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Heinz Schütte

**Hundred Flowers in Vietnam**

**1955-1957**

**No. 22**

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## 1. Introduction

The Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) which emerged from the eight-year resistance war against the French colonial regime and the Geneva Convention on Indochina in 1954, was, soon after the return of the victorious troops of the People's Army to Hanoi, afflicted with two severe inner-political crises – a rural and an urban one whose latter, as will be shown, was at least partially fed by the former. The crisis in the countryside was the outcome of mistakes and errors committed during the land reform which had been urged forward since 1953 and which led to generalised fear, dissatisfaction and to peasant revolts in the provinces of Nghe An and Ha Tinh which were put down by the People's Army. The second crisis was a revolt of urban intellectuals whose most visible expression was the so-called Hundred Flowers or Humanism movement, *Nhan Van-Giai Pham*. This short-lived, exceptionally creative flowering shall in the following be delineated and put into its politico-historical context.<sup>1</sup>

The only comprehensive description of these events is the 1991 book by Georges Boudarel, *Cent Fleurs écloses dans la nuit du Vietnam*,<sup>2</sup> which did not become known beyond a small circle of experts. Shorter publications of the late 1950s and the 60s<sup>3</sup> as well as the book by Hoang Van Chi, *From Colonialism to Communism*<sup>4</sup>, all of which, at the time of their publication, are likely to have been read as ammunition in the cold war climate. In 1987 there appeared an outline by Hoang Giang in the Paris-based *Chroniques Vietnamiennes* under the title *La Révolte des Intellectuels Communistes au Viet-Nam en 1956*.<sup>5</sup>

I became acquainted with the Hundred Flowers movement when, in 1997, I read Boudarel's book and began interviewing francophone Vietnamese intellectuals in Hanoi as part of a study on cultural syncretisms. On the occasion of a further visit to Hanoi, I had Boudarel's book photocopied about 25 times for my interview partners. This got me onto politically ticklish territory which is to this day tabooed by official Vietnamese historiography. For my photocopies were handed on, photocopied again and initiated a discussion which gained me admittance to the circle of independent intellectuals which had so far not been accessible to me. As a result, I was able to make contact with the survivors of the dissidence and to record their recollections in long discussions.

Further, I availed myself of the archives of the former German Democratic Republic, especially those of the Central Committee of the SED and the Ministry of External Affairs which

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<sup>1</sup> Christopher Goscha has generously commented on an earlier, much longer version of this paper. I am grateful for his encouraging and critical remarks.

<sup>2</sup> Georges Boudarel, *Cent Fleurs écloses dans la nuit du Vietnam – Communisme et Dissidence 1954-1956*, Paris, 1991; Georges Boudarel, *Autobiographie*, Paris, 1991

<sup>3</sup> Bernard B. Fall, *Crisis in North Vietnam*, in: *Far Eastern Survey*, New York, January 1957, pp. 12-16; P. J. Honey, *Revolt of the Intellectuals in North Vietnam*, in: *The World Today*, vol. 13, no. 6, June 1957, pp. 250-260; Nguyen Dang Thuc, *An Intellectual views the Nhan-Van Affair*, in: *Asian Culture* 1958, vol. 1, no. 2; P. J. Honey, *Ho Chi Minh and the Intellectuals*, in: *Soviet Survey*, no. 28, 1959, pp. 19-24; Nhu Phong, *Intellectuals, Writers and Artists*, in: *The China Quarterly*, no. 9, 1962, pp. 47-62

<sup>4</sup> Hoang Van Chi, *From Colonialism to Communism. A Case History of North Vietnam*, New York, 1964. Hoa Mai (ed.), *The 'Nhan-Van' Affair*, published by The Vietnam Chapter of the Asian Peoples' Anti-Communist League, no year, no place (Saigon, 1958), contains translations from contributions to *Nhan Van*.

<sup>5</sup> Hoang Giang, *La Révolte des Intellectuels Communistes au Viet-Nam en 1956*, in: *Chroniques Vietnamiennes*, no. 2, Paris, 1987, pp. 12-15; this article has later appeared in English in: *The Vietnam Forum*, no. 13, 1990. See also: Georges Boudarel, *Intellectual Dissidence in the 1950s. The Nhan Van Giai Pham Affair*, in: *ibid.* And: Hirohide Kurihara, *Changes in the Literary Policy of the Vietnamese Workers' Party, 1956-1958*, in: *Indochina in the 1940s and 1950s*, edited by Takashi Shiraisi and Motoo Furuta, SEAsia Program, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York, 1992; Georges Boudarel/Nguyen Van Ky, *Hanoi 1936-1996. Du drapeau rouge au billet vert*, Paris, 1997, pp. 131-140; Heinz Schütte, *Kurzlebige Hundert Blumen in Vietnam 1955-1957*, in: *Internationales Asienforum*, Vol. 33 (2002), No. 3-4, pp. 271-301

contain valuable material on Vietnam and the events here under discussion.<sup>6</sup> Most of what I found in the archives has been confirmed by the interviews, and vice versa.

## 2. Anti-colonialism, national revolution and the Chinese influence

The men and (very few) women I have been able to talk with in Hanoi, were born between 1906 and 1930. They perceived Ho Chi Minh's declaration of independence of 2nd September 1945 as a moment of catharsis – a youthful awakening to national consciousness, determined to create a world of justice and equality, of prosperity and happiness. The joint experiences of the Resistance became the foundation myth and the essential ingredient of the community ideology of the new state.<sup>7</sup>

Ever since 1950 when the Vietnamese resistance had succeeded in driving the French away from the northern border,<sup>8</sup> which led to a joint frontier between the Chinese and the Vietnamese revolutions, Maoism made its appearance with its ideological rectification procedures (*chinh huan*). Thereupon quite a few intellectuals left the ranks of the resistance, although the majority considered this necessary for the success of the struggle against colonialism. Due to the communist victory in 1949, China enjoyed an immense prestige, and she did not only export ideology and advisers to the South, but also provided massive material help vital for the impoverished country and which allowed the Viet Minh forces to transform themselves from a guerilla movement into a real army. The Cold War was in full swing; while the Viet Minh received Chinese assistance, the USA – in renunciation of Roosevelt's anti-French policy – massively assisted the French war effort.<sup>9</sup>

In January 1950, the third plenum of the Vietnamese Communist Party officially signalled the turn of Vietnam to China<sup>10</sup> and to a class-orientated internal policy including the liquidation of « reactionary elements » inside the country. Chinese writings<sup>11</sup>, especially Mao's works, were translated into Vietnamese with the aim to apply Chinese methods of Marxism-Leninism-Maoism, of the revolution and thought reform in Vietnam. Thought reform courses for intellectuals were conducted in the maquis of Viet Bac ever since 1951. The liberation of the Vietnam-China border proved to be the decisive precondition for the launching of the inner-Vietnamese revolution.<sup>12</sup>

The land reform got underway on a grand scale in 1953 in order to mobilise the peasantry for the final assault on the French; together with the advance of the Viet Minh armies, the land reform also had slowly moved from the high north further south<sup>13</sup>. It was executed on the basis of Chinese landholding statistics, although conditions in Vietnam did not conform to those of the age-old enemy cousin. Not only there existed in Vietnam – and particularly in the North – overwhelmingly small and middle peasants,<sup>14</sup> but the majority of large landowners had long

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<sup>6</sup> The files of the *Staatssicherheit (Stasi)* of the GDR concerning Vietnam, however, fell victim to the shredder during the *Wende* of 1989/1990.

<sup>7</sup> see David G. Marr, *Vietnam 1945. The Quest for Power*, University of California Press, 1995, pp. 345 and 552, and Duong Thu Huong, *Au-delà des illusions*, Paris, 1996, p. 268/269

<sup>8</sup> Colonel Dang Van Viet, *La R. C. 4 Campagne des Frontières (1947-1950)*, Hanoi 1990

<sup>9</sup> As a result, France attempted to convince the USA (and the rest of the Western world) that the war in Indochina was not a *colonial* war but France's contribution to the attempts of the Western world to push back communism. See Bernard B. Fall, *The Two Viet-Nams*, New York and London, 1964, pp. 69/70, p. 225

<sup>10</sup> Hy V. Luong, *Revolution in the Village – Tradition and Transformation in North Vietnam, 1925-1988*, Honolulu, 1992, p. 158

<sup>11</sup> In May 1951, the German anti-fascist deserter from the Foreign Legion to the Viet Minh in Viet Bac, Rudolf Schröder alias Le Duc Nhan alias Kerkhof, read Liu Chao-chi's *On the Party* in English, and he commented on it in his 1950 diary. Fonds Maria Schröder (FMS)

<sup>12</sup> Hoang Van Chi, *From Colonialism to Communism*, op. cit., pp. 85/86

<sup>13</sup> see Joseph R. Starobin, *Eyewitness in Indo-China*, New York (1954), 1968, p. 91

<sup>14</sup> 98,2 % of the acreage under cultivation consisted of properties of 5 ha or less. See Fall, *The Two Viet-Nams*, op. cit., p. 308



since fled anyway. While the resistance was a united national effort composed of all classes against the colonial regime, the land reform was designed and practiced as a class struggle, stimulating hatred within a society which the Viet Minh had so far presented as a patriotic community, against all those not of peasant or working-class origin and, consequently, against those categorised (and endangered) as « reactionary elements ».

The victory of Dien Bien Phu did not lead to the unity of Vietnam but, due to the resolutions of the Geneva Conference on Indochina, the country remained divided: north of the 17th parallel a communist regime, and a capitalist one in the South. Yet Dien Bien Phu was, as Graham Greene has shown, the symbol of the impossibility and the end of European colonialism. My interview partners in Hanoi were drunk with victory, *ivre de victoire* – it had been *their* war and it was *their* victory, leading to *their* freedom. « The period was romantic », said the poet Huy Can (born 1920) who has never been a dissident but is by many considered a « revolutionary mandarin », and nostalgically he added: « One is a romantic because one is a patriot. »<sup>15</sup>

Thus, on completion of the national and political revolution in the North, the internal social and cultural revolution was launched. After the land reform, the struggle against the Hundred Flowers-Movement (*Nhan Van – Giai Pham*) which was centered on Hanoi, ended with the hegemony of the Party over the intellectual domain, over culture and ideology. Then, from 1958 to 1960, followed the so-called reform of capitalists and capitalism<sup>16</sup> (*cai tao tu san*), including small traders who exhibited a « tendency to bourgeois spontaneity ».<sup>17</sup> From 1945/46 onwards there had been a national united front for independence under the leadership of the Viet Minh, whereas class struggle was waged in the entire society as of 1953/54 – if not since 1950/51 – with the aim of establishing a marxist-leninist society.

The war of resistance against the French colonial regime had not only been conducted militarily but also ideologically, according to the motto adopted by Ho Chi Minh in his December 1951 letter to the « Painter Comrades »: « Arts and literature also constitute a front », and where he says: « Should there be anyone who thinks ‘Mr. Ho Chi Minh is conducting the arts onto the territory of politics’, then he would be correct. Because literature and the arts, just as any other activity, cannot stand aloof from economics and politics, but they are interdependent. »<sup>18</sup> In February 1957, the Central Committee of the Vietnamese Workers Party appealed to the 2nd Congress of Writers and Artists in these words: « Our people demands of our writers and artists to fulfill their duty as ‘engineers of the soul’ through the perfect creation of big ideas, noble sentiments, precious virtues and the banishment of bad ideas and sentiments and decadent morals. »<sup>19</sup> These ideas had already been developed by the general secretary and *maître penseur* of the Party, Truong Chinh (1907-1988), in his chapter on *Cultural Resistance* of 1947 as well as his more extensive report delivered at the Second National Cultural Conference held in the resistance stronghold of Viet Bac in July 1948, entitled *Marxism and Vietnamese Culture*<sup>20</sup> which, according to Nguyen Huu Dang (who had been close to Truong

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<sup>15</sup> Personal communication, Hanoi, 29. 11. 1997

<sup>16</sup> see the excellent unpublished paper by Nguyen Thi Ngoc Thanh, The reform of capitalists and capitalism in North Vietnam, Institute of Economics, Hanoi, September 1999

<sup>17</sup> Resolution des XIV. Plenums des Zentralkomitees der Partei der Arbeit Vietnams (November 1958), in: MfAA/A 8679, fiches 1 and 2, pag. 101

<sup>18</sup> Auswärtiges Amt, Berlin, Politisches Archiv-Bestand MfAA/A 8582, pag. 0180. In the following quoted as ‘MfAA’

<sup>19</sup> *ibid.*, pag. 040. See also Nguyen Dinh Thi, Kampf gegen Revisionismus in der Literatur und Kunst, in: Hoc Tap, No. 3, 1958. MfAA/A 8494, pag. 050-079

<sup>20</sup> Truong Chinh, *Marxism and Vietnamese Culture*. Report delivered at the Second National Cultural Conference, July 1948, in: *Selected Writings*, Hanoi, 1994, pp. 202-278; Truong Chinh, *Cultural Resistance* (1947), in: *ibid.*, pp. 121-126. Truong Chinh was the renovator and the systematiser of a Vietnamese cultural theory. He connects the Vietnamisation, popularisation and scientific character of culture with the national struggle against the Japanese and the French led by the CP. Not only does he show intellectuals of the early 1940s a way out of colonial humiliation, but, moreover, he incorporates them into the

Chinh ever since the 1930s when he was in charge of the party journal *Tin Duc*, i. e. ‘Information’) were already written in 1943 under the title *Les grandes lignes d’un mouvement culturel proposées par le Parti (De cuong van hoa moi)*.<sup>21</sup> This Action plan for a new culture proposed the motto of a national and scientific culture.<sup>22</sup>

The revolution, however, had not only begun in 1945, but its roots must be traced back to an earlier stage. And if we want to trace its beginnings, we do also need to look at the Indochinese environment and, apart from Thailand, particularly to China. It seems that in the 1930s, revolutionary influences from China and the Soviet Union were solidly engrained in the leading circle of the Indochinese Communist Party. From 1938 to 1941, for example, Nguyen Ai Quoc<sup>23</sup> was the Comintern’s representative in China where he worked as party secretary and then was in charge of culture and propaganda of an army unit<sup>24</sup>. At that time he had translated a Chinese text on the peasant question<sup>25</sup> which was followed by a treatise on the Long Resistance (in HCM’s works of 1941), namely Mao’s text on the Protracted War of May 1938 where the author declared that « The theory of the inevitable subjugation of China is false, but equally false is the theory of rapid victory ».<sup>26</sup>

The Vietnamese communists were thus familiar with Mao’s ideas on the revolutionary struggle. They would also have known his views on New Democracy (1940) and the role which intellectuals were supposed to play in it. In actual fact, Mao’s New Democracy postulate had in 1943 been taken up by Truong Chinh in the above-mentioned document, and it is here that he talked for the first time about culture as a front – apart from the economic and political front – on which communists had to fight. Vietnamese culture had to be national, scientific and popular, i. e. mass-oriented. And ‘popular’ means that the center of culture moves from the cities to the countryside, just as the struggle withdrew from the urban centers to the countryside. The war is the historic vehicle of the revolution of the arts; arts and letters leave the towns and cities, and instead chase darkness and backwardness (of feudalism and colonialism) out of the countryside so as to enlighten it with the civilising and progressive message of the new age, of the revolution. The cities remained in the hands of the imperialists, and they had become the embodiment of evil, of all that was rotten and decadent. The *new* cultural and societal forms were to emerge from the popular rural masses where the essence of Vietnamese culture was supposed to have been maintained. Cultural production - be it in the form of poetry, painting or music – has a morally and politically uplifting function and becomes indistinguishable from *propaganda* which aims at winning over the population for the communist cause, even though it may (in a first phase) come along in the guise of nationalism. To this end, the *Union for the salvation of Vietnamese national culture (Hoi Van hoa Cuu quoc)* was created in 1944 under the leadership of the long-standing collaborator of the General Secretary, Nguyen Huu Dang, to whom I shall come back later. The task of the Union was to ‘introduce’ intellectuals to the Viet Minh.

### 3. The enigmatic Nguyen Son

As mentioned above, Chinese influences can be detected much earlier than 1950, and I want to return once more to this point in connection with the notorious general Nguyen Son (1908-1956). Some consider him a military failure and a literary and cultural bletherer, to others he

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Viet Minh-alliance. See Kim Ninh, *Revolution, Politics and Culture in Vietnam, 1945-1965*, Yale University, 1996, unpublished PhD thesis, pp. 52 ff., 100 ff.

<sup>21</sup> Personal communication, Hanoi, 20. 10. 2000

<sup>22</sup> Nguyen Dinh Thi, MfAA/A 8582, pag. 081

<sup>23</sup> Alexander Woodside, *Community and Revolution in Modern Vietnam*, Boston, 1976, p. 224

<sup>24</sup> Pierre Brocheux, *Ho Chi Minh*, Paris, 2000, p. 178

<sup>25</sup> Dang Phong, personal communication in Tam Dao, I

<sup>26</sup> Mao Tse-Tung, *Ausgewählte Werke*, Band II, Peking 1968, pp. 127 ff.

is a stylite, a charismatic renovator of the Vietnamese intellectual scene. Who is this Nguyen Son?

As a 17 year old student he had fled to China in 1925 in order to evade the French police who were after him because of his involvement in a student movement. In China he was educated at Whampoa military academy, became a member of the Chinese communist party and its Central Committee and, as an officer, took part in the Long March. He organised the first theatre group of the Red Army and was in charge of a propaganda unit. At the request of the cadre-starved Communist Party of Indochina, he returned to Vietnam in late autumn of 1945 and became a member of the Central Committee. Yet the Chinese Central Committee only 'lent' him to the Vietnamese as both it and *Son the Chinese* feared that he might run into problems of political acclimatisation in his original fatherland, thus keeping his return to China open from the very beginning.<sup>27</sup> He subsequently became head of the 4th Interzone (Khu IV, northern Central Vietnam) with its headquarters at Quang Ngai until his return to China in 1951. Due to personal differences with general Giap and unovercomable political disagreements with the official line of the communist party of his seemingly difficult fatherland, he is said to have asked the Chinese communist party to take him back.<sup>28</sup> We know little about him, so until today he remains enigmatic, a myth, open to various causes and wild interpretations. His strength, Frey/Stern insists, lied in politics rather than in military craftsmanship.<sup>29</sup>

It seems that, ever since 1947, he had suggested or even carried out, *chinh huan* (rectification) courses.<sup>30</sup> In 1948/49, he translated several Mao texts, notably writings on the long resistance and on materialist dialectics.<sup>31</sup> His great passion, though, was theatre and literature. And although there seem to be no texts by himself, we know from oral reports that he constantly talked about these subjects, in public and in private, and that in this way he had become a stimulant, an inspiration and a patron for artists and writers.<sup>32</sup> "His audience watched him spellbound as Arabs would the story-teller."<sup>33</sup> The courses on Arts and Literature for the Resistance (*Van Nghe Khang Chieu*) which he inspired are to this day remembered as highlights on the way to a revolutionary cultural renewal. Through him, Maoism avant la lettre arrived in the sphere of culture, a smooth and exciting appeal to the young to dedicate themselves to the new, the revolutionary, to embrace adventure and the people and the dream of a morrow which had never existed before.<sup>34</sup>

Today, some insist that they were wise to his tricks and knew from the very outset he was a hard-core Maoist who interpreted Mao's Yenan ideas<sup>35</sup> of the early 40s,<sup>36</sup> that he was a blusterer. For most, though, in a transfiguring recollection, he has remained a renovator who encouraged his audience but would never impose his ideas, and in this way he became retrospectively an intellectual door-opener, the mythical counter-model to the dictatorial To Huu (see below). His early death is likely to have contributed to the evasiveness of his impact.

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<sup>27</sup> Ferry Stern, *Ist es auch Wahnsinn....*, unpublished manuscript, n. d., p. 860 (This is the original, 1216-page manuscript of Ernst Frey, *Vietnam, mon amour – Ein Wiener Jude im Dienst von Hô Chi Minh*, hg. von Doris Sottopietra, Wien, 2001)

<sup>28</sup> Stern/Frey, op. cit., p. 1143. According to the same source, he was then readmitted to his position in the CCP yet was severely criticized by his Chinese comrades for his opposition to Giap and to the Vietnamese Central Committee. Ibid., p. 1168. Several of my Vietnamese interlocutors in Hanoi related that he was charged with lack of revolutionary discipline.

<sup>29</sup> Stern/Frey, op. cit., p. 1089

<sup>30</sup> see Hoang Van Chi, op. cit., p. 136

<sup>31</sup> Interview with Ho Si Bang in Hanoi, 16/11/2001

<sup>32</sup> see: *Mon hoc va giang vien* (Studienfächer und Dozenten), ca. 1948, Khu IV, Quelle: Ng. Xuan Sanh

<sup>33</sup> Stern/Frey, op. cit., p. 860. - And the historian Dao Hung, then a secondary school student, remembered: "Il a parlé avec nous, les lycéens, à notre niveau de connaissances, à Tay Hoa." » Personal communication, Hanoi, 17 October 2001

<sup>34</sup> see Chu Ngoc, Nguyen-Son. *Nguoi di dau trong duong loi Van nghe rong rai* (Nguyen Son, the pioneer of a liberal line in literature and the arts), in: *Nhan Van*, no. 5, 20/11/1956

<sup>35</sup> Dao Hung, 17. 10. 2001. Stern/Frey called him an "exponent" of Mao's guerrilla tactics, op. cit., p. 883

<sup>36</sup> Le Dat, 2. 11. 2001

Apart from that he was an excentric, a daredevil, a lady's man, conscious of his power, close to the people and sporting a Clark Gable moustache, a Robin Hood who smoked forbidden cigarettes. Such characters are scarce among disciplined stalinist communists and they are therefore bewitching, firing the imagination, so that not a few poets and artists after 1954 would refer to him as a liberal and a humanist among the communist leaders.<sup>37</sup>

What nowadays is considered Maoist ideas or historical dialectics in literary critique, was at the time perceived as a bombshell of modernity, as an antithesis of bourgeois literary criticism with which the young intellectuals of the time had grown up under French colonialism. Nguyen Son's literary criticism – and especially his analysis of the *Kieu* – were identified with the critique of Confucian society, and suddenly they saw the world with new eyes. He contrasted the Freudian interpretation of the *Kieu* with a materialist one which was received as an illumination, leading the way towards material reality and the people. Under the influence of such trends, not a few urban intellectuals started to move towards a populist-utopian version of the revolution: They demanded a “new culture” which was neither Confucian nor French. Nguyen Son's direct sphere of influence, the Khu IV, was a unique field of discussion for this new culture which had not yet seen the light of day, and there were in his Interzone some of the later dissidents such as Dao Duy Anh, Chu Ngoc and (the ‘Trotskyist’) Truong Tuu, (Nguyen) Si (Sy) Ngoc and Nguyen Tien Lang<sup>38</sup> but also Dang Thai Mai...

#### 4. Writers and artists in the Resistance

During the resistance, artists and writers were cadres in the service of the revolution; they belonged to the intelligentsia and they were to be the vanguard of the socialist tomorrow. According to Truong Chinh's *Cultural Resistance* of 1947, the cultural front aims at the elimination of the outdated, obscurantist and backward modes of thought and action. Cultural activity becomes propaganda; cultural workers “must aim at welding our people into one bloc, in support of the government, with firm confidence in national salvation, not losing heart when faced with difficulties and hardships.”<sup>39</sup> The resolution of cultural and ideological questions was considered the prerequisite for military success and economic development – ideology therefore is of the uppermost importance.

Consequently, in the People's Army, there was a large group of writers and artists most of whom, before the outbreak of war in December 1946, had been educated in the Franco-Indochinese secondary schools. They accepted the discipline and the deprivations of the Viet Minh-led war and justified their choice by what official historiography calls “Patriotism” to which they syncretistically added French values as their own ones. Many of them had moved into the war in the name of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the Revolution of 1789, the Rights of Man and the Citizen, the Republic, and of Democracy. « Ils se sentent en parfaite communion avec la masse qui se réveille et qui lutte »,<sup>40</sup> Dang Thai Mai would write in 1961, and this is a fine example of the attempt of the North to monopolise the discourse and the interpretation of nationalist, i.e. anti-colonial history. As mentioned above, professor Dang Thai Mai had been a player in the cultural field of the 4th Interzone and therefore close to Nguyen Son; we can only surmise as to the ideological influence Son might have had on him.

Such famous New Poetry representatives of the early 1940s as Huy Can (born 1920) and Xuan Dieu (1916-1985) – romantically lost, painfully suffering from the abandonment of the individualist, waiting to find the redeemer – were reborn by the Party, the Viet Minh and the

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<sup>37</sup> Hoang Cam, 25. 10. 2001

<sup>38</sup> see Nguyen Tien Lang, *Les Chemins de la Révolte*, Paris, 1953

<sup>39</sup> Truong Chinh, *Cultural Resistance*, op. cit., pp. 121-124. On a training school for popular letters and arts in the Viet Bac, see Léo Figueres, *Je reviens du Viet-Nam libre*, Paris, 1950, pp. 55-58

<sup>40</sup> Dan(g) Thai Mai, *La Littérature Vietnamienne*, in: *Europe*, no. 387/388, July-August 1961, p. 91

revolution and unconditionally immersed themselves into the new community which emerged in the movement.<sup>41</sup> Yet this was not the case for all intellectuals. The poets Hoang Cam (born 1922), Tran Dan (1924-1997) and Le Dat (born 1929) or scholars such as Phan Khoi (1887-1960), Dao Duy Anh (1904-1988) and Tran Duc Thao (1917-1993) have never been just and only unquestioning party automats fed with, and uncritically regurgitating the right ideological slogans. Although they did for certain periods not resist the collective fanaticism which had gripped the movement, they retained their contradictoriness and their individuality.

In actual fact, however, most of the later dissidents were members of the Party or worked closely with it or its leading representatives, and often in high positions. Le Dat was a private secretary of party chief Truong Chinh from 1949 to 1951 and, from 1952 onwards, secretary of the Party's ideological bureau. In 1951 he organised re-education courses for intellectuals.<sup>42</sup> His friend Hoang Cam (who has never been a member of the Party, though) served as head of the Viet Bac artistic group in 1951/52 under general Chu Van Tan. In June 1952 he was appointed head of the army's department of arts and letters by general Nguyen Chi Thanh<sup>43</sup>, at the time director of the political commissariat of the People's Army. This artistic group comprised more than 200 men and women. Moreover, for the next two years, the famous general would meet regularly with the poet and some of his friends in a kind of private academy to further his artistic and literary education.<sup>44</sup> The novelist Phung Quan (1932-1995) used to be a liaison agent between the army units under general Ha Van Lan. His ever obstinate and belligerent colleague Tran Dan who in those days in the circle of friends was known as the « pirate chief »<sup>45</sup>, had first worked in one of the Viet Minh's information services before joining the army in 1948 and was involved in the first literary and artistic group of the armed forces.<sup>46</sup> In 1950-51 Tran Dan was in charge of a campaign for the re-education of intellectuals through manual labour,<sup>47</sup> while he would later on become editor-in-chief of the Army's literary journal *Van* where he cooperated with Vu Cao and Tu Bich Hoang.

During the war, not a few of these urban intellectuals married young women from poor peasant backgrounds,<sup>48</sup> amongst them Hoang Cam and Le Dat. They thus demonstrated their wholehearted devotion to the revolution and the rural masses because the private, the national and the political did no longer belong to separate spheres but, in keeping with the dominating ideology and the emotional fever of the times, became submerged in one inseparable whole in a passionate, youthful adventure. Devotion to the enlightening Party was not always free from elements of messianism. And marriage, especially with a member of the previously down-trodden classes where the essence of Vietnamese culture had ostensibly been preserved, had

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<sup>41</sup> Neil L. Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam*, University of California Press, 1995, pp. 189, 209, 268/269. See also Peter Zinoman, Introduction to *Dumb Luck*, a novel by Vu Trong Phung, Ann Arbor, 2002, pp. 18-20. And see, for example, the portrait of the poet (Nguyen) Xuan Sanh, in: Franz Faber, *Rot leuchtet der Song Cai*, Berlin, 1955, pp. 142-144. In the short story *Dans la Jungle* from 1948, the writer Nam Cao who was killed in 1951, in Georges Boudarel's translation, said: « Je pensais vraiment trop à moi. Après la révolution d'Août, je mesurais un peu plus chaque jour que mon 'moi' ne signifiait pratiquement rien. Il prenait juste quelque valeur quand il arrivait à s'harmoniser avec les hommes qui m'entouraient. Souvent il fallait s'oublier, oublier son nom et sa réputation pour pouvoir être utile. A quoi bon se démenner pour chercher à se faire un nom dans l'histoire? L'histoire est une prise bien plus grande. Elle est l'oeuvre des masses. Penser au grand nombre plutôt qu'à soi. Je fis et je fais encore beaucoup d'efforts pour prendre de l'intérêt aux travaux modestes et obscurs, mais utiles... ». *Chi Phéo*, Hanoi, 1960, p. 184

<sup>42</sup> « C'était lui qui donnait des directives à nous autres dans le sens du Maoïsme », Nguyen Dinh Thi told me in Hanoi on 26/3/2002

<sup>43</sup> In 1952, the Party introduced the « two-commander system » of joint military and political commanders in the People's Army, and it was devised and implemented chiefly by general Nguyen Chi Than. Douglas Pike, *PAVN – People's Army of Vietnam*, Novato, Calif., 1986, pp. 158-159

<sup>44</sup> Personal communication, Hanoi 1999/2001

<sup>45</sup> Personal communication Le Dat, Hanoi 11. 10. 2000; see Nhu Phong, *op. cit.*, pp. 52-53

<sup>46</sup> Boudarel, *Cent Fleurs écloses...*, *op. cit.*, pp. 49/50

<sup>47</sup> Personal communication Hoang Cam, Hanoi 5. 10. 2000; see also Kim Ninh, *op. cit.*, pp. 205/206

<sup>48</sup> see the novel by Duong Thu Huong, *Histoire d'amour racontée avant l'aube*, La Tour d'Aigues, éditions de l'aube, 1991. Most of them only divorced after *Doi Moi* (1986) – this was pointed out to me by Tran Duy in Hanoi on 17/10/2001

therefore become a highly symbolical act in the revolutionary process. The journalist and political activist, Nguyen Huu Dang who never got married and who had organised the independence celebrations for Ho Chi Minh on 2nd September 1945 and in November 1946 was in charge of the First national cultural congress in Hanoi, was later entrusted by Truong Chinh with recruiting intellectuals for the resistance through the Cultural society of national liberation (*Van hoa cuu quoc*) which lasted until 1948. He became the Inspector General for People's Education and in this capacity conducted the campaign against illiteracy<sup>49</sup> through which he contributed to the regime's assuring itself the monopoly over knowledge and access of knowledge. Another 'example' is the painter Phan Ke An: In 1948 he was commissioned by Truong Chinh to spend several weeks with Ho Chi Minh in Viet Bac so as to make sketches and portraits of the president. And 52 years later he related the encounter as an idyll in which the young student met his master, a master of morals and proper conduct.<sup>50</sup>

But not all was unambiguous submission and blind devotion to the task they had shouldered. Because even during the war, artists and writers in the ranks of the resistance experienced unfair treatment, and this was surely all the more so since Maoism set in. They originated overwhelmingly from the (petty)bourgeois urban classes, and in the harsh milieu of the resistance where everybody tried to be more than politically correct, they were at best tolerated as « court jesters » but otherwise systematically discriminated against by the « cultural cadres » vis-à-vis artists from proletarian and peasant backgrounds. This was emphasised by a mid-1956 report by Nguyen Dinh Thi (1924-2003), then editor-in-chief of *Van Nghe*, the journal of the association of writers and artists, and who, for given reasons, self-critically related that whenever a writer would ask leave to write, he would be told: « Indeed you must be suffering from bourgeois liberalism – from individualism. »<sup>51</sup> And, as was underlined by Nguyen Tuan, president of the Association of writers and artists: « The dominating view was that only the manual worker, i.e. the worker or the peasant as long as they were soldiers, could be the people's artists. »<sup>52</sup>

On the occasion of the screening of a film about the declaration of independence of 2nd September 1945, Rudolf Schröder alias Le Duc Nhan, one of the high-ranking German intellectuals in the Viet Minh, on 5 April 1950 scribbled the following comments in his frail little diary: “The yearning for the city, their capital, Hanoi, became distinctly perceptible through the intensity of applause each time a street, a house... could be recognised. ... I was most impressed by the excited applause for the female groups of the parade, particularly the groups of girls from the Hanoi bourgeoisie, easily recognisable by the characteristic style of their clothes and the light colours of their festive dresses. The acclamation was repeated unabated with each new group, and it was clearly much longer than for the President and much more lively and primordial at that. In the darkness where nobody feared being observed by the others, all was neighing and howling. A collective sexual frenzy of distateful primitiveness.” And he continued: “These youngsters – Confucians, repressers, abstainers – also will want to live when they get back. I'm wondering what that will look like.”<sup>53</sup>

With the return to Hanoi in 1954 and a sudden decrease of tension and iron discipline, therefore, the moment for stock-taking had come at last. For many, the goal longed-for over many years had been attained, and for some it was the time to embark on the second leg of the struggle for a new society because after the flush of victory they woke up in a social reality they had not envisaged. They had so far accepted the leadership of the regime as the only one

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<sup>49</sup> Personal communication Nguyen Huu Dang, Hanoi, 30. 10. 2000

<sup>50</sup> Conversation with Phan Ke An, Hanoi 2 and 14 October 2000

<sup>51</sup> Zur kulturellen Situation, Report of GDR embassy in Hanoi, no date – probably mid-1956; in: MfAA/A 8420, pag. 020

<sup>52</sup> *ibid.*, pag. 017. See also interview with Tran Duy, 17.10. 01: cot can

<sup>53</sup> Fonds Maria Schröder

that had been able to rid them of colonialism. Probably most of them had never considered Marxism as the model of a post-colonial order – unless they had identified communism or marxism with the ideals of the enlightenment or with Jean-Jacques Rousseau. The historian Dao Hung (born 1932) told me, that he had joined the Party as a very young man during the resistance war. I asked him what it had meant for him to become a communist, and he replied: « At the time, communism was just like patriotism – it meant anti-colonialism, and all decent people were communists. »<sup>54</sup> The latter part is certainly a simplification and post-facto rationalisation, but I think it is true to say that most intellectuals of the Resistance were anti-colonialists, nationalists, patriots, including those with anti-communist leanings from urban, educated or land-owning families who frequently came from the confucian literati elite.

*Ivre de victoire*, « drunk with victory », the poet Hoang Cam was charged with organising the victory celebrations, and intellectuals more and more demanded that they be given their share as citizens in the creation of the new post-colonial, post-war order. Hoang Cam spoke for many an ex-resistant when he declared: « Seven-eight years of resistance war have polished me like a billiard-ball; now the hour has come to let my prickles grow again. »<sup>55</sup>

Yet Hoang Cam and his comrades were soon to realise that during the years of war, an omnipotent party-state had established itself. It was present by its direct agents in those spheres in which previously there had been room for negotiation between citizens and mandarins, between literati and monks who had acted as mediators with considerable leeway in the social and political spheres and among different interest groups. The Party was equally drunk with victory, and it saw itself on top of the world after the triumph over the French; it was not going to tolerate any compromises in the North on the pretext of the not-yet achieved reunification with the South. Also, due to the eradication of « reactionary elements » in the purges of party, state and mass organisations which had accompanied the land reform, the peasantry which had gained victory far away from the urban centers, had come to power in Hanoi.<sup>56</sup> The philosopher Tran Duc Thao in 1956 talked about « the hooliganisation of the peasantry », <sup>57</sup> and this expressed both the traditional elite's attitude towards the rural masses and the shock experienced by them over the apparent abolition of their seemingly eternal superiority.

The success of the Viet Minh can not only be explained by its (reckless) ability to exclude other anti-colonial groups and to present itself as the guarantor of success but, moreover, from the fact that in 1945/46 it represented a large majority and the determination of a humiliated people to resist. The Viet Minh had found the language which gave words to colonial violations and, more importantly still, it was capable of organising the resistance. The leadership at the time knew how to link the myth of Vietnam's cultural uniqueness with her ostensibly eternal patriotism. The intellectuals had devoted themselves to this project which came to be confirmed in the ritual of the 2nd September 1945 and which made the Viet Minh the representative of the Vietnamese people. In 1954, on the other hand, the situation was quite different: What everybody had longed for had been achieved, namely independence. The counter-myths which had been neglected during the war, could once more begin to speak up – the values assimilated from French education, the popular buddhist traditions and the hidden (an-archic) taoist values of thought and conduct which had always opposed the rigidity of confu-

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<sup>54</sup> Personal communication, Hanoi, 12. 10. 2000. « Je ne crois pas qu'il y ait eu plus de cinquante vrais communistes convaincus dans toute l'Indochine en 1945. En revanche, pour qui voulait l'indépendance nationale du Vietnam, il n'y avait pas d'autre choix que de soutenir le Vietminh. » Viet Tran, Vietnam: J'ai choisi l'exil, Paris, 1979, p. 18

<sup>55</sup> Boudarel, Cent Fleurs écloses, op. cit., pp. 23/24

<sup>56</sup> see, for example, the novel by Duong Thu Huong, Paradise of the Blind

<sup>57</sup> Tran Duc Thao, Freedom and Society, in: Giai Pham Mua Dong, Hanoi, 1956, quoted in: Hoang Van Chi, From Colonialism to Communism, op. cit., p. 123

cianism and the *raison d'état*<sup>58</sup>. Marxism had proven its credibility as the instrumental ideology of resistance, but its cultural one-dimensionality had not succeeded to exterminate the myths and the intellectual and popular cultures of Vietnam, including the French heritage of the educated strata, in favour of its hegemony. Many intellectuals therefore rejected the authoritarian demands of the Party which threatened to smother them. They had read André Gide's *Retour de l'URSS* when it first came out in 1936, and some had still been able to lay hands on George Orwell's *Animal Farm* published in 1945. Those messages were, finally, not lost on them.

But for nothing in the world they would have disavowed their contribution to and their performance in the resistance. When Huy Can had said that "The period was romantic", he had spoken for most of his colleagues, albeit the lessons drawn might be fundamentally different. The poet Vu Can (1928-1999), formerly chief editor of the official propaganda organ, pertinently accepted the contradictions in himself when he wrote the poem *La Condition* in 1992:

Jeune je vivais dans l'humiliation  
Frustré de ma propre patrie comme j'étais  
Elle pesait lourd la colonisation  
Vietnamien elle m'avait fait sujet français

A la révolution j'allais adhérer  
Tant pour laver ma honte que celle des miens  
L'indépendance a redonné la dignité  
L'ex-sujet français devient objet vietnamien<sup>59</sup>

## 5. Nguyen Chi Thanh, Tran Dan and the 32 points

During the drizzly and melancholy winter months of 1954-1955, a group of journalists, writers and artists, members of the People's Army's Arts and Letters Bureau, came together to discuss, and eventually demand, an ideological and cultural re-orientation. The North Vietnamese army of those days has been described as « a school of democracy »<sup>60</sup> because it would continue critical debates throughout the war which, if this is correct, would be pursued with a growing sense of urgency under conditions of peace.

Does this mean that the Party's hold on intellectuals in the Army was weak, or does it mean that the Party of those days was not entirely *gleichgeschaltet*, i.e. unified ideologically?<sup>61</sup> There were in the army throughout the war all those conflicting elements and representatives of ideological persuasions which, after Dien Bien Phu when the revolution was to cement its power over political and social institutions, should burst open, soon to find their battleground in the theatre of social revolution. Outside the army, the pursuit of a cultural opening could not be restrained either, and there existed an intricate network of close personal relations in the intimate village circle of North Vietnamese intellectuals between army and civilian life.

Some of the poets who congregated during that winter had known each other from the circle of their symbolist journal, *L'Enfer*, in 1946, and they were influenced by Verlaine and Rim-

<sup>58</sup> For a revealing comparison of an ensemble of folk worship and the high tradition of religion which together make up the religious and ethical fabric of a given society with « a good deal of trafficking between the two pantheons », see Amitav Ghosh, *In an Antique Land – History in the guise of a traveller's tale*, New York, 1992, pp. 251-252

<sup>59</sup> Vu Can, *Frissons d'Hérésie – Poèmes*, published in photocopied form in 12 copies by the author, Hanoi 1998, p. 59. Two weeks before his death on 17th May 1999, Vu Can said to me in his characteristically ironic melancholy: "J'ai 50 au Parti Communiste et 25 ans de diabète – qu'est-ce qui est le pire selon toi?" Conversation with Vu Can, Hanoi, 3. 5. 1999; see also *Frissons d'Hérésie*, pp. 129/130

<sup>60</sup> Boudarel, *Cent Fleurs écloses*, op. cit., p. 97

<sup>61</sup> Thanks to Christopher Goscha for his pertinent remarks in this respect.



baud. « We're a gang of homeless ones, lost, wandering around, by mistake reborn in the hour of the fading stars. »<sup>62</sup> And one could well argue that these people had at no point reneged on their individuality<sup>63</sup> which had been shaped by their 'liberal' education in the 1930s and early 40s, although they had at times fettered their energy and their spirits to the almost hysterical will to outdo any past. One of them, the poet and writer Tran Dan, who at the time was working in the cultural department of the army under the general and political commissar Tran Do, was sent to China to write the script for a film on the battle of Dien Bien Phu. There he fell to loggerheads with the commissar assigned to him who did not only keep watch over the political conduct of his charge, but apparently was determined to have the last word in artistic questions according to the political line of the party as well.<sup>64</sup> This experience is likely to have contributed to Tran Dan's rebelliousness in the events soon to come. The assertion that in China Tran Dan had come into contact with the ideas of the liberal marxist literary critic Hu Feng and that China, implicitly, had been the spiritual godfather of the Vietnamese dissidence, is very unlikely and impossible to prove.<sup>65</sup>

Tran Dan's experience in China, the political leading-strings applied by his authoritarian watchdog, coupled with the Army poets' and artists' life under stringent military discipline which they did no longer consider justified after the restoration of peace, appear to have been major causes for the outbreak of dissent. And it means that the Party's battle for intellectual hegemony was anything but won in 1955-1956.<sup>66</sup>

In the magazine *Hoc Tap* (Study) appeared in 1958 – i.e. shortly after the events to be presented in the following – a long report written by the poet, composer and writer Nguyen Dinh Thi (1924-2003) who was then general secretary of the Association of Vietnamese Writers and Artists, under the title *Against Revisionism in Literature*. Its German translation is kept in the archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the German Democratic Republic.<sup>67</sup> This document contains the only archival indication concerning the group of writers and artists in the army which for the very first time voiced critique of the organisation and content of the DRV's cultural policy. At first, their critique was restricted to cultural and artistic work in the ranks of the army. According to Nguyen Dinh Thi, there emerged « in the army around Tran Dan, Tu Phac and others, a group of writers and artists who demanded the foundation of an independent association of writers and artists free from any political and organisational direction of the army. The false standpoints were smashed consequent upon a struggle that took several months but for the time being, the bourgeois ideology in the conceptions of Le Dat or Tran Dan remained hidden from the public. »<sup>68</sup> The first part of the quotation is a factual observation (except that Le Dat was not a member of the army), whereas the second can not be accepted as such. Because the authorities succeeded neither in smashing the « false standpoints » of the reformers, nor did their conceptions (which were by no means always very « bourgeois ») remain hidden from the public.

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<sup>62</sup> Boudarel, *Cent Fleurs écloses*, op. cit., p. 49

<sup>63</sup> see Kim Ninh, op. cit., part II: The construction of the New State, 1954-1956, p. 230

<sup>64</sup> According to oral information in Hanoi and in Paris, the political commissar was Hoang Xuan Tuy, who later became director of the Polytechnical School in Hanoi and Vice-Minister for Higher Education.

<sup>65</sup> see Boudarel, *Cent Fleurs écloses*, op. cit., pp. 52 ff, 87, 156 ff. Early in March 2001 I asked Boudarel as to what he and Tran Dan had known by 1955 on Hu Feng, and he replied: « Rien », and he then added: « Je me suis trompé ». See also Kim Ninh, op. cit., p. 231; William J. Duiker, *Ho Chi Minh*, New York, 2000, p. 489. On Hu Feng: Merle Goldman, *Literary Dissent in Communist China*, Harvard University Press, 1967, as well as her *Hu Feng's Conflict with the Communist Authorities*, in: *The China Quarterly*, vol. 12, 1960; Roderick MacFarquhar, *The Hundred Flowers*, London, 1960

<sup>66</sup> It would be most interesting to know more about the role played at the time by general Tran Do.

<sup>67</sup> MfAA/ A 8494, fiche 1, pag. 050-079. The concept 'revisionism' has been applied to the Hanoi dissidence only since 1957; the concept emerged in reaction to the XXth Congress of the CPSU in 1956 and was thus not current in Vietnam in 1954/55.

<sup>68</sup> *ibid.*, pag. 051

What then is Nguyen Dinh Thi talking about? Tran Dan and his friends Tu Phac, Hoang Cam, Do Nhuan, Truc Lam, Hoang Tich Linh and others had drawn up a catalogue of 32 points entitled *Proposals for a cultural policy* which had been edited by Tran Dan. Instead of passing them on to the competent authorities through official channels, they had asked general Nguyen Chi Thanh to suspend the programme of one of their regular get-togethers and instead listen to and discuss their proposals. To this he agreed, and the memorable meeting took place in Hanoi in February 1955 in Thanh's private residence. It seems that the writers and artists had no doubt that in the person of Nguyen Chi Thanh they had a supporter of their claims, and they were equally certain to find sympathetic encouragement – or at least tolerance – with generals Tran Do and Le Liem. Apart from general Thanh and the complete circle of teachers<sup>69</sup>, there were two high military men present, namely Le Quang Dao, head of the army office for education and information, and his deputy, Vo Huong Cuong.

The 32 points have never been published, and there is no written record. Participants have related to me in Hanoi that Tran Dan read slowly from his handwritten notes and that Thanh listened attentively until point 14 had been presented. At that moment, to the extreme consternation of all, Nguyen Chi Thanh exploded with fury, violently banging the table, jumping up and accusing the assembly of bourgeois liberalism and of being infected with the sugary bullets of capitalism. He stormed out of the room – relations between the artists and the general were henceforth broken off, and the attempt to enter into discussions on a cultural reorientation with the army authorities, with the Party and government, had failed.

Were the poets, writers and artists really so naive and politically innocent as not to recognise the hard-core political commissar behind the affable facade of Nguyen Chi Thanh who, as the man of the party in the army, could not possibly accept demands which contradicted the party's platform on culture? They seem to have concluded that Thanh had undergone an abrupt change of ideology and that he had been hit by the bullets that had come from the northern neighbour. Had they assumed that Maoism had only been a tactical means in the struggle against colonialism and that it would be abandoned once the war was over? The question needs to be asked, though, if there had been any sympathies for the reformers on the part of military leaders, as is sometimes maintained. General Giap has to this day remained silent on the matter, although one of his close collaborators, the political commissar of the battle of Dien Bien Phu, Le Liem, did in fact, on behalf of the Politbureau, negotiate with the men who had strayed from the right path during the hot summer of 1956 so as to bring them back into the fold. Le Liem and Giap, just as Tran Do, were soon to be accused of Revisionism.<sup>70</sup> My impression is that the level of *presumed* tolerance and sympathy for a cultural and artistic reorientation on the part of the North Vietnamese Party, state and army leadership, must be defined in the light of the revisionism debate which blew up with the XXth Congress of the CPSU. Thereupon the span of what was politically and culturally possible in the Eastern bloc at the time between Maoism and Soviet revisionism à la Nikita Chrushev, became evident.<sup>71</sup> By no means there was in the Vietnamese leadership at that stage any inclination to extend a helping hand to a pluralist cultural policy, in other words: a freeing of culture from its political, military and economic functions.

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<sup>69</sup> This circle comprised the novelist Thanh Tinh, the poet Vu Cao and his brother, the writer Vu Tu Nam, the poet Phung Quan, the painter Mai Van Hien, the composers Do Nhuan, Luong Ngoc Trac, Van An and Doan Nho as well as the writers, poets and journalists Cao Nhi, Phac Van, Tu Phac and, of course, Hoang Cam. See also Kim Ninh, *op. cit.*, p. 285. On general Thanh, see Bui Tin, *1945-1999 Vietnam – La Face Cachée du Régime*, Paris, 1999, pp. 86-87, and Georges Boudarel, *Cent Fleurs écloses*, *op. cit.*, pp. 98-100

<sup>70</sup> In 1999, at the age of 86, Tran Do was excluded from the Party after having put his demands for an opening and for reforms of the regime into the Internet – after many years of bidding for his proposals behind closed doors, he went public, thus overstepping the Party's level of tolerance. He died in August 2002.

<sup>71</sup> Over the following 20 years, this split between China and the Soviet Union was to determine, in manifold ups and downs and in floating alliances, the internal and external policies of the DRV. On this aspect, the GDR archival material gathered yet so far not exploited, is most revealing.

The demands of Tran Dan and his friends comprised essentially three areas: First, the restitution of responsibility for arts and literature to writers and artists; second, the establishment of a department for literature and the arts within the army which was to be attached to the (civilian) federation for literature and the arts and which would not be subordinate to the control of the political general commissariat's propaganda and education department; third, the abolition of military regulations applied to the army's department for arts and literature.<sup>72</sup>

Tran Dan submitted these demands in the name of the collective. He pleaded for a realism informed by the social and individual truths and demanded that neither a programme, nor a guiding principle should ever be allowed to become an immutable model. « Realism », he proposed, « encourages a hundred schools to unfold, both in content and in form.» Accusing the political cadres to smother creativity and the arts, he concluded that the writer should not write so as to satisfy the wishes of the department of propaganda and education, and that the « revolution does not need flatterers who fawn political programmes, ruminating hatred of the enemy and patriotism, nor does it need shamans who celebrate its cult, deceitfully beating their cymbals and chanting their repulsive litanies... In our literature there is at present much artificiality (and even hypocrisy)... The writer comes forward with a frame and he forces reality into it.... Why do we, for example, not write about the office? Or about love? When we write about love, then it is a matter of sacrificing oneself for the fatherland... Why are only peasants and workers worthy to be portrayed? » So he insisted: « We want to talk openly and honestly and we want to say everything. »<sup>73</sup>

The reformers objected to a socialism in which the leninist party held sway over all aspects of society, including the most personal affairs of an individual's life, insisting that « Politics cannot control literature and the arts. »<sup>74</sup> They seemed to be anticipating the Spring of Prague, wishing to portray reality in its diversity and in its contradictoriness because « everyone carries in himself an element of the facets of reality: of men, of stories, of facts... Every soldier, every cadre, every writer carries in himself a... novel. »<sup>75</sup> Their great literary influences were the French symbolists (Verlaine, Rimbaud) and Majakowski.

In my encounters with the surviving actors of those events it was always pointed out that what they wanted was diversity, independent debate and organisational relaxation *within* the existing socialist order, and that their demands were not levelled at party or government. This is borne out by a report from GDR ambassador Pfützner who gives an account of the situation at the end of 1955: «After the restoration of peace (Geneva Conference on Indochina of 1954), artists of all branches expected a decisive change and were hoping for support from government and party. They found themselves in all types of jobs and activities. They had become administrative cadres or organising officials or had remained army cadres. In the army, for example, they were subject to strict military discipline which would not allow them any artistic work and which frequently had a mortifying and humiliating effect on them. For example, just like any other soldier, they have to go to bed at 9 o'clock at night so they have no opportunity to devote at least a few hours of the night to their art. In other governing bodies and organisations, where artists time and again demanded that they be granted the indispensable preconditions for their work, they invariably met with bureaucratic incomprehension. – This is what the situation was like about a year ago when there emerged among writers and artists a movement which loudly expressed its discontent. »<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Nhu Phong, op. cit., p. 57

<sup>73</sup> Boudarel, *Cent Fleurs écloses*, op. cit., pp. 89-92; Boudarel et Nguyen Van Ky, op. cit., pp. 132-136

<sup>74</sup> Nhu Phong, op. cit., p. 57

<sup>75</sup> Boudarel, *Cent Fleurs écloses*, op. cit., p. 93

<sup>76</sup> Botschafter Pfützner, Oppositionelle Bewegungen der Schriftsteller und Künstler gegen die Politik des ZK der Lao-Dong-Partei in den Fragen der Literatur und Kunst, November 1956, in: MfAA/A 8420, pag. 031

With their 32 demands, the artists and writers in the army were the first ones to formulate an alternative to the cultural policy of the Party. The above-mentioned report of the East German ambassador pointed out that the intellectuals (*Kulturschaffende*) from the army and from civilian life who, after the sacrifices they had made throughout the war, were now expecting relaxations on the part of – and in cooperation with – the government and the party. He went on to say that only due to the negative stance adopted by the authorities, a certain radicalisation and an increasing marginalisation had occurred.<sup>77</sup>

## 6. The antagonistic contradictions of 1956

It had become evident that the desired reforms would not be granted because « The leading party has given to Vietnamese literature and Vietnamese arts the light of marxist-leninist ideas and illuminated the path to struggle for the societal revival of Vietnam and the evolution of the new Vietnamese man... The party has introduced writers and artists to the best method of artistic creation, the method of socialist realism... ».<sup>78</sup>

Party and government are driven by one aim, i.e. re-unification under the leadership of the party. In the case of deviation from the prescribed line, the enemy might exploit the situation. The 8th plenum of the Central Committee of the Lao Dong Party in 1955 discussed the « fight against spies, saboteurs, counter-revolutionary organisations and... the education to vigilance. The unfolding of this struggle in the cities demands, as a prerequisite, registration and the obligation to report of the population, in the factories and in the public service the permanent education and training to secrecy and the guarding of official secrets. »<sup>79</sup> In addition, the population's freedom of movement was restricted (*ho khau*), and every citizen was equipped with a biographical identity booklet which indicated the social class membership of its bearer (*ly lich*).<sup>80</sup>

But the heretics did not give in. Rather, together with colleagues and friends from outside the army, in March 1956 they published *Giai pham mua xua*, the literary works of spring, an almanach-like literary collection. The charges against them now moved out of the comparatively protected circle of the military and were forthwith taken up by the Party, i.e. by To Huu (1920-2003), « generally considered the biggest contemporary poet »<sup>81</sup>, member of the Politbureau in charge of education and propaganda, and the Party's official poet, interpreter of the right line which was largely stipulated by him – one of the most powerful men in the country. He proved ruthless.<sup>82</sup> It is related in Hanoi that he had convened the colleagues with whom he had entertained amicable relations during the resistance, to his office and that he snapped at them: « For whom do you write? For the future instead of for the workers and peasants and for the revolution? If that is so, then you shall eat in the future, and not now! » The Party had taken a decisive step towards control over the ideological sector and thus to the stabilisation of its power after 1954. While the Viet Minh had, ten years earlier, attempted to control ac-

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<sup>77</sup> *ibid.*, pag. 028-036

<sup>78</sup> Hauptreferat auf dem 2. vietnamesischen Kongreß der Schriftsteller und Künstler 1957: Die Entwicklung der Kunst und Literatur in ihren großen Zügen, in: MfAA/ a 8582, pag. 079-080

<sup>79</sup> Botschaft der DDR, Hanoi, 20/9/1955, Aktenvermerk über die Versammlung der Botschafter der befreundeten Länder, Genossen Truong Chin (sic), 17/9/55 – 15.00 bis 18.00 Uhr, in: MfAA/A 8679, fiche 3, pag. 0229a

<sup>80</sup> Georges Boudarel et Ngyen Van Ky, *op. cit.*, p. 134

<sup>81</sup> *Blood and Flowers – The path of the poet To Huu*, Hanoi, 1978, p. 9. Also see Harry Thürk et al., *Stärker als die reißenden Flüsse – Vietnam in Geschichte und Gegenwart*, Berlin, 1970, p. 188

<sup>82</sup> To Huu is likely to have been deeply hurt in his pride as a poet early in 1955 by the biting attacks on the part of Tran Dan and Le Dat on his poetry collection *Viet Bac* for which he had received the literature price for 1954-1955. See Boudarel, *Cent Fleurs écloses*, *op. cit.*, pp. 119 ff; Kim Ninh, *op. cit.*, pp. 235-238; Gérard Tongas, *J'ai vécu dans l'enfer communiste au Nord Viêt-Nam*, 2me édition, Paris, 1960, p. 337. Further: Nguyen Tran Huan, *The Literature of Vietnam, 1954-1973*, in: Tham Seong Chee, ed., *Essays on literature and society in Southeast Asia. Political and sociological perspectives*, Singapore University Press, 1981, pp. 322-323 and 330-331. For an (official) biography of To Huu (about 1959), see MfAA/A 8494, pag. 0137

cess to the written word and to knowledge through the literacy campaign, the Party now dealt a fatal blow at the producers of the written word so as to bring them into its orbit.<sup>83</sup>

For the leadership of state and party, however, things turned rather rough also due to internal as well as external problems. In the countryside, the excesses of the land reform and the purges of the party and mass organisations, had provoked opposition and rebellion. Everywhere the situation was « politically tense »<sup>84</sup>; even families whose members had fought in the Resistance, were now persecuted. Famine considerably aggravated the situation;<sup>85</sup> neither the economic upturn nor the political and ‘moral’ impact expected from the land reform had materialised, deputy foreign minister Ung van Khiem told the GDR ambassador in October 1956.<sup>86</sup>

Phung Quan, writer and poet, described what he had seen in the countryside of the northern delta in these verses:

I have passed through  
Many villages of Kien-An and Hong Quang  
Where the sea broke in and left its salt over wide plains  
Where, for two successive seasons, no grain of rice has grown  
And human excrement is red with peels of sweet potatoes.  
I have met countless emaciated children  
Of five or six years old  
Eating less rice than bran...<sup>87</sup>

On 29th September 1956, the hero of Dien Bien Phu, General Giap, made a public self-criticism in the name of party and government, and the correction of mistakes committed in the land reform began in November. President Ho Chi Minh had personally admitted to errors in the land reform which in general, though, he considered as ultimately positive and successful<sup>88</sup>. He wept in public which to this day does not fail to produce the impression of his honesty and fatherly concern for the well-being of the people. Despite such conciliatory gestures, the situation continued to deteriorate, and in November 1956 – at the same time as the « events in Hungary » – the People’s Army was employed for the bloody task of putting down peasant uprisings in a number of villages in Nghe An, Ho’s home province. An indication of the seriousness of the crisis is the sudden visit of Chinese Premier Chou En-lai to Hanoi on 18th November.<sup>89</sup>

Meantime, writers, poets and artists, together with other members of the intelligentsia, had been sent to the countryside to observe the land reform. The experiences they were confronted with, enforced their doubts and stoke up the climate of resistance in the urban centers. It now

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<sup>83</sup> In an unpublished manuscript of the early 1970s, Rudolf Schröder alias Le Duc Nhan wrote: « The ability to read and write is splendidly suited to produce, maintain, spread and deepen obscurantism... I fear that by now Vietnam has become one of the countries where those in power totally control knowledge. » FMS, manuscript in my possession, p. 56

<sup>84</sup> Botschaft der DDR to Ministerium für Auswärtige Angelegenheiten, Hanoi 8/4/1957, in: MfAA/A 8383, pag. 009

<sup>85</sup> In September 1955, General Secretary Truong Chinh informed the ambassadors of « the friendly countries » that there still were « 91000 unemployed who are, to an extent, occupied with casual jobs... The number of those affected by acute famine dropped from 1 million (March, 1955) to 180000 (July, 1955). The May harvest exceeded the preliminary estimate (without any figures). In industry and trade, however, the plan has not been fulfilled. » The remarkable thing about this information is not the figures provided (and it is irrelevant whether they are exact or not), but the admission of famine and extreme economic difficulties. Botschaft der DDR, Hanoi, 20/9/1955, Aktenvermerk über die Versammlung der Botschafter der befreundeten Länder..., in: MfAA/A 8679, pag. 0229a

<sup>86</sup> Botschaft der DDR to Zentralkomitee der SED, Berlin, Hanoi, 17/1/1956, in: Zentralkomitee der SED Internationale Verbindungen, Bundesarchiv, DY30/IV2/20/217. In the following, this archival fund will be quoted as ‘ZK der SED’

<sup>87</sup> from Giai Pham Mua Thu, October 1956, quoted from Hoang Van Chi, Collectivisation and Rice Production, in: The China Quarterly, no. 9, 1962, p. 96

<sup>88</sup> Bernard B. Fall, ed., Ho Chi Minh On Revolution – Selected Writings, 1920-1966, London, 1967, pp. 304-306

<sup>89</sup> P. J. H., Revolt of the Intellectuals in North Vietnam, op. cit., p. 251

became apparent, as Georges Boudarel has pointed out, that Mao's utopian line which had been dogmatically applied in Vietnam, had led to excesses<sup>90</sup> in the land reform and to reactions of the population which threatened to tear the regime apart and which subsequently made divisions in the leadership apparent: on the one hand, a dogmatic maoist majority, and on the other a minority, more pragmatic wing, the so-called revisionists.

1956 was a critical year for the communist bloc. A certain détente and a timid questioning of dictatorial rule had already begun with Stalin's death in 1953. On the occasion of the XXth congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, on 26 February 1956, general secretary Khrushchev delivered his so-called secret report on the crimes of Stalin, thus overthrowing the so far indubitable idol. At the end of May, 1956, following Mao's speech *On Contradictions*, Peking – convinced, it seems, that antagonistic contradictions in the country had been overcome and that, consequently, remaining non-antagonistic ones could be openly discussed – called on the entire intelligentsia to criticise bureaucracy and other shortcomings of the regime. This led to the short-lived Chinese version of the Hundred Flowers under the motto *A hundred schools contend; a hundred flowers bloom*.<sup>91</sup> At the end of June, an uprising occurred in Poznan, Poland; in October, revolt erupted in Hungary, squashed in November by the Warsaw pact armies.

These events unnerved the regime in Hanoi. In a *Resolution of the 10th (enlarged) session of the central committee on the achievements of the land reform and the re-organisation of parties and mass organisations* in September, we read: « The unfavourable influence of the situation reigning in the countryside is currently extending to the cities and is spreading to all classes and societal strata of the country in the North just as well as in the South. These circumstances impose on us the necessity to amend the mistakes committed decisively, rapidly and considerably. »<sup>92</sup> In a tête-à-tête on 7th January 1957, Prime Minister Pham Van Dong told the GDR ambassador that «about three or four months ago... the situation in the countryside had been very critical, much more serious than we had been prepared to admit at the time »<sup>93</sup>, and that it had not been possible to raise the material situation since the restoration of peace in July 1954. According to the ambassador's report, the Prime Minister continued saying that the « dissatisfaction so far manifests itself in ideologically masked (disguised) attacks onto the people's democratic regime. Here the government differentiates carefully between avowed enemies of the public order, and fellow-travellers or scatterbrains. The fullness of strength would be employed against its enemies. »<sup>94</sup> On the type of action to be employed against dissatisfied intellectuals and in particular against the *Nhan Van* group, there was, according to Nguyen Dinh Thi who met the ambassadors accredited in Hanoi on 20 October 1956, « so far no uniform view within the Central Committee of the Lao-Dong-Party, although representatives of the CC had already had a number of discussions with the group. »<sup>95</sup> This undecisiveness gave the rebels some breathing space which came to an abrupt end with the suppression of the Hungarian revolt. A meeting of the governing communist parties in Moscow in December 1957 decided to crack down on all deviants.<sup>96</sup> The ice age had set in again.

The party's hegemony had been maintained by repression. But the thorn of doubt in the flesh of the system had been confirmed by the XXth party congress of the SU whose significance

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<sup>90</sup> Georges Boudarel et Nguyen Van Ky, op. cit.

<sup>91</sup> Merle Goldman, *Literary Dissent in Communist China*, op.cit., p. 160; Roderick Farquhar, *The Hundred Flowers*, op. cit.

<sup>92</sup> MfAA/A 8380, pag. 056

<sup>93</sup> Botschafter Pfützner to MfAA, 8/1/1957, in: MfAA/A 8699, fiche 3, pag. 0233-0237

<sup>94</sup> *ibid.*, pag. 0234

<sup>95</sup> Botschafter Pfützner to Ministerium für Auswärtige Angelegenheiten der DDR, Hanoi, 5/11/1956, in: MfAA/A 8420, pag. 0028

<sup>96</sup> see Roderick MacFarquhar, op. cit., pp. 303/304

for Vietnam and her intelligentsia cannot be overestimated. Nobody at first had read Krushev's speech, yet reports and rumours – here and there from the extremely rare French newspapers – nourished from fragmentary information, made the rounds and hatched the conviction that what had so far been taken for granted, was no longer valid.<sup>97</sup> If the doubt had been postulated in the Kremlin, then doubt must also be permissible in Vietnam. This goes to explain that the ardent socialist patriotism of many a young revolutionary which had temporarily been strengthened through the Maoist experience and which was simultaneously being modified by the reading of Soviet novels ever since the early 1950s<sup>98</sup>, was getting amputated of its socialist-communist variant by the Moscow congress.

These disillusioning events, though, did at the same time lead to new encouragements. The fact that the revelations about Stalin and Soviet totalitarianism came from inside the regime, was, in the minds of many Vietnamese, proof of the communist system's renewability. « For us, the Soviet experience had always been a light of freedom », said the historian Dao Hung.<sup>99</sup> Therefore, the XXth congress of the CPSU ultimately encouraged the dissidents not to slacken off their demands. The then attaché of the GDR embassy in Hanoi, Klaus Matzke, on 23rd August 1963 had a discussion in the Ministry of Culture of the DRV with comrades Vo Cong Ky, head of the foreign department, and (Xuan?) Thuy. He was told « that even among Vietnamese intellectuals in the arts and literature, bourgeois influences were being perceived... ». Matzke asked whether these « pernicious conceptions would perhaps come from Thailand or South Vietnam », to which his interlocutors replied: « The source of these pernicious views were neither in Thailand nor in South Vietnam, but in the Soviet Union. »<sup>100</sup> The contradictions had become antagonistic indeed.

## 7. Cent Fleurs écloses: *Giai Pham*

What had happened on the intellectual scene of Hanoi in the meantime? I have already mentioned that the *Literary Works (Giai Pham)* which were later in the year referred to as those of spring (*mua xua*), had appeared in March 1956, edited by Hoang Cam. In this literary selection, the writers did not aim at the Soviet Union, but they took the master thinker of their party, Truong Chinh, at his word and aimed at his programmatical piece *Marxism and Vietnamese culture* of 1948 where he had demanded: « Without criticism and controversy, our cultural movement is too placid, too uneventful... True unity must be founded on criticism motivated by unity and aimed at strengthening unity... ». And then he let the cat out of the bag: « The criticism we have in mind is criticism that abides by principles and democratic discipline, and not 'free criticism'. There may be some who wish to use criticism to sow dissension and doubt in the ranks of our people and supply the enemy with documents to be used against us. They are not critics but trouble-makers who seek not progress but provocation. Their place is not on the public debating platform of a democratic country but in the prisons of the people's state. »<sup>101</sup> Truong Chinh's definition of 'critique' was unambiguous, and the lot of those who would not abide by it, was equally unambiguous.

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<sup>97</sup> According to Bui Tin, op. cit., p. 57, the DRV's General Secretary Truong Chinh who had participated in the Moscow congress, was « en état de choc » since he had heard the secret report. Bui Tin relates how Truong Chinh had hidden the transcript of Krushev's speech in his briefcase, that he did not talk to anybody about what had happened, and that on his return to Hanoi he only informed Ho Chi Minh about it.

<sup>98</sup> Conversation with Dao Hung, Hanoi 10/10/2000

<sup>99</sup> *ibid.*, and he continued: « But then this did slowly change, and with the rise of Brechnev this hope vanished. And with the invasion of the Soviet troops into Czechoslovakia, it is over for us... ».

<sup>100</sup> And further: « Since many Sov. works of art and literature were imported into the DRV, the CC of the Workers' Party of Vietnam had given instructions to reorganise the control agencies for the import of Sov. films, Sov. literature etc. so as to put a stop to such pernicious influences. » Aktenvermerk Nr. 117/63, Botschaft der DDR, Hanoi, 7. 9. 1963, ZK der SED, DY 30/IV A2/20/442.

<sup>101</sup> Truong Chinh, op. cit., p. 271

The writers and artists of *Giai Pham* were members of official organisations such as the army, the writers' association or the editorial staff of the association's cultural magazine. And we can assume that they had all been engaged in the anti-colonial war (apart from a very few who, due to the Geneva Convention, had come from the South). The authors of this literary collection were « animated by the desire to make a stand against conformism, to seek what is modern, to preach openly the sincerity of the artist. »<sup>102</sup> Two contributions in particular aroused the wrath of the custodians of the right path. One is a quatrain by Le Dat, entitled *Mr. Limepot*:

People who live too long  
Are like lime-pots.  
The longer they live, the worse they grow  
And the narrower they become.<sup>103</sup>

In *Giai Pham mua thu*, the August edition of the *Literary Works*, the confucian scholar, sinologist, journalist and political activist Phan Khoi (1887-1960)<sup>104</sup>, explained that the limepot was a vessel indispensable for the betel chewer and that its opening would gradually get narrower due to sediments. As it is getting useless, it is placed onto the family altar or kept in the pagoda where it is venerated alongside the ancestors. Le Dat had thus attacked the cult of the old, the veneration of ancestors, of teachers and the old men in the party apparatus. The poet Xuan Dieu, reborn through the revolution, replied: « Being educated by the party, the older people among us do indeed become narrower day by day, as we struggle to restrict individualism within us, the smaller the better, in order that the new human, the collective human can grow and develop: And this is a source of happiness for us. »<sup>105</sup> Then, as Phan Khoi criticised the 1954-55 prize-winning poems of Xuan Dieu as « verses partly incomprehensible and vulgar », he was told « that this could not be the case as the poet had been educated by the party », whereupon the ever so sharp veteran of the Vietnamese literature milieu replicated: « The party has taught Xuan Dieu how to make revolution and not how to write poetry. »<sup>106</sup> And this was exactly the point where roads parted...

The style of the second offending poem was influenced by Majakowski and written by Tran Dan; it had 500 lines and was entitled *We shall win (Nhat dinh thang)*. The « leading cultural cadres (considered) the poem... a cunningly reactionary work... ».<sup>107</sup> It told of the love of a young couple during the melancholy month of December after the end of the war under conditions of cramped and squalid living space, material distress, hopelessness, and the mass exodus to the South – taboos in a socialist society. « How much pain, how much woe we have been through in those days! I walked the streets but didn't see streets or houses. I only saw rain which trickled on red flags. » The dejected image is followed by programmatic demands: « Why is it that the difficulties of our country are not reflected in poetry?... I'd rather that all those who claim reunification first start with the small things: With eating, sleeping, with private affairs. With pondering over things, with tenderly caressing their children, with making love... ».<sup>108</sup> Tran Dan did not portray the heroic peasants, workers, and soldiers decreed by the propaganda officials because:

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<sup>102</sup> MfAA/A 8420, pag. 022

<sup>103</sup> see Hoang Van Chi, *From Colonialism to Communism*, op. cit., p. 236; also: Hoang Giang, op. cit., p. 12

<sup>104</sup> see Neil Jamieson, op. cit., pp. 109/111. Phan Khoi's grandfather was the legendary general Hoang Dieu who hanged himself when the French captured the citadel of Hanoi in 1882. Phan Khoi spent 9 years on the French prison island of Poulo Condor.

<sup>105</sup> quoted from Jamieson, op. cit., p. 265; see Hoang Van Chi, *From Colonialism to Communism*, op.cit., p. 237

<sup>106</sup> Resumé of an article by Phan Khoi *Kritik an der Art, wie man bei uns Kunst und Literatur leitet*, Botschaft der DDR in Hanoi, in: MfAA/A 8420, pag. 015

<sup>107</sup> Zur kulturellen Situation, DDR-Botschaft Hanoi, in: MfAA/A 8420, pag. 023

<sup>108</sup> My translations from *Giai pham* of spring 1956, as rendered in: DDR-Botschaft Hanoi, MfAA/A 8420, pag. 007-012



Oh, at all times Man (*Nganoi*) lacked confidence in Man, Man has always been afraid of the future.

He talked about the glorious army, the struggle for reunification, about devotion to the just cause of the North, but: « So much sorrow and anxiety unfold this night... There you see, darling, that even the most ardent believer knows moments of doubt. »<sup>109</sup> Consequently, « in a meeting of the permanent commission of the writers' and artists' association in February 1956, the writer and his poem were banished and the journal of the association informed the public that Tran Dan was a reactionary and a slanderer of the political order of the North. Thereupon the *Literary Works of Spring* were withdrawn and pulped. »<sup>110</sup>

I have been told in Hanoi that Tran Dan was in the countryside as a *doi vien*, a member of a land reform group, and that he was not aware of the publication of his poem. In February 1956, though, « due to a disciplinary offence in the army (absenteeism overnight without authorisation) »<sup>111</sup> he was, together with his composer friend Tu Phac, arrested by the military under cover of darkness. At the time, he lived with a young woman from bourgeois-catholic background in Sinh Tu street, which, for a member of the People's Army and of the party, was considered treason of his (imputed) class position. In order to get out of his prison deep in a dark cellar, sly Tran Dan simulated a suicide attempt which led to helplessly embarrassed excitement among top military and government leaders. He was committed to write his self-criticism, and his superiors tried to make him see his devious ways to get him back to the fold because a poet of this calibre was a valuable instrument in the ideological struggle against the South and for the stabilisation of the North. Nguyen Dinh Thi doesn't beat about the bush: « Literature and the arts are meant to forge a new ideology and a new soul in the sense of patriotism and the socialist ideal for our people. »<sup>112</sup> Artists and writers are stooges of the Party's messianic project which, conversely, means that the Party requires their cooperation. For as we have seen, they are soldiers on the cultural, political and economic front in the battle for the construction of socialism. And this, of course, affords them a certain degree of independence.

The *Literary Works* were the first *open* assault on the Party's conformism and orthodoxy. The XXth congress of the CPSU gave the opponents of the orthodox line an enormous stimulus, and even the president of the Association of Writers and Artists for a short time self-critically pleaded for candour and discussion: « The artists do not want to turn away from the Party, they recognize that the Party has given them orientation, but they demand an uncontrolled artistic space. The central question in this circle today is whether all artistic tendencies will be allowed to express themselves. »<sup>113</sup>

That this question was to be answered positively, was no longer in doubt for the majority of artists and writers because « the simultaneous exposure of Stalin's bloody errors, the land

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<sup>109</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>110</sup> Zur kulturellen Situation, *ibid.*

<sup>111</sup> Botschafter Pfützner, Hanoi, November 1956, Oppositionelle Bewegungen der Schriftsteller und Künstler gegen die Politik der Lao-Dong-Partei in Fragen der Literatur und Kunst, in: MfAA/A 8420, pag. 032. It is rumoured in Hanoi that it was To Huu who had ordered the director of the arts and letters services of the army, Van Phac, to arrest the poet, following a meeting of those responsible for ideology and culture to discuss the first issue of *Giai pham* where, I was told, the poet Che Lan Vien had opened the attack on Tran Dan.

<sup>112</sup> Report of the Executive Committee of the Association of Writers and Artists, Second National Congress of Writers and Artists, 28 February 1957, quoted from Gérard Tongas, *J'ai vécu dans l'enfer communiste au Nord Viêt-Nam*, 2me édition, Paris, 1960, p. 336

<sup>113</sup> Nguyen Tuan, in: Zur kulturellen Situation, *op. cit.*, pag. 018. Even the hardest of hardliners among North Vietnam's ideologues, To Huu, appears to soften under the impression of the XXth Congress; he admits « that, in the past, serious errors have been committed in the field of culture and in the treatment of the bourgeois intelligentsia which need to be corrected. Everything that has been wronged in the field of 'isms', is due to weak ideological orientation. » *ibid.*, pag. 020

reform tragedies and the party purges, was to radically change the atmosphere overnight. »<sup>114</sup> Two more issues of *Giai Pham* came out, the one of summer and the one of autumn, and the first issue which had been confiscated in spring, was reprinted. All artists and writers were obliged to participate in an 18-day conference of their association from 1 to 18 August where they had to study Marx and Engels and write their autocritique.<sup>115</sup> There the contradictions between the party line and the intelligentsia came vividly into the open. For the political cadres, poetry was not a private affair, and it was to be didactic instead of expressive.<sup>116</sup>

Nevertheless, the 10th session of the Central Committee of the Lao Dong Party in September 1956 had created a « more democratic atmosphere »<sup>117</sup> whereupon, during that memorable meeting which even today in Hanoi is described as a milestone, the award of the 1954-55 literary prizes – especially the second prize for Xuan Dieu's *The Star (Ngoi Sao)* – was passionately debated. *Van Nghe*, the Association's journal, opened its pages for discussion, the leading cultural cadres wrote self-critical statements<sup>118</sup>, and in the course of summer and autumn, a whole string of spring-like creative journals blossomed: The students published *Dat Moi* (New Land), the very popular poet Nguyen Binh brought out *Tram Hoa* (Hundred Flowers)<sup>119</sup>; further, there appeared *Noi That* (Free Speech), *Tap San Phe Binh* (Critique-Review) and several others, and even the official publications such as the party newspaper *Nhan Dan* (The People), and *Cuu Quoc*, the organ of the Fatherland Front, could not resist the torrential wave of free expression of opinion on intellectuals, their role in socialism and Vietnamese society, and on democratic freedoms.

The essay by Phan Khoi on *Criticism of the Leadership in Arts and Letters* in the autumn edition of *Giai Pham*<sup>120</sup> is symptomatic for the climate amongst intellectuals and their dispute with the Party and the culture authorities at the time. Phan Khoi, after the privations of the war and the achievement of independence, did not question the legitimacy and moral authority of the state which had been forged during the resistance. For him, the cause of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam was the just cause. On the other hand, he quarreled with the authoritarian cultural theory, the ideological narrowness and the dictatorial ambitions which had also evolved during the war. Phan Khoi and his friends demanded a civil society of emancipated citizens. The old literatus insisted that *public* criticism – not just criticism behind closed doors – was necessary, that the truth had to be told, even though he had been advised that one could not talk about certain truths. Yet, he wrote, « I do not believe this. Under a different regime this would be true. Under our regime, though, where criticism and self-criticism are considered weapons – which truth one should not be able to disclose? ! » And, responding to the objection that public criticism in the press allowed the enemy to fabricate wrongful accusations, he replied that he did not believe that either. « Formerly, dirty linen used to be washed within the family... Nowadays, internal dissension must be put before the masses

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<sup>114</sup> Georges Boudarel, Intellectual Dissidence in the 1950s – The Nhân Văn-Giai Phẩm Affair, in: The Vietnam Forum, no. 13, 1990, pp. 160/161. See also: Kommunique der vietnamesischen Regierung zur innenpolitischen Lage in der DRV 1956, in: MfAA/A 11621

<sup>115</sup> on this point, see interviews with Nguyen Dinh Thi, March 2002

<sup>116</sup> Jamieson, op. cit., p. 270

<sup>117</sup> « The first example for this came from the deputies of Hanoi who, on their 3rd congress, in full freedom of opinion, criticized the situation of the city and discussed new proposals. This was something quite new in political life. » Zur kulturellen Situation, in: MfAA/A 8420, pag. 023. See also: ZK der SED, Schreiben ADN 24/11/1956

<sup>118</sup> Selbstkritik des ständigen Büros des Verbandes der Schriftsteller und Künstler veröffentlicht am 2. 10. 56, in: MfAA/A 8420, pag. 020-021

<sup>119</sup> Several participants in the events have told me that Nguyen Binh – « almost illiterate, an anarchist, a *real* poet! » – had been subsidised by the ideological bureau of the Party in order to write against *Nhan Van*, but: « He was an artist! », and his columns very soon were on an equally critical course...

<sup>120</sup> According to the *Foreword*, this edition intended « to contribute to the preparation of the national congress of writers and artists so as to develop and to advance the freedom of artistic and literary creation on the basis of the principle 'Let a hundred flowers bloom'. The *Literary Works of autumn* contain texts of several authors of different character, different esthetic tendencies. Each author is responsible for his own text. » MfAA/A 8420, pag. 023

without whom nothing can be solved. » The argument that the enemy would use the (published) truth for the pursuit of his devious aims, he considered « a pretext that serves to better hide the truth. Moreover, the enemy always lies, whether we provide him with material or not. »<sup>121</sup> He pointed out that nobody demanded unrestrained freedom but only the freedom of artistic work. And « Since art is a private sphere, politics should not encroach on it. »<sup>122</sup>

The reason for the publication of *Giai Pham Phan Khoi* saw in the cultural policy of the DRV after Dien Bien Phu. He deplored the way Tran Dan was incriminated by the Writers' Association because of his *We will win* and that he was even (wrongly) accused of having written the word *He* or *Man (Nguoi)* in capital letters which was reserved for Ho Chi Minh. « When I heard that accusation, I imagined I was in a royal court watching Mr. X accuse Mr. Y of lese majeste because Y did not respect taboo words. Happily I awoke from my daydream and found myself in a session of the Congress of Arts and Letters Association! »<sup>123</sup>

## 8. Cent fleurs écloses: *Nhan Van*

On 20th September 1956, a second « private publication » made its appearance, the journal *Nhan Van (Humanism)*, edited by Phan Khoi and the painter and writer Tran Duy (born 1920) as editorial secretary. In October 2000 one of the protagonists of the venture described *Nhan Van* to me as « a very important instrument for the struggle for freedom and against intellectual enslavement, for democracy and against a dictatorship which calls itself proletarian. » The clear-cut political motives advanced in the year 2000, though, may not have been quite the same as those which had evolved much more spontaneously 45 years earlier.<sup>124</sup>

The real driving force behind the undertaking was the journalist, publicist and politician Nguyen Huu Dang (born 1918). He had been intimately connected with the anti-colonial movement since the 1930s as a close associate of Truong Chinh; at the age of 16 he had been imprisoned by the French. He became Minister for Youth in Ho Chi Minh's first government, and on behalf of the President, he had organised the independence ceremony of 2 September 1945 in Ba Dinh square<sup>125</sup> – a fateful hour in which *Annamites* had become *Vietnamese* (“Aus den Annamiten waren Vietnamesen geworden”), as Rudolf Schröder alias Le Duc Nhan was to write later<sup>126</sup>. In November 1946, Dang was in charge of the National Cultural Congress in Hanoi. During the war, he had been inspector general for people's education and was thus responsible for the battle against illiteracy. As mentioned already, in the early 1940s, Truong Chinh had entrusted him with the mobilisation of intellectuals, writers and artists for the cause of the revolution and the anti-colonial struggle through the *Cultural Society for National Liberation (Van hoa cuu quoc)*<sup>127</sup>. Simultaneously, though, throughout the decades of cooperation with Truong Chinh, Dang had been an ambitious candidate for positions of power and an opponent in ideological questions. This opposition now manifested itself openly and found its hotbed with the publication of *Nhan Van*. While Truong Chinh was a dogmatic marxist,

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<sup>121</sup> Résumé zum Artikel von Phan Khoi, MfAA/A 8420, pag. 013

<sup>122</sup> quoted from Hoang Van Chi, *The New Class*, op. cit., pp. 80/81

<sup>123</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 81/82

<sup>124</sup> Thanks to Christopher Goscha

<sup>125</sup> Despite its colonial past with its *Résidence générale* (« le symbole du pouvoir colonial » according to Charles Meyer, *Les Français en Indochine 1860-1910*, Paris, 1985, p. 192), through the ritual of 2 September, Ba Dinh square became the symbolic center of the new state and, consequently, the mausoleum of Ho Chi Minh was built here.

<sup>126</sup> unpublished manuscript, p. 117

<sup>127</sup> This society existed until 1948 when it was replaced by the newly founded professional association of writers and artists. It is related that Dang had lost trust in the eventual victory of the Viet Minh and that, therefore, he had withdrawn from the Resistance (Nguyen Dinh Thi) into a form of 'internal exile'. Others maintain that the arrival of Maoism had led to his disillusion (Dang Phong). Dang himself keeps silent on this aspect and on the years 1950-1954...

Nguyen Huu Dang is rather a liberal-democratic socialist, although he had at times entertained utopian dreams.

After Dien Bien Phu, Dang set out to tackle the second stage of his life's work, i.e. the struggle for democracy and for the rights of man and the citizen. The experienced organiser rallied the poets Hoang Cam and Tran Dan in the army and others from civilian life such as Le Dat, Tran Duy and influential intellectuals such as Phan Khoi, Dao Duy Anh (1904-1988) or the philosopher Tran Duc Thao (died 1993), the professor of literature Nguyen Manh Tuong (1909-1994)<sup>128</sup> and the great painter Bui Xuan Phai (1920-1988)<sup>129</sup> around *Nhan Van* (although all these people were either friends or at least knew each other well, and there existed an intricate web of personal relations between the intellectuals and artists of Hanoi anyway).<sup>130</sup>

Nguyen Huu Dang's busy negotiations with the intellectual and literary elite of Hanoi did not remain concealed from the political leadership who, in turn, attempted to sow dissension in the emerging ranks to keep writers and intellectuals away from making common cause with Dang. As already mentioned, on behalf of the Central Committee, general Le Liem, assistant director of the political department of the army, had a series of discussions with writers and poets during the weeks preceding publication of the journal.<sup>131</sup> He is reported to have assured them of the justness of their demands, that the highest authorities right up to the President would sympathetically listen to them, and that everything was discussable and negotiable – provided they accepted two conditions: The first one was that they renounced their cooperation with Nguyen Huu Dang who, Le Liem is said to have maintained, was not primarily interested in intellectual and artistic reforms but pursued political objectives, ultimately the overthrow of the socialist system. The other prerequisite was to abandon the *Nhan Van* project altogether, which meant not going public and instead enter into open talks with the authorities.

These proposals were not flatly rejected by some of the writers who presented their counter-proposals. They explained to Le Liem that they were ready to give up the project and their alliance with Dang if, first, the political leadership would dismiss those responsible for the arrest of Tran Dan and, secondly, publicly apologise for the 'mistakes' committed vis-à-vis writers and artists. This was not only aimed at the powerful To Huu, but they expected that the Party admitted to mistakes before the public. Yet these were exactly the two points that could never be negotiable. *Nhan Van* accused those responsible for cultural affairs « not to take people into account, to stifle heart and soul through an excess of politics, bureaucratism, their authority mania and their encouragement of the conventional only. The journal *Nhan Van* affirms its willingness to acknowledge the leadership of the Lao Dong Party and to support the regime of the Democratic Republic, but that it also strives for the democratisation of intellectual life. »<sup>132</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> Nguyen Manh Tuong, Un Excommunié. Hanoi 1954-1991: Procès d'un intellectuel, Paris 1992

<sup>129</sup> Philippe Papin, Histoire de Hanoi, Paris, 2001, p.320

<sup>130</sup> The GDR ambassador in Hanoi at the time described the *Nhan Van* group as follows: « With regard to its tendencies and its composition, the group constitutes a non-uniform front. One section, the most reactionary one, under the pretext of opposing the manifestations of the personality cult, fights against the fundamentals of government policy and the Lao-Dong-Party. Another section consists of ideological scatterbrains who either plead for 'true marxism' or demand some 'democratic freedoms' as they were supposed to be guaranteed in capitalist countries... As a result of mistakes committed by the government and party, not only in their relationship with writers and artists (e.g. mistakes in the land reform, violation of democratic legality etc.), this group has become a reservoir of all those dissatisfied and displeased and requires the attentiveness of party and government. » Botschafter Pfütznner, Oppositionelle Bewegung der Schriftsteller..., November 1956, MfAA/A 8420, pag. 034

<sup>131</sup> Throughout the life of *Nhan Van*, talks and negotiations took place between the highest representatives of the state and prominent members of the *Nhan Van* group.

<sup>132</sup> Zur kulturellen Situation, MfAA/A 8420, pag. 024

The journal was published in the shape of a newspaper and was originally financed by small amounts from its contributors. Its success was outstanding; its « circulation of 6000 to 7000 copies which is very high for Hanoi »<sup>133</sup> sold virtually overnight. The first issue carried a long article entitled *The man Tran-Dan (Con Nguoi Tran-Dan)* which was Hoang Cam's version of his friend's fate. It was accompanied by a drawing by Nguyen Sang which accentuated the cicatrice of Tran Dan's throat from the (simulated) suicide attempt – a telling indictment of the culture bureaucrats. In the third edition, the dramatic producer Chu Ngoc claimed: « In our criticism, we want to employ the following method: say it openly, say it honestly, and say everything. »<sup>134</sup> But, as Tran Duy cautioned in his leading article of 30 September under the heading *Let us fight so that all the hundred flowers are allowed to blossom*: « Under the reality which reigns in our country, it is not an easy and simple thing to accomplish the principle 'Blossoming of a hundred flowers'. A formula alone does not have enough force to penetrate all the conservative, bureaucratic spirits accustomed to outdated methods of leadership and who know only one concern, and that is to tie literature and the arts to dry slogans, to the party line, and to mechanical principles of economics and sociology... ».<sup>135</sup> And Le Dat pronounced: « A policeman in the street is necessary – a policeman in one's heart is dangerous. »<sup>136</sup>

The call for public debate, for legality and human rights, thus: for structural reforms and, implicitly, political pluralism, was raised more and more emphatically. Even those who did not see themselves as political thinkers, let alone actors in the political arena, but considered themselves poets, writers or artists, could not but join forces, after what had occurred in Moscow, in Hungary and in Poland (not to mention the events at the Stalinallee in Berlin in June 1953). The 5th issue of *Nhan Van*, dated 20 November 1956, carried an unsigned article under the heading *Lessons from Poland and Hungary (Bai hoc Ba lan va Hungari)*. Its author, as I was assured in Hanoi, was the poet Le Dat who distinguished between the need to impose democracy for the masses and inflict dictatorship upon the enemy. Thus, he concluded, it was « necessary to resolutely and courageously correct mistakes promptly and fully, particularly by raising the standard of living of the people, and by increasing democratic freedoms. » In Poland and Hungary, « the cult of Stalin and Stalin's mistakes... seriously prejudiced man's life and his right to freedom. »<sup>137</sup> The emphasis on heavy industry and the neglect of agriculture and small industry had been detrimental to the people's living conditions. « The erroneous theory that the more one advances toward socialism, the more bitter the class struggle will be, has led to baleful consequences, such as abusive enlightenment, dictatorship toward both party members and the masses, and serious violations of the judicial system of socialism. »<sup>138</sup>

The fourth edition of *Nhan Van* of 5 November carried a leading article by Nguyen Huu Dang whose publication, it seems, had been hotly debated in the editorial team as some of its members considered it too outrightly political, dreading that the regime would take drastic steps against the journal if the article was printed; indeed it reached the bounds of what was toler-

<sup>133</sup> Botschafter Pfützner, *Oppositionelle Bewegungen...*, op. cit., pag. 034. Members of the editorial group have assured me in Hanoi that of the first issue, 1500 copies were printed (and sold), and that no. 5 appeared in 20000 copies.

<sup>134</sup> quoted from Boudarel, *Intellectual Dissidence in the 1950s*, op. cit., p. 164

<sup>135</sup> quoted from: Zur kulturellen Situation, in: MfAA/A 8420, pag. 024. Tran Duy's *The Giants* which appeared in the autumn edition of *Giai Pham*, was summarised by ambassador Pfützner as follows: « The country is tormented and oppressed by demons and evil spirits. Then giants appear who bravely take up the cudgels against those tormentors and who finally overthrow them. But they do not pay attention to the wretched, and in their battle they also destroy love and emotions. » Translated from: *Oppositionelle Bewegungen...*, op.cit., MfAA/A 8420, pag. 033; see also Hoang Van Chi, *The New Class in North Vietnam*, op. cit., pp. 123-131

<sup>136</sup> Botschafter Pfützner, *Oppositionelle Bewegungen...*, November 1956, op.cit., pag. 033. Another rendering of Le Dat's poem is in Nguyen Dang Thuc, op. cit., p. 69: « Placing police stations and machinery in the center of the human heart, / Forcing feelings to be expressed according to a set of rules promulgated by the government. »

<sup>137</sup> The lessons of Poland and Hungary, *Nhan Van* no. 5, 20 November 1956, in: Hoa Mai, editor, op.cit., p. 130

<sup>138</sup> *ibid.*, p. 131

able. Dang wrote: « ...we are used to looking down upon bourgeois legal principles, so that among a large number of people this state of affairs has become a contempt for the law in general. It is also because, during our long and hard resistance, we were used to solving all questions within our groups, at our convenience. We were accustomed to resorting to 'rule of thumb' to move things along every time this work ran into a regulation. We were used to replacing law with 'view point' ... In the agrarian reform, illegal arrests, imprisonments, investigations (with barbarous torture), executions, requisitions of property, and the quarantining of landowners' houses (or the houses of peasants wrongly classified as landowners), which left innocent children to die of starvation, are not exclusively due to the shortcomings of leadership, but also due to the lack of a complete legal code. »<sup>139</sup>

For the next edition, Dang had written a leader entitled *How are human democratic freedoms guaranteed by the Vietnamese Constitution of 1946* in which he pointed out that the Constitution had not been applied due to the war but that now « the situation of the North could be considered as stabilized » and that, as a consequence, Article 10 should be respected: »All Vietnamese citizens have the right to freedom of expression and press; freedom of publication; freedom of organization and assembly; freedom of residence; free circulation inside and outside the country. »<sup>140</sup>

Before the sixth issue which had already been set up in type but had not yet been printed, could come out, the administrative committee of Hanoi on 2 December 1956 published a decree which prohibited the journal *Nhan Van* because it had published articles « which exaggerate the truth, slander, create conflicts and anxiety, jeopardize the people's democratic order which had many grave consequences that harm the order and the peace of the city. »<sup>141</sup>

## 9. Epilogue

Even after having outlawed the heretic publication, the authorities still stood comparatively aloof – the « events in Hungary » urged caution. The incriminated publications had, « as a cultural opposition,... increasingly developed a political controversy... which proved to be destructive and demoralising..., (but) the party organ and the journals continued to deal with the problem of the intelligentsia. The emphasis in these articles was that one should have more confidence in intellectuals and especially in those who had participated in the resistance. In an unpublished talk of Truong Chin's (sic), the party expressed its views on the question of the intelligentsia, stressing the frank and correct attitude of the party vis-à-vis the intelligentsia. There existed the dictatorship of the proletariat, and not the dictatorship of some individuals. If something of that sort had happened, then this had been wrong and needed to be corrected. »<sup>142</sup>

Publication bans in Hanoi and military repression in Eastern Europe, however, could *so far* not silence the contradictory spirits who were still thirsting for action. This became evident during the 2nd national Congress of Writers and Artists of Vietnam which took place from 20 to 28 February 1957 with about 500 participants. The Central Committee in its address to the « Fighters on the cultural front » explained that « The August Revolution, simultaneously with the liberation of the nation, has liberated our writers and artists. » But to-date « we are

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<sup>139</sup> Nguyen Huu Dang, It Is Necessary To Have A More Ordered Society, *Nhan Van*. November 5 (1956), in: Hoa Mai, ed., op.cit., pp. 101-104

<sup>140</sup> Nguyen Huu Dang, How Are Democratic Freedoms Guaranteed By The Vietnamese Constitution Of 1946, *Nhan Van*, November 20 (1956), in: Hoa Mai, ed., op. cit., pp. 127-129

<sup>141</sup> Beschluß des Verwaltungskomitees von Hanoi über das Erscheinungs- und Vertriebsverbot der Zeitung « NHÂN-VAN », with a letter of the GDR embassy in Hanoi dated 7/1/1957 to the MfAA in Berlin, in: MfAA/A 8420, pag. 043. On 14 December, President Ho Chi Minh had « signed a decree defining the nature, tasks, rights and activities of the Press », see Hoa Mai, ed., op. cit., pp. 165-167

<sup>142</sup> Zur kulturellen Situation, in: MfAA/A 8420, pag. 026

short of works which are truly worthy of the heroic people. » The Party admitted to errors in the field of literature and the arts, but they were to be balanced against the failings of artists and writers such as « for example the as yet confused ideological platform, a superficial understanding of the life of the people, formalism, naturalism and lack of discrimination etc. which are still widespread in their creations. » In order to attain the « glorious aims » formulated by the Party, « our writers and artists must eagerly study Marxism-Leninism, the political platform and the practical policy of party and government, consolidate their class position, their ideology and improve upon the techniques of their arts. »<sup>143</sup>

The Congress unanimously adopted a resolution which stipulated the present-day tasks of arts and literature as follows: « Strengthening of North Vietnam in her gradual progress towards socialism, continuation of the struggle for the achievement of national unity, and active construction of a rich national literature and arts. »<sup>144</sup> But the alleged unanimity of this resolution could not hide the differences which continued to exist, and indeed in the discussions they came vividly to light. General Secretary Truong Chinh who deemed *Nhan Van* « a weapon of psychological warfare of the enemy against the DRV », sharply objected to the Hundred Flowers: « useful flowers should blossom, stinking flowers and the flowers of evil had to be eradicated. Even during his speech he was vigorously contradicted by the opposition. »<sup>145</sup>

Phan Khoi asked to speak, and « there was much commotion in the hall... » because he demanded « the freedom... to carry out the controversy in the newspapers » in order to know the truth about the group under attack. « He wanted concrete... proof for what Trung (sic) Chinh had affirmed without being concrete. A member of the chair interrupted Van (sic) Khoi and asked Khoi to put off his comments to another time as time was running out. » Phung Quan, author of the novel *Escape from Poulo Condore*, attacked Truong Chinh: « There is much talk about unity among writers and artists. I declare there is no unity (among us). It has been shattered. Our doubts, our sorrow are (as big as) a mountain. There is only one way to attain unity, one has to give us the opportunity to freely voice our opinions. As long as one continues to condemn us to silence, it is out of the question to talk about unity and solidarity among us. » And on Truong Chinh's demand for the eradication of the « stinking flowers », he had this to say: « The difficulty (consists) in recognising which flowers are stinking and which ones are flowers of evil... As to the extermination of the bad flowers, one should leave their elimination to criticism and to the people instead of to the opinion of whatever authority which is not competent anyway. One takes things too easy calling us opponents of the party, we are only against its errors... ». The minutes recorded « Silence, no acclamation. » Yet when the composer Do Nhuan « passionately expressed his disapproval of Phung Quan and most severely attacked 'Humanism', (he) had the most frenzied applause. Very tense atmosphere. Acts of violence were to be feared. »<sup>146</sup>

The debate led nowhere; the leadership of party and the state continued in their uncompromising attitude. In July, the directorate of the Association of Writers and Artists launched a new official weekly, *Van (Literature)*, which, conceived as an ideological striker, came back – just as Nguyen Binh's *Tram Hoa* before – as a boomerang and was discontinued upon its 37th issue as it had displayed « bourgeois literary tendencies... derived from an ideology of the

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<sup>143</sup> MfAA/A 8582, pag. 035, 036, 040. On the cultural cadres' critique of the failings of artists and writers, see also *Die Entwicklung der Kunst und Literatur in ihren grossen Zuegen* by Nguyen Dinh Thi, in: *ibid.*, pag. 083-085, 095-096. On the report by Nguyen Dinh Thi and on the 2nd Cultural Congress, see also: Gérard Tongas, *op. cit.*, pp. 329 ff.

<sup>144</sup> quoted from the Vietnamese Bulletin no. 7/57 of 2/3/1957, as rendered in: MfAA/A 8582, pag. 0168

<sup>145</sup> Über Fragen der Literatur und Kunst in der Demokratischen Republik Vietnam, Mai 1958, in: ZK der SDE, DY30/IV2/20/217

<sup>146</sup> Diskussion. Aus den Berichten der DDR-Botschaft zum Kongreß, in: MfAA/A 8582, pag. 0152-0162. Do Nhuan and Phung Quan had been members of the « academy »-group around general Nguyen Chi Thanh, see footnote 59

‘falling classes’».<sup>147</sup> Together with those who had hitherto not been noticed as deviants, the contributors of the outlawed publications quickly found shelter with *Van* on whose pages they continued the battle. The journal was halted because it was supposed to have fallen short of expectations, namely to « continue the ideological clarification process which had flared up since the XXth Party Congress of the CPSU, the slogan ‘Let 100 flowers bloom’, and the events in Hungary but which could not be considered completed ». *Cuu Quoc* also, which had published poems by Majakowski and Brecht’s *An die Nachgeborenen*, was severely reprimanded.<sup>148</sup> The translation from the French of, inter alia, Brecht’s poem which had appeared in an edition of the Writers and Artists Association’s publishing house in 1957, had been done « by representatives of Revisionism, that is Tran Dan, Le Dat and Hong (sic) Cam. The foreword had been written by Huy Phuong, also a representative of Revisionism. »<sup>149</sup>

On the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the Bolshevik October revolution, the twelve governing parties of the Soviet bloc met in Moscow in November 1957 where harmony carried the day with regard to the need to crack down on deviants: Mao Tse-tung and Khrushchev agreed to keep a tight rein on intellectuals and arts and letters.<sup>150</sup> In Vietnam, political education courses « to study the problems of the Moscow talks »<sup>151</sup> for writers and artists, in the university and for other members of the intelligentsia were conducted. The machine of repression was set in motion. Early in February, harsh attacks appeared against « revisionist » views propagated by the journal *Van* which « proved that they have nothing in common with the workers’ and peasants’ regime in the DRV which, under the leadership of the Lao Dong Party... is building Socialism. » Such occurrences were attributed to « the activities of a group of enemies of the people of long standing ».<sup>152</sup> The language was no longer conciliatory, attempting to settle differences and to negotiate as had been the case even a few months earlier, but it had become stern, doctrinaire and menacing. Dissidents were sent « into reality », i.e. into the countryside or into factories, frequently under extremely harsh and perilous conditions, so as to be reformed through physical labour and contact with the masses. As of 1 August 1958, all intellectuals were to undergo periods of cultural practice which were meant to « enable artists to create truly socialist works »<sup>153</sup> in that they « descended to the masses »<sup>154</sup>. Truong Chinh, rather leniently, saw « in education the essential means to correct a comrade who has committed mistakes » whereby the objective is « to eliminate the disease but to save the patient as a human being ».<sup>155</sup> To this end, innumerable rectification and reeducation courses were conducted, and many intellectuals, writers and artists were to write their autocritique time and again.

<sup>147</sup> William G. F. Smith, *The Nhan Van Giai Pham Affair: Literary dissidence in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, 1956-1957*, unpublished M.A. Area Studies (South East Asia), SAOS, London, September, 1993, p. 29

<sup>148</sup> Botschaft der DDR... to Ministerium für Auswärtige Angelegenheiten, Berlin. Hanoi 27/2/57 (sic – should be ‘1958’), in: MfAA/A 8420, pag. 046-048

<sup>149</sup> Botschaft der DDR, Hanoi, to Ministerium für Auswärtige Angelegenheiten, Berlin, 13/11/1958, in: MfAA/A 8494, fiche 2, pag. 097/098

<sup>150</sup> G. F. Hudson, *China and the Communist ‘Thaw’*, in: Roderick Mac Farquhar, op. cit., pp. 295, 303

<sup>151</sup> Botschaft der DDR to Ministerium für Auswärtige Angelegenheiten, Hanoi 27/2/58, in: MfAA/A 8420, pag. 048. See also MfAA/A 8499, pag. 092

<sup>152</sup> Attaché Kittler, *Über den Kampf gegen rechte Elemente*, in: MfAA/A 8494, fiche 1, pag. 080

<sup>153</sup> *ibid.*; see also P. J. Honey, *Ho Chi Minh and the Intellectuals*, op. cit., p. 24

<sup>154</sup> Attaché Kittler to MfAA, Hanoi 24/6/1958, in: MfAA/A 8420, pag. 070. Professor Dang Thai Mai, the father-in-law of general Vo Nguyen Giap and then president of the Association of Writers and Artists, explained the need for these ‘cultural practica’ as follows: « Only that writer or artist who lives with the working people, eats with them, and lives with them under one roof and works with them, will be able to perceive the creative force, the sincerity and simplicity in everyday life, the patience and endurance in the overcoming of difficulties and privations of those people who, according to the directions of the party, actively build a new life and a happy future for our fatherland. » MfAA/A 8493, pag. 028

<sup>155</sup> Truong Chinh, *Die Wiedergutmachung der Irrtümer und der weitere Vormarsch*, in: *Hoc Tap*, November 1956, quoted from: ZK der SED, DY30/IV2/20/217. On the different positions in this regard, see Hirohide Kuniyama, op. cit., pp. 167-172



Dissident writers, including journalists and artists, were prohibited from publishing, and their salaries were reduced to below the minimum requirements. Where *Berufsverbote* were officially pronounced, they were limited to 1 or 2 years. In most cases, though, they were in force for more than 30 years. The relative and cautious, never guaranteed and perpetually imperiled turning-point only came with the reforms introduced by General Secretary Nguyen Van Linh in October 1987. There have never been official rehabilitations. Noted intellectuals such as Tran Duc Thao, Nguyen Manh Tuong or Dao Duy Anh were allowed to remain in Hanoi, but they were 'excommunicated' and isolated non-persons, vegetating on the verge of material disaster and mental despair.<sup>156</sup> Phan Khoi was abused as an « old French agent and open enemy of communism », and so was Tran Duy.<sup>157</sup>

In June 1958, the powerful politician, leading cultural cadre and poet To Huu and his poet colleague and henchman for decades, Huy Can, then vice-minister of culture, reported on the results of cultural activities over the past years. They referred to the « sabotage » of the « subversive » *Nhan Van-Giai Pham* group and pointed out that « even today... reactionary publications which were directed against the Communist Party of China, against the People's Republic of China or against Ho Chi Minh » were being found.<sup>158</sup> But late in 1958, the XIVth plenum of the Central Committee reported that « the subversive elements have been given a decisive blow and the attack of the bourgeoisie has been repelled. »<sup>159</sup> In 1964, the « great model » in poetry was Chairman Mao because his poems and rhymes inspired « revolutionary spirit ».<sup>160</sup>

While poets, writers and artists were generally considered (naive but indispensable) sheep who had strayed from the right path yet who it seemed possible to recuperate through reform and education, this was not the case for a political mind like Nguyen Huu Dang. Together with two friends he was arrested as a reactionary on 10 April 1958.<sup>161</sup> Driven into a corner by rumours, insinuations and threats under phantastically secretive manoeuvres, he had tried to flee the country in order to continue the struggle for a democratic Vietnam from overseas. On 15 April 1958, the party paper *Nhan Dan*, in an article by Manh Phu Tu, anathematised him as « a very dangerous saboteur of the first order and as a Trotskyist carrying out destructive work ».<sup>162</sup> In January 1960, he was tried as a spy of the former colonial power. He spent 15 years in a penal colony near the Chinese border, isolated from the outside world, constantly threatened by hunger, cold and illness, and then 15 years under the most wretched and dehumanising conditions in his home village. Early in the 1990s, he was allowed to return to Hanoi. « Nous autres démocrates, nous sommes complètement paralysés mentalement », he says now.<sup>163</sup>

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<sup>156</sup> see the testimony of Nguyen Manh Thuong, *Un Excommunié*, op. cit.

<sup>157</sup> Abteilung Außenpolitik und Internationale Beziehungen. Über Fragen der Literatur und Kunst in der Demokratischen Republik Vietnam, Mai 1958, in: ZK der SED. See also: Gérard Tongas, op. cit., pp. 340/341

<sup>158</sup> Botschaft der DDR to Ministerium für Auswärtige Angelegenheiten, Hanoi 24/6/1958, *Die Entwicklung der DRV auf kulturellem Gebiet*, in: MfAA/A 8420, pag. 070-079

<sup>159</sup> Resolution des XIV. Plenums des Zentralkomitees der Partei der Arbeit Vietnams (November 1958), in: MfAA/A 8679, fiche 1, pag. 067

<sup>160</sup> Botschaft der DDR, Hanoi 24/11/1964, Attaché Matzke, *Einschätzung über die Kulturpolitik und kulturelle Entwicklung in der DRV, unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Verwirklichung der Beschlüsse des 9. Plenums des ZK der Partei der Werktätigen Vietnams auf dem Gebiete der Kunst und Literatur*, in: ZK der SED, DY/30/IV A2/20/437.

<sup>161</sup> Botschaft der DDR to Ministerium für Auswärtige Angelegenheiten, Hanoi 23/4/1958, in: MfAA/A 8420, pag. 069; see also Nhu Phong, op. cit., p. 64

<sup>162</sup> in: MfAA/A 8494, fiche 1, pag. 089-091. Phan Khoi died early in 1960, a few days before his courtcase was to commence.

<sup>163</sup> Nguyen Huu Dang has not been rehabilitated, but since his return to Hanoi he has received a pension. Also, the government donated him a house in noble Phan Dinh Phung street which he sold forthwith... On 2 September 2000, he appeared for about one minute on national television as a witness of the declaration of independence in 1945 – this was the very first time his name was publicly mentioned. In the same vein, the Ho Chi Minh prize for the Social Sciences for 2000, the most presti-

The questions posed by the *Nhan Van-Giai Pham* group remain to this day unresolved. Ever since the late 1980s, though, a younger generation of writers such as Duong Thu Huong, Bao Ninh and Nguyen Huy Thiep, who have participated in the so-called American war, have created uneasiness and anxiety and who are threatened with house arrest and prohibition to publish their works. On them gets heaped the concerted wrath of the authoritarian quarters in the Party and the cultural bureaucracy. « The domain of arts », Phan Khoi had written, « only belongs to the arts; here politics must not interfere. » The demand for freedom of thought in 1956 struck terror into the rulers in Hanoi because it imperilled the monopoly for spiritual hegemony. In consequence of the narrow-minded imposition of party orthodoxy, Vietnamese socialism has lost the intellectual and creative class which had been willing to shoulder the cultural and scientific modernisation of the country in order to render the system internally attractive and externally credible. Instead, philistine cultural bureaucrats under the leadership of the Party, have done their utmost to keep Vietnam isolated from the world of knowledge, from questioning and doubts, from any thought and practice unbecoming an ossified dogma, thus constraining the country into the narrow provincialism of petty bourgeois backwardness.

But then, this was one of the crucial aims of the revolution.

**Paris, February 2003**

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