up in almost every conversation I have with Australian-Vietnamese. "There are still hundreds of political prisoners in Vietnam," explains a Melbourne professional whose brother is still in jail in Vietnam and who requests anonymity. "How can I believe Hanoi's new policy of openness? They must release all political prisoners before I start believing."

---

(2). Some military officers are truly at an advantage. On the day I was leaving Vietnam, one Hanoi friend in his early forties, told me how his younger brother, who was in the Army near Saigon, was "given" a piece of land a few years ago and had capitalized on it to "become rich". According to my friend, many officers like his brother were lobbying for the Army to be allowed a "freer hand in business." Although he disliked the thought of a full time military career, my friend - a government employee - wondered if he would not have made it rich, faster, by joining the army.

Dan's Friday Club submitted to Canberra a list of 650 political prisoners. When Vietnamese Prime Minister Vo Van Kiet visited Australia in 1993, protestors followed him everywhere he went. Some re-enacted on the street scenes of beating they had endured while in detention in Vietnam. "Not all dissidents are treated the same," says Nguyen Trieu Dan. "Communist party members get away with much more criticism. It all depends on your connections."

For having advocated democracy and suggested that Vietnam abandon Marxist-Leninism, northern mathematician Phan Dinh Dieu lost his job as Vice-President of the National Center for Scientific Research. For having said pretty much the same thing, HCMCity physician Doan Viet Hoat was sentenced to 15 years in jail.(3) For having done even less, HCMCity physician Nguyen Dan Que is also serving a 20-year jail sentence. (As Vietnam's first member of Amnesty International, Que had written to the authorities, demanding the release of political prisoners.)

"I believe some people are still in jail simply because the officials do not want to give them back what they stole," says a Melbourne professional whose brother is in jail. "Human rights cannot be protected if corruption is not stopped, if the legal system is not upgraded. We are talking long term here."

The Vietnamese-overseas play a critical role in keeping the world informed of the fate of Vietnam's political prisoners. Their network of informants gather precious information on the prisoners whereabouts, their health status and the state of Vietnam's judicial and correctional system. But the Vietnamese-overseas involvement in international human rights delegations can sometimes backfire, as was the case in Australia this July.

A SABOTAGED HUMAN RIGHTS DELEGATION?

"We had a first on our hands, and they sabotaged it," bitterly complains an official of the Australian Foreign Ministry who requests anonymity. "We were going to send to Hanoi the first Western delegation dedicated to open a dialogue on human rights. It was a huge step forward. But it was not enough for some Vietnamese overseas."

The official is sad and troubled. The delegation he worked hard to arrange was officially canceled a few days ago, three days before it was due to leave for Hanoi. "We spent a year on this," he recalls. "Everything else was put on hold. We spent nights, up ironing things out with Hanoi. Every time we did, someone got on

(3). Dieu circulated a petition in 1991 arguing in favor of a two-party system, saying the people should have "a real choice". Although he was never a member of the Party, he was a member of the National Assembly from 1974 to 1981. He also set up Vietnam's first computing center. He was demoted this year because of his open criticism of the government in the western media. Hoat, by comparison, is now serving a 15-year sentence for having published four issues of a newsletter called Freedom Forum, advocating democracy by non-violent means.

the radio, said something that angered Hanoi and we had to start all over again."

The official says he learned his lesson the hard way. Some members of the Vietnamese community in Australia have their own agenda, one that does not always coincide with the Australian one. "They seem to care more for revenge, they want to shame Hanoi, not work for reform," he concludes.

The process that led to the cancellation on July 4th, of Australia's parliamentary delegation to Vietnam is muddy. I spent hours trying to untangle contradictory versions. Most refugees blame Hanoi. "They never intended to receive the delegation," says Huynh Bich Cam.

According to David Marr, respected Vietnam watcher and director of Pacific Studies at Australian National University (ANU), the incident is an "expression of differences between factions within the Vietnamese leadership." Some were ready to receive the delegation, others were not. And the Vietnamese overseas - that is according to me - played into the hands of the conservatives, hindering the efforts of the reformers. But let's first run through a chronology of the events:

1. May 1993: Prime Minister Vo Van Kiet visits Australia. His visit is marred by protests over Vietnam's human rights record. During a session with Australian officials he says Vietnamese exiles should come and see for themselves. Australian officials "seize the opportunity", recalls a government official. Kiet is asked if he would host a delegation. He says yes.

2. Kiet has not yet left Australia and Hanoi begins to express resistance to the proposed visit. Deputy Foreign Minister Le Mai says Vietnam will not allow any interference in human rights.

3. Back in Canberra, Foreign Affairs officials begin the difficult process of organizing the visit. "Negotiations were long and difficult," says one official. "The Foreign ministry in Hanoi was up against the Interior ministry. It took us until April 1994 to agree to a formula."

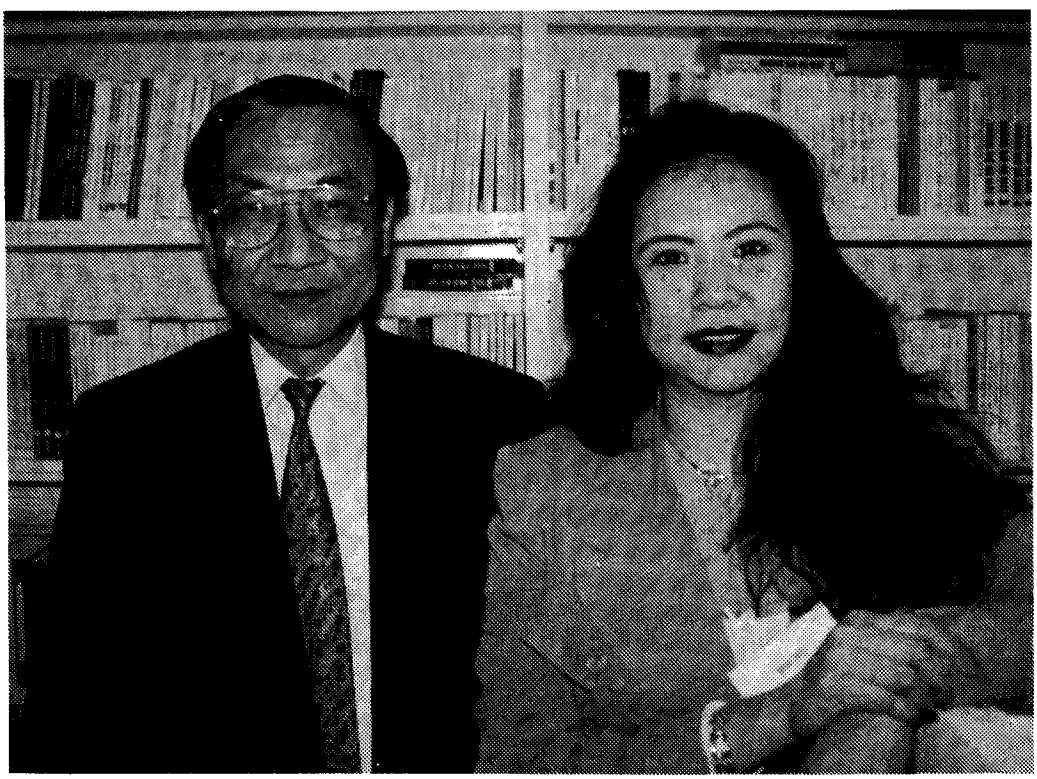
The formula is a compromise. Hanoi agrees to have two Vietnamese overseas on the delegation, including a controversial figure. Canberra agrees to change the name of the delegation from a "Human Rights Delegation" to a "Parliamentary Consultative Delegation."

"Officially we had moved away from the original purpose," admits a Canberra official. "But we had a tacit understanding with Hanoi. Establishing a dialogue on human rights issues was going to be an important theme of the visit but we would keep quiet about it. The question would be studied in the broader context of Vietnam's current judicial and legal circumstances. Our aim was to open a dialogue and they were willing to do so." Some Vietnamese overseas are outraged by the change.

4. In April 1994, Australian Prime Minister Paul Keating goes on an official visit to Vietnam and announces a doubling of Australian aid. He comes backs to Canberra with good news for the Delegation.

Canberra now has both an agenda and an agreed list of delegation-members. The program includes visits to a prison and an ethnic minority area, both sensitive issues. There are meetings with the Ministry of the Interior, the Ministry of Justice, the Supreme People's Court, the Supreme's People Procuracy, the Hanoi Law College, the Commission for Religious Affairs, the Hue Police Department, as well as various People's Councils and the Writers' Association.

The seven-member delegation includes two prominent Vietnamese-Australians: Ho Thi Quynh Mai, a 31-year-old Richmond city-councillor, and Quang Luu, former diplomat and broadcaster. Mai is not controversial. Luu is.



Quang Luu and Mai Ho as they appeared on the July 6th cover of TiVi Tuan-san.

5. Mid-June 94, former South-Vietnam ambassador to Tokyo and human rights activist Nguyen Trieu Dan grants an interview to the BBC. He says the delegation's main purpose is to investigate human rights violations. He encourages Vietnamese citizens to get in touch with the visitors and says the delegation will attempt to get in touch with high profile dissidents. "Some people in Hanoi hit the roof," recalls a Canberra official. "They wanted to call everything off. It took us weeks to patch up the rift. We were able to deflect it saying it was one person's opinion, not that of the delegation."

6. Late June, another exile, delegation member Quang Luu grants an interview to the BBC. He says the "essential purpose" of the visit is to "examine" human rights issues. He emphasizes the delegation's desire to meet prominent political prisoners and says the Vietnamese government's degree of cooperation in this regard will be evidence of its good will.

Once again, sensitivities flare up in Hanoi. "They reacted strongly not only to what he said but also to the language he used to say it," says a Canberra official. On July 1st, Canberra is told that Hanoi has "withdrawn" Luu's visa and is drastically cutting back the program. "If we had more time, we could have had the agenda reinstated," says the official. "But we ran out of time."

On July 4th, three days before the delegation was due to arrive in Hanoi, Foreign Minister Gareth Evans cancels the visit, citing "Vietnamese decision to deny a visa to one member of the Delegation, Mr Quang Luu, and to drastically cut back the program previously agreed."

WHAT REALLY HAPPENED?

Luu argues he has said nothing more than had already been said in the past by Australian officials and Hanoi simply used his comments as an excuse.

Back in Canberra, some officials see things differently. "We had a fairly ground-breaking initiative, and the community busted it," says one. "Some of them are not interested in opening a dialogue they want to put pressure on Vietnam. In the end, they were happy the delegation did not proceed. They were worried the report would not be as bleak as they wanted it to be. Their agenda is not the same as the Australian government and we should learn from that."

Former diplomat Nguyen Trieu Dan disagrees. He says Canberra simply lost its leverage with Hanoi. "In May 1993, Vietnam needed money and friends," says Dan. "Kiet wanted to please Australia so it would lobby the West in its favor. Now with the Paris conference having committed so much aid money, and with the American embargo lifted, Vietnam does not need Australia anymore." Moreover, according to Dan, Australian businessmen now have to compete with Americans for the Vietnamese market and they are pressuring Canberra not to irritate Hanoi.

I was puzzled by the week's events. Both sides accused the other of "over-reacting". All major Australian newspapers published editorials supporting Canberra's decision. Only a tabloid columnist raised questions I too deemed important:

1. How could a person with such a highly political profile as Quang Luu be Director of Australia's government-funded multi-ethnic broadcasting system?

2. Was it wise to have a refugee associated with the opposition in the delegation? Especially someone who, as a former south-Vietnamese diplomat, could be perceived by Hanoi as having condoned violations of human rights committed in the past?

3. How was Minister Evans' decision influenced by the high number of Vietnamese citizens in his riding?

I mulled over those questions while I tried to reach Quang Luu. Australian colleagues had told me he was not talking to the press. But he did call back two days later and we agreed to meet.

Born in Sadec, the Mekong delta town made famous by French author Marguerite Duras in her bestselling novel "L'Amant" (The Lover), Luu is a well-educated man in his mid-fifties. A barrister trained in Saigon, he was a diplomat in Canberra from 1970 to 1974 and escaped soon after Saigon fell. In 1977, he became the founding National President of the Vietnamese Community in Australia.

I meet Luu in his office in the large new white building of Australia's Special Broadcasting Services (SBS), a unique multilingual radio network broadcasting in 66 different languages to six of the country's major cities. Communities battle for air time and prime-time slots, all of it paid for by Australian taxpayers. "SBS is there to push the political agenda of the communities," explains Melanie Beresford, Vietnam watcher and economics professor at Macquarie University in Sydney. From another friend and colleague, I hear that SBS is a hotbed of conflict, Serbs and Croats and Macedonians and all the others respectively struggling to keep up with the station's code of ethics but sometimes broadcasting propaganda against each other.

I am anxious to meet Luu, head of SBS since 1990. He has been presiding over a fabulous expansion of the network, from two community-based radio stations to the world's first multicultural radio network. Now serving six of Australia's eight major cities, it will soon launch its first hour of English programming daily.

Some say Luu consciously sabotaged the Australian parliamentary delegation. "He has been a successful public servant here, he was a diplomat in Vietnam, he knows the sensitivities," said a Canberra official. "If a brash Australian had made the mistake, I would have understood, but Luu?"

Sitting in his comfortable office, wearing a well-tailored suit and a gold chain around his neck, Luu smiles at the thought he might have "made a mistake". "I knew very well what I was doing," he says sitting up and raising his chin.

According to Luu, the purpose of the delegation had been "diluted" and "needed to be refocused". "What's the point of visiting the Ministry of Justice or the police department? You do not go to the police to talk brutality," he says with a suddenly angry voice. "You go to the victims. If we had gone in that context we would have only heard briefings. I wanted to see political prisoners not hear briefings. If the Hanoi authorities allowed my comments, it meant they were really ready to receive a human rights delegation, If not, well... a cancellation would be better than a diluted visit."

Today, Luu believes the cancellation "highlighted the issues", "put more international pressure on Vietnam" and "achieved more than a few useless meetings with the Ministry of Justice." As he says so, Luu looks like the cat that swallowed the canary.

My interview with Luu is full of surprises. He says he never got a visa to go to Vietnam. This contradicts what I have heard in Canberra. Luu maintains he never got one. "But maybe the Foreign Affairs lied to me," he says.

While we talk, I discover that Luu used to be the boss of a good friend of mine. On the eve of Saigon's fall they were working in the same office. My friend came to see him and asked about his plans. "I told him I was getting out of the office and beginning to plan my escape," recalls Luu. "He looked at me and said: I will stay and I will serve."

I ask Luu about Vietnam's future, about the need for reconciliation. "No one demands an apology," he says, "But they must abandon their war mentality, they must stop looking at us like enemies, they must admit they have treated the South too harshly."

Luu says he does not want to topple Hanoi, only brings more democracy to his country. But once a while, his emotions get the better of him. "I cannot go there as a friend," he says. "I cannot forget everything. I will not crawl in front of them."

SO WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE? A SETBACK FOR AUSTRALIA

So Luu has had his way and the delegation did not go to Hanoi. Officials in Canberra believe there is no hope of sending another delegation for "quite a while". Foreign Minister Gareth Evans tells the press that this is "no real setback". Another Western diplomat I called said the incident will cause at least a "short-term setback".

Melbourne lawyer Huy Le believes that the delegation was a "step in the right direction" and is saddened by the end result. He is optimistic about the future though, mainly because the young Vietnamese in both countries are increasingly willing to shed past grievances and work together for a better future. "Some developing countries had to pay millions to send their students abroad," he says. "Vietnam did not. Still, we have thousands of well-educated people ready to help, especially the young. If only the authorities would clean up their act on political prisoners and allow for free speech."

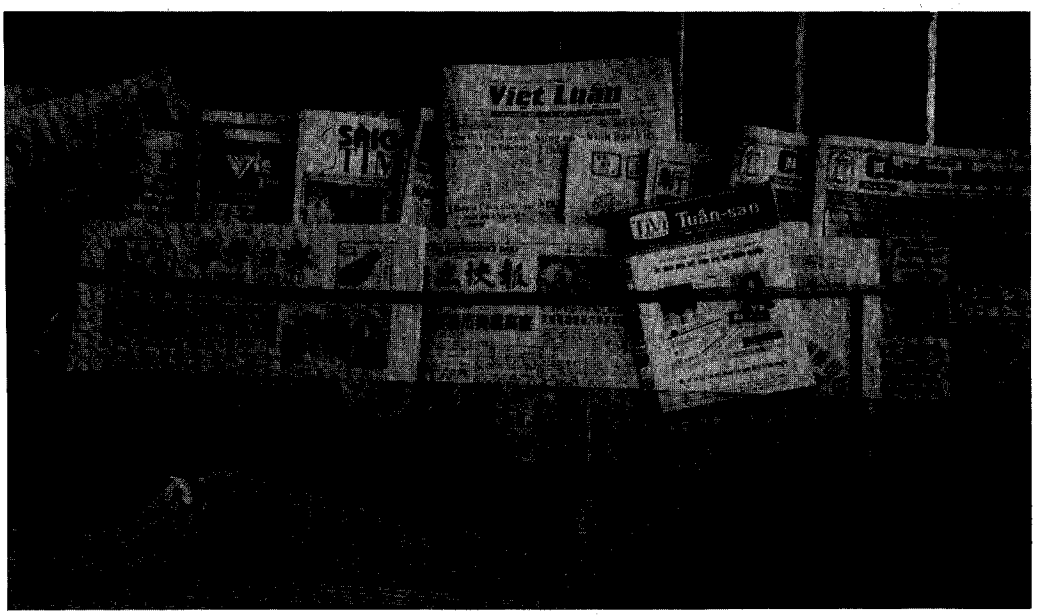
At the Melbourne dance hall, young Xuan had asked me relentlessly about Hanoi, the shaded streets, the fight to protect the old city from the highrises, the best businesses to get into. "We will only visit Saigon this time," she had said mournfully. "That's where my family is. But I really want to see Hanoi."

And so the Vietnamese community keeps on groping for a new role in this transition period. Exiles such as Nguyen Trieu Dan believe the community's role will be more important than ever in the future. "We are a political force," insists Quang Luu. "The Communist authorities fear us. We can use that force to bring change." Luu also banks on the new generation. He quizzes me on my perception of the Vietnamese youth: How do they feel about communism? What do they dream of?

In Hanoi, an official once told me how surprised he had been by the type of questions Vietnamese-Australians had asked him during one of his visits. He felt they had let him off the hook easy. "They could have asked much better questions that would have forced me to admit the government's mistakes," he recalled.

I must admit some of the Vietnamese-Australian's attitudes puzzle me too. Take editor Anh for example. He is happy to say he now receives many newspapers published in Vietnam. His desk is covered with some of the country's most daring newspapers such as Truoi Tre and Lao Dong. "I read them and I reproduce excerpts from them in our paper with a comment," he explains, adding that those papers "are much better than before" and "they expose a lot of problems."

Still he refuses to sell them to his customers and has even found a way to circumvent the high cost of a foreign subscription by getting a friend in Vietnam to send the papers to him. "I have been asked to distribute those papers here," he recalls. "But I said no. I will only sell them when we have democracy." Anh sees no truth in my suggestion that selling those papers now would help give them a better financial base, and maybe a stronger voice at home.



A typical news stand: many Australia-based Vietnamese publications. Not a single one Vietnam-based.

The more I listen to Vietnamese-Australians, the more I find a strange twist to their argument against helping Vietnam develop. In Anh's book shop, in the living room of Nguyen Trieu Dan and the office of Quang Luu, I heard a new reason why the West should oppose Hanoi. "The Communists," it is said, are now trying to combine a free market with an authoritarian state, along the lines which have prove so popular with foreign investors in China. If Hanoi succeeds, it may end up replicating the ideological stance of the Saigon regime it fought so hard to defeat. For that reason the West should oppose the Hanoi regime. Beats me how history sometimes comes full circle.

Carole Beaulieu

Carole Beaulieu
San-Francisco, August 8th

Received in Hanover 8/11/94.

What if communism began to crumble soon after the fall of Saigon?

Peter Bird Martin
ICWA
4 West Wheelock Street
Hanover, NH 03755

Dear Peter,

Hanoi economist Dang Phong is a frail-looking man who laughs like an old Zen master and has the drinking and smoking habits of a Left Bank author from the 50's. If he wrote textbooks instead of editing the Hanoi-based Market and Price review, a publication of the Government Price Committee, economy would rhyme. "The Russian soul lives in me," says Phong to explain his lyrical ways. Now in his 50's, Phong speaks not only fluent Russian, but also fluent French and has begun to study English. As a young man, Phong entered Saigon with the People's Army. He was a reporter then. "I was impressed by the logistics of the Americans in the South," he recalls. "And I never forgot the heroism of their young men."

Today, Phong is a long way from the war. He sits on my left in a drab classroom of Macquarie University in Sydney. I am whispering in his ear the French translation of the economic discussion taking place in English between about 15 scholars and students doing research on contemporary Vietnam. As the General Secretary of the Association for the Study of Vietnam's Economic History, Phong is the distinguished guest of the workshop. In his over-large white shirt and his badly cut gray-streaked hair, he is a study in contrast with the new generation of well-groomed Vietnamese power brokers who have begun to appear at international conferences. But the man knows how to drop a bomb. "You could easily argue that the reforms began in 1976," he says. "It was a case of internal pressure, of corruption of orthodox Marxism, but we denied it."

Phong remembers the day he noticed an "informal market" developing within the centrally-planned economy of the communist capital. It was not in 1986, the year the Communist Party adopted *doi moi*, its renovation policy. It was not in 1981 either, another year often used to mark the beginning of reform. [That year the Party adopted a new contract system giving more freedom to farmers].

Phong noticed the change in 1976. During that year, directors of state-owned enterprises began to buy 2000 light bulbs instead of

---

Carole Beaulieu is an ICWA fellow writing about the countries of former French Indochina, with a focus on Vietnam.
