

**People of Hà Nội in the Bao Cấp Era: Everyday Life under
Vietnamese Socialist Rule, 1954-1986**

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Ethics Statement

The author, whose name appears on the title of this work, has obtained, for the research described in this work, human research approval from the University of Ottawa Research Ethics Board.

Abstract

“People of Hà Nội in the Bao Cấp era: Everyday Life under Vietnamese Socialist Rule, 1954-1986” explores the lived experiences of Hà Nội residents during the socialist era, also known as the *Bao Cấp* era. This thesis argues that life in Hà Nội under the central planning system - the *bao cấp* system – was a mix of negative and positive experiences, filled with paradoxes and unpredictable changes. Drawing on personal accounts and Vietnamese official publications, it investigates Hà Nội residents’ shifting social realities, material conditions, and cultural practices. It suggests that how the residents navigated their realities were informed by, and simultaneously, informing the *bao cấp* system and larger ideological, political conditions. The thesis challenges conventional narratives and assumptions about socialism. It contributes to the history of Việt Nam and to the history of global socialist experiences.

Keywords: *Bao Cấp*; Socialism; American war; Consumerism

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Introduction

“Public memory in present-day Vietnam is characterized as much by confusion as by profusion”¹ - Hue-Tam Ho Tai’s assessment of public discourse around Vietnamese history in 2001 continues to hold true in 2022. The battle between different narratives of the revolutionary past remains as fierce as it was over two decades ago, especially now given its greater visibility to the general public due to rapid internet expansion.² However, the construction of historical narratives and the making of memories in 2022 has one major difference from that of twenty years ago. These processes no longer limited themselves to the fall of Sài Gòn in 1975, but have expanded to incorporate a new time frame: the *Bao Cấp* (Subsidy) era (1954/1975-1986/1990).³

Despite the widespread usage of the term by state and non-state-affiliated institutions or individuals alike, “*Bao Cấp* era” is strictly a colloquial name.⁴ This term does not exist in governmental official documents, nor is it employed in state-approved textbooks.⁵ *Bao Cấp*

¹ Hue-Tam Ho Tai, *The Country of Memory: Remaking the Past in Late Socialist Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 2.

² There have been waves of governmental crackdown on online posts that promote alternative interpretations of the leadership of the Vietnamese Communist Party and its predecessors in the past. See for example: Phạm Văn Hòa, “Đấu Tranh Với Những Luận Điều Xuyên Tạc, Hạ Thấp Uy Tín Lãnh Đạo Của Đảng, Nhà Nước” [Against Distorting Views Which Discredit The Legitimacy Of The Party-State], *Tuyên Giáo – Journal of the Central Propaganda and Education Commission* (2021 Aug 9), accessed 2022 Jan 18, <https://tuyengiao.vn/bao-ve-nen-tang-tu-tuong-cua-dang/dau-tranh-voi-nhung-luan-dieu-xuyen-tac-ha-thap-uy-tin-lanh-dao-cua-dang-nha-nuoc-134877>; Nhóm PV/VOV1, “Xuyên Tạc Lịch Sử - Trò Hề Của Những Kẻ Cơ Hội Chính Trị” [Distorting History – A Farce Created By Political Opportunists], *Voice of Việt Nam* (2021 Dec 2), accessed 2022 Jan 18, <https://vov.vn/chinh-tri/xuyen-tac-lich-su-tro-he-cua-nhung-ke-co-hoi-chinh-tri-908747.vov>.

³ The ambiguous periodization will be explained in further detail later.

⁴ See for example: Thế Dương, “Những Bức Vẽ Hóm Hỉnh, Khó Quên Về Thời Kỳ Bao Cấp” [Humorous And Unforgettable Illustrations Of The Bao Cấp Era], *The Communist Party of Việt Nam – Online Newspaper* (2018 Aug 26), accessed 2022 Jan 18, <https://dangcongsan.vn/anh/nhung-buc-ve-hom-hinh-kho-quen-ve-thoi-ky-bao-cap-495353.html>.

⁵ In school textbooks, the 1975-1986 period is often described as a period of building socialism and national defense. See for example: Ministry of Education and Training, *Lịch Sử 12* [History 12] (Vinh: Nhà Xuất Bản Giáo Dục, 2010), 203-7. This Vietnamese literature textbook does not use the 1975-1986 periodization and uses the larger periodization of 1975 to the present. See: Ministry of Education and Training, *Văn học 12* [Literature 12], vol. 1 (Thanh Hóa: Nhà Xuất Bản Giáo Dục, 2011), 14-8.

derives from the truncated name of the central planning system (*cơ chế bao cấp, kế hoạch hóa tập trung*), which is often regarded as the most defining feature of Việt Nam's pursuit of socialism. In this system, the government monopolized both production and distribution. Through various *bao cấp* mechanisms – including the bureaucratic machinery for managing the allocation of resources, and the law enforcement for defending state monopoly and deterring the “outside” market⁶ – the government sought to reorganize society in accordance with socialist planning, however ambiguous and inconsistent visions of socialism might have been. The system was applied first in the Democratic Republic of Việt Nam (North Việt Nam) in the late 1950s, and after 1975 was extended to the South. Both the beginning and end of this system and hence the periodization of the *Bao Cấp* era remains open to debate. Some explanations for the ambiguous periodization include the loss of official documents during the rebuilding of the bureaucracy after decolonization and during the war with the United States of America and South Việt Nam.⁷ Another explanation lies in the reality that both the adoption and abandonment of the *bao cấp* system were gradual processes.⁸ Finally, there is the problem of standpoint. From

⁶ A conventional name for the market that existed parallel to the planned economy was the “black/gray market.” “Black” and “gray” indicated the illegality of this market. However, throughout the Bao Cấp era's three decades, the government's attitude toward commercial activities outside of the official state plan underwent constant changes. The ambiguous legality of this market was also due to the fact that the treatments toward non-planned markets depended largely on the local leaderships and the local police force rather than the central government. This could be the result of miscommunication or a disconnect between these entities due to the war, inefficient bureaucracy, or the result of the local forces' independent decisions. For these reasons, I decided to use the word “outside market,” which had a stronger emphasis on the spontaneity of commercial activities that took place in this market, and its subordinate/supplemental position to the rationing system.

For extensive studies on the price gap between ration goods and market goods, and the interdependence of the *bao cấp* system and the “outside” market, see for example: Melanie Beresford and Đặng Phong, *Economic Transition in Vietnam – Trade and Aid in the Demise of a Centrally Planned Economy* (Northampton, Massachusetts: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2000).

⁷ Ken MacLean, *The Government of Distrust: Illegibility and Bureaucratic Power in Socialist Vietnam* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin, 2013), 92.

⁸ Nguyen Van Huy, “Life in Hà Nội in the State Subsidy Period – Questions Raised in Social Criticism and Social Reminiscences”, in *Historicizing Theories, Identities, and Nations*, eds. Regna Darnell and Frederic W. Gleach (Lincoln, London: University of Nebraska Press, 2017), 237; MacLean, *The Government of Distrust*, 163-4.

a Northern perspective, the era began after the 1954 takeover of Hà Nội from the French, whereas from a Southern perspective, the era began after the fall of Sài Gòn in 1975. For that reason, in national-distribution news outlets that target the entire population from North to South, there is a stronger tendency to choose 1975 as the starting year of the “national *Bao Cấp* era” (*thời kỳ bao cấp toàn quốc*). 1986 – the conventional outset of Việt Nam’s economic liberalization known as *Đổi Mới* (Renovation) – is also often represented as the end year in these media. Today’s common use of the 1975-1986 periodization, however, must also be attributed to the 2006 exhibition *Life in Hà Nội in the State Subsidy Period (1975-1986)*. This was the first exhibition to explore the hitherto vaguely defined and rarely discussed time period following the American war (1954-1975) and preceding the Renovation era (*thời kỳ Đổi Mới*) (1986-current). This exhibition stimulated a national interest in the *Bao Cấp* era, an interest which has yet to show signs of decline after over 15 years. Furthermore, as the title of the exhibition already suggested, *Life in Hà Nội* also helped to further familiarize the general public with a new approach to history: the history of everyday life.⁹ Daily experiences of ordinary people, as opposed to “great men” or the party-state and their leadership, became subjects worthy of academic inquiry on their own terms. Such an approach proved to be highly successful with the general public. It has inspired lively discourse especially on online platforms where people can easily share their memories of the period and interact with others.

My thesis takes inspiration from the ordinary person-centered approach of *Life in Hà Nội*, and benefited from the public discourse that the trailblazing exhibition launched. Specifically, it seeks to explore the newly emerged body of memories, and to reconstruct a more detailed,

⁹ For a detailed discussion on Vietnamese museal culture’s embrace of the history of everyday life approach in the early 2000s, see the short memoir of Nguyen Van Huy - former director of the Việt Nam Museum of Ethnology and who chaired *Life in Hà Nội*: Nguyen, “Life in Hà Nội”, 220-4.

multifaceted portrait of the everyday life of ordinary residents in Hà Nội during the *Bao Cấp* era. Nevertheless, the thesis also differs from the exhibition in its expansive, Northern-centered periodization of the *Bao Cấp* era, which starts from 1954 and ends in 1986. It does not concern itself with finding a *national* origin story for Việt Nam’s abandonment of the *bao cấp* system. The main goal is to understand the cultural life, social identities, and daily habits of Hà Nội residents specifically in relation to the *bao cấp* system and the changing socio-political conditions of Hà Nội.

The *Bao Cấp* era and the everyday people in Vietnamese History

In comparison to the historiography on periods such as the French colonial era and especially the American war,¹⁰ or to the emerging and expanding body of works on the post-1986 economic reform *Đổi Mới* era, the 1975 – 1986 period has received significantly less attention in both Vietnamese and Anglo-Saxon academic circles. This lack of research must first be attributed to the recent origin of the periodization of the *Bao Cấp* era. It was not until around the time of preparation for the 2006 exhibition *Life in Hà Nội* that the 1975-1986 periodization and the name “*Bao Cấp* era” (*thời bao cấp*) became popularized in Việt Nam and began to take root in the historiography.¹¹ From a Vietnamese perspective, explaining why it took so long for mass media, academia, and state institutions to break the silence on this period, Nguyễn Văn Huy

¹⁰ While widely known outside of Việt Nam as the Vietnam war, in Việt Nam or among the diaspora, depending on one’s political orientation, the war can be referred to as the Resistance War against America (*chiến tranh chống Mỹ*). In fact, this is the official term that is used in textbooks and official media in present-day Việt Nam.

¹¹ This is not to say that the term “*Bao Cấp* era” or non-official discussions about the period did not exist prior to 2005. One can still find some blog posts and online journal articles written between 2000 and 2005 which use the term “*Bao Cấp* era”.

– a key figure in the planning of *Life in Hà Nội* – offered an insightful observation: “Criticism of the past and of what was already overcome is somehow easier than criticism of what presently exists”.¹² In other words, twenty years was the necessary amount of time for the *Bao Cấp* era to be considered history, distant enough that the present leadership could avoid taking direct responsibility over what had happened during the era, hence making the era safe enough for public discussion.

This anxiety with the potential risks of voicing social critiques of what is considered too recent was not without precedent. Huy himself cited the ethnologist Nguyễn Văn Huyền’s abandonment of his 1942 studies on the 1913 Confucian court examination as an example. In his research, Huyền had identified various legal and ethical problems that occurred during the examination. However, Huyền ultimately decided not to publish the full study for fear of upsetting powerful figures who were involved in the organization of the examination.¹³ In more recent history, one could look at the case of the late 1950s *Nhân Văn Giai Phẩm* *Affair* as another prime example of the risks of voicing criticism of contemporary issues. Participants of the *Affair* consisted primarily of supporters of the postcolonial government, and who were university students, professors, artists, and other highly educated professionals. Their criticism came not from a subversive desire, but from their high expectation for the postcolonial socialist government. The authorities, however, saw these voices as having a destabilizing effect on the new order, and as such decided to quell the movement. Participants experienced both personal

¹² Nguyen, “Life in Hà Nội”, 223.

¹³ Nguyen, “Life in Hà Nội”, 224.

and professional retributions, their everyday activities were constantly monitored by the secret police force.¹⁴

Other than these precedents, Huy's concern about the socio-political impacts of a public discussion on the pre-*Đổi Mới* years outside of the conventional narrative of war victories was also grounded in the unstable political atmosphere of the 1990s and early 2000s. The *Đổi Mới* reforms that began in 1986 – the Vietnamese equivalence to the USSR's 1980s *Perestroika* or the PRC's post-1978 *Gaige Kaifang* movement – had successfully saved Việt Nam's communist party-state from suffering the same fate as Eastern bloc countries in Europe. The trade-off, however, was a rising challenge to the legitimacy of its monopoly over political power. By demolishing the *bao cấp* system, and officially acknowledging a market-oriented economy, the party-state had instilled doubt about whether its past leadership was anything but a costly, meaningless, even regressive pursuit of unattainable goals.¹⁵ Simultaneously, voices that branded *Đổi Mới* as the “Southernization” of the country, that is the perception of the (re)introduction of capitalist economy as the return to South Việt Nam's economic model, began to gather more attention.¹⁶ The result was the emergence of an atmosphere of admiration towards the state of South Việt Nam, which had been condemned by the Northern government as a corrupted puppet state after the fall of Sài Gòn in 1975. Life in South Việt Nam became remembered as one single cosmopolitan city of Sài Gòn, as *la perle de l'Extrême-Orient* - divorced from war and

¹⁴ For detailed studies of the *Nhân Văn Giai Phẩm* Affair, see for example: Shawn McHale, “Vietnamese Marxism, Dissent, and the Politics of Postcolonial Memory: Tran Duc Thao, 1946-1993”, *The Journal of Asian Studies* 61, no.1 (February 2002), 7-31, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2700187>; Peter Zinoman, “Nhân Văn – Giai Phẩm and Vietnamese ‘Reform Communism’ in the 1950s: A Revisionist Interpretation”, *Journal of Cold War Studies* 13, no.1 (Winter 2011), 60-100, https://doi.org/10.1162/JCWS_a_00071.

¹⁵ See this sentiment in: Michael J. Totten, “Hanoi's Capitalist Revolution”, *City Journal* (2015), accessed 2022 Jan 25, <https://www.city-journal.org/html/Hanoi%E2%80%99s-capitalist-revolution-13743.html>.

¹⁶ Melanie Beresford, “Vietnam: Northernizing the South or Southernizing the North?”, *Contemporary Southeast Asia* 8, no. 4 (1987 Mar 1), 261–75, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25797914>.

corruption, and abundant in consumer goods.¹⁷ In total contrast, the *bao cấp* system was now deemed a move backward and failing to foster prosperity (*phú quý giật lùi*) – a dysfunctional system that equally impoverished (*cào bằng*) the nation. By the late 1990s, the idealized perception of pre-1975 South Việt Nam, along with a rising skepticism about the war and ultimately about the party’s leadership, were pervasive and alarming enough to be categorized as a “cultural malady” in the 1998 *Central Resolution 03-NQ/TW by the Eighth Congress on Building and Developing a Progressive Vietnamese Culture Rich in National Identity*.¹⁸

Huy and other members of *Life in Hà Nội*’s advisory council were acutely aware of this problem.¹⁹ Their considerations of post-*Đổi Mới* political conditions thus shaped the narrative that came out of the exhibition. By focusing entirely on ordinary persons and not on the country’s leadership, and by portraying their everyday struggles with limited resources in terms of resilience and creativity, *Life in Hà Nội* managed to illuminate various social issues of the time, yet without directing too much attention to the party-state’s responsibility in generating these issues. Instead, the exhibition was even able to reinvigorate the party-state’s image as a government capable of listening to its people, reinforcing its legitimate ruling power. The success of *Life in Hà Nội* strengthened the confidence among domestic scholars that this interpretive framework was politically safe, yet it provided enough space for extensive inquiries.

¹⁷ This phenomenon can be observed today in picture collections of “old Sài Gòn” (*Sài Gòn xưa*) that are posted and shared online, most of which shared the narrative of “beautiful and rich Sài Gòn”. See, for example: “Bộ Ảnh Đẹp Về Sài Gòn Xưa, Trước Năm 1975” [Collection Of Beautiful Pictures Of Old Sài Gòn Prior To 1975], *Hình Ảnh Việt Nam*, accessed 2022 Jan 25, <https://hinhanhVietNam.com/bo-anh-dep-ve-sai-gon-xua-truoc-nam-1975/>.

¹⁸ Ban Chấp Hành Trung Ương, *Nghị Quyết Số 03-NQ/TW Hội Nghị Lần Thứ Năm Ban Chấp Hành Trung Ương Đảng (Khóa VIII) Về Xây Dựng Và Phát Triển Nền Văn Hoá Việt Nam Tiên Tiến, Đậm Đà Bản Sắc Dân Tộc* [Central Resolution No.03-NQ/TW by the Eighth Congress on Building and Developing a Progressive Vietnamese Culture Rich in National Identity], 1998 Jul 16, accessed 2022 Jan 25, <https://thuvienphapluat.vn/van-ban/Van-hoa-Xa-hoi/Nghi-quyet-03-NQ-TW-nam-1998-ve-xay-dung-va-phat-trien-nen-van-hoa-Viet-Nam-tien-130939.aspx>.

¹⁹ See the notes from the council’s meeting in: Nguyen, “Life in Hà Nội”, 225-30.

The result was a nascent body of economic history works that sought to identify the “roots” of *Đổi Mới* in the *Bao Cấp* era using a bottom-up approach.²⁰ A pioneer of this approach was the economic historian Đặng Phong, who also served as a member of the advisory council for *Life in Hà Nội*. In his analyses of economic behaviors of ordinary people and institutions, Đặng Phong shed light on three important points: First, the complexity of state actors as individual entities with differing ways of thinking, who were constantly in negotiation with one another and with the population; second, the dual realities that unorthodox individual economic activities and policy decisions sustained and simultaneously undermined the *bao cấp* system; third, the larger context of international politics within which Việt Nam was embedded, and the mutually informing relationship between domestic/international policies and everyday economic experiences.²¹ These findings indeed demonstrated that post-*Đổi Mới* political circumstances had put certain constraints on domestic studies in terms of approach, research questions, language, and conclusions. In other words, for scholars like Đặng who wished to have their works published in Việt Nam, the party-state’s increased vulnerability to attacks from anti-communist forces had led to a hesitation toward a systematic and straightforward critical assessment of past leadership and human tragedies.²² Nevertheless, as members of the Vietnamese community who possessed firsthand experience of the *Bao Cấp* era and who also possessed multiple valuable personal contacts, domestic Vietnamese researchers were able to conduct research from angles

²⁰ See, for example: Đặng Phong, “*Phá Rào*” Trong Kinh Tế Vào Đêm Trước *Đổi Mới* [“Fence Breaking” In The Economy On The Eve Of *Đổi Mới*], (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Tri Thức, 2009); Thái Duy, *Khoán Chui Hay Là Chết* [Hidden Contracts Or Death] (TP.HCM: Nhà Xuất Bản Trẻ, 2015).

²¹ Beresford and Đặng, *Economic Transition in*; Đặng Phong, *Lịch Sử Ngân Hàng Ngoại Thương Việt Nam Vietcombank 1963-2003* [History Of Bank For Foreign Trade Of Việt Nam Vietcombank 1963-2003], (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Chính Trị Quốc Gia, 2003); Đặng Phong, *Tư Duy Kinh Tế Việt Nam 1975–1989* [Việt Nam’s Economic Mindset 1975–1989] (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Tri Thức, 2013).

²² Đặng Phong spoke briefly about self-censoring and described the publishing of his studies on unorthodox economic activities as a process of testing the waters. See: Đặng, Preface to “*Phá Rào*” Trong.

that non-native scholars might have difficulties approaching. For instance, domestic studies were particularly strong at pinpointing subtle yet pivotal changes in the socio-economic conditions of the era,²³ identifying non-Politburo members who were influential in grass-root movements or in various state institutions and examining public reactions to state policies and ideological discourse. For these reasons, the knowledge that domestically published works produced was no less valuable than those produced outside of the Vietnamese government's surveillance, which themselves were subjected to various other political forces.

The body of English language literature, in parallel to its Vietnamese counterpart, also primarily focused on tracing the development of *Đổi Mới* in the decade after the Vietnam war.²⁴ However, unlike Vietnamese scholarship which preferred the bottom-up approach and avoided harsh criticism of the party-state, English language scholarship tended to focus on the internal politics of the Politburo and its economic decision-making processes. Scholars were mainly concerned with identifying the consistent “failures” of the socialist central planning system throughout its existence between 1954 and 1986, or the “failures” of each state economic plan prior to *Đổi Mới*, that had compelled the government to initiate reforms.²⁵ These “failure”-oriented studies, when put together with the massive number of academic works that dealt with

²³ Some policies, including both local-level and nation-wide policies, such as Directive Z30 (1983), were conducted without being documented in papers. It is extremely difficult to assess the importance of undocumented official policies without having any knowledge of its existence and/or having connections with those who were directly involved in the enforcement of these policies.

²⁴ I use the name “Vietnam war” and not “American war” in this section to reflect the Euro-American perspective.

²⁵ See, for example: Adam Fforde and Stefan de Vylder, *From Plan to Market – The Economic Transition in Vietnam* (New York: Westview Press, 1996); Dang Phong and Melanie Beresford, *Authority Relations & Economic Decision-Making in Vietnam: An Historical Perspective* (Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, 1998); Adam Fforde, *Vietnamese State Industry and the Political Economy of Commercial Renaissance: Dragon's Tooth or Curate's Egg?* (Stanton Harcourt, Oxford: Chandos Publishing, 2007).

An exception is Benedict J. Tria Kerkvliet, *The Power of Everyday Politics: How Vietnamese Peasants Transformed National Policy* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2005). Kerkvliet used a “transformation from below” approach and examined farmers' struggles and resistance to the authorities that were manifested in their everyday activities, and which ultimately contributed to the collapse of collective farming.

the horrors of the Vietnam war, perpetuated an image of Việt Nam under state socialism as a war-torn country with a dysfunctional planning economy.²⁶ Under the failed planning system, poverty, and uninformed corrective measures in the form of unreasonable repression and extortion rendered society a hotbed of lawlessness, dissension, and ultimately of human tragedies – as exemplified by the boat people crisis. This construction of the socialist past was further reinforced by the new economic studies that emphasized the starkly different socio-economic conditions of before and after *Đổi Mới*, and attributed these transformations to the progressive leadership, whose greatest fear was for Việt Nam to be “left behind.”²⁷ In doing so, these studies perpetuated the story of a backward Việt Nam that overcame its tragic fate by disposing its socialist utopian dream to join the global capitalist system, and potentially became Asia’s “new economic dragon.”²⁸ Such a “success” story corresponded to the post-Cold War atmosphere in which the master narrative about capitalism’s inevitable victory – the triumphant *end of history* – was not only gaining a large audience in the general public worldwide, but was also shaping the directions of knowledge production in multiple academic disciplines.²⁹ It is undeniable that the

²⁶ See, for example: Michael Lind, *Vietnam: The Necessary War: A Reinterpretation of America's Most Disastrous Military Conflict* (New York: The Free Press, 1999); Mark Moyar, *Triumph Forsaken: The Vietnam war, 1954-1965* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Howard Jones, *My Lai: Vietnam, 1968, and the Descent into Darkness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

²⁷ See, for example: Binh-Tran Nam and Chi Do Pham, *The Vietnamese Economy: Awakening the Dormant Dragon* (New York: Routledge, 2003); David W. P. Elliott, *Changing Worlds: Vietnam's Transition from Cold War to Globalization* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

²⁸ The question of whether Việt Nam is or will be a new economic dragon/tiger in Asia is a recurring theme in economic studies in both the Vietnamese and the English language. See, for example: Brian Van Arkadie and Raymond Mallon, *Vietnam: A Transitioning Tiger?* (Canberra: Asia Pacific Press at the Australian National University, 2004); Anne Welle-Strand, Monica Vlaicu, and Arild Tjeldvoll, “Vietnam– A New Economic Dragon in Southeast Asia?”, *Journal of Developing Societies* 29, no.2, (2013 May 3), 155–87, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0169796X13479705>; Huỳnh Bửu Sơn, *Giấc Mơ Hóa Rồng: Kinh Tế Việt Nam Trong 25 Năm Mở Cửa Và Đổi Mới* [Becoming Dragon Dream: Vietnamese Economy During 25 Years Of Opening Up And Renovating] (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Thế Giới, 2016); Finn Tarp, *Growth, Structural Transformation, And Rural Change In Viet Nam: A Rising Dragon On The Move* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

²⁹ Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Free Press, 1992).

present-day Vietnamese economy and the country's GDP and living standards on average are a far cry from those of over forty years ago. Nevertheless, economic problems were only one element of social realities under the *bao cấp* system. Similar to the ways in which the dominant "Vietnam war" framework contributed to the othering of the Vietnamese by reducing their multidimensionality to a single category of "victim", the continuing dominance of the "economic success" narrative threatened to flatten *bao cấp* experiences and the *Bao Cấp* era's person into a cultureless, indiscernible figure.³⁰ In this economically failed and unjust representation of the era before *Đổi Mới*, the *Bao Cấp* era's person and his experiences were to serve as the parameter for evaluating poverty and state policies' effectiveness. Such a narrow framework did not allow for a rigorous examination of personal experiences, life stories, and anecdotes that potentially shed light on the daily routines of the everyday person, their concerns over matters other than politics, ideology, and the economy. In other words, there was no attempt at studying the everyday life experiences of Vietnamese people before *Đổi Mới* for the sake of understanding better the complex social and cultural life of Vietnamese people.

However, as we moved further away from 1989, and as the *end of history* thesis significantly lost its appeal with the unfolding of neoliberalism, voices that criticized the reproduction of Cold War dichotomies in existing scholarship began to emerge. These voices pointed to how Cold War ideological biases and distortions manifested themselves in the design of research questions, and thus demanded new approaches that could provide better

For a discussion about the reproduction of Cold War tropes and the promotion of American exceptionalism in post-Soviet era, see: Adaluna Borcila, *American Representations of Post-Communism: Television, Travel Sites, and Post-Cold War Narratives* (New York: Routledge, 2015); on the impact of Soviet dissolution on the social sciences, see for example: Marian Burchardt and Gal Kirn, eds., *Beyond Neoliberalism? – Social Analysis after 1989* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017).

³⁰ For an in-depth criticism of the "victim" narrative for the Vietnam war, see: Viet Thanh Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2016).

representations of socialist societies. This shift was most noticeable in the fields of Russian Studies, East European Studies, and Chinese Studies. The result was a burgeoning body of literature that concertedly reexamined the various aspects of socialist realities, with increasing sensitivity to geographical and temporal specificities. Applying new approaches such as social history, oral history, transnational history, decolonization, feminism, materialism, or interdisciplinary approaches, these new studies shed light on the complexity of socialist experiences as they were embedded in networks of existing power relations and identities.³¹ These new studies, underlaid by a desire to rehumanize the peoples of the socialist era, successfully challenged Cold War binary narratives without falling into the trap of romanticization. The realities of socialism, as shown in these studies, were where “control, coercion, alienation, fear, and moral quandaries were irreducibly mixed with ideals, communal ethics, dignity, creativity, and care for the future.”³² In the field of Vietnamese studies, recent studies have also displayed a shift in themes, research questions, approaches, and not least, the adoption of the colloquial naming “*Bao Cấp* era.”³³ On the topic of everyday politics, Benedict J. Tria Kervliet and Danielle Labbé, in their respective analyses of everyday people’s productive

³¹ Some examples include Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Time* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); Katherine Pence and Paul Betts, *Socialist Modern: East German Everyday Culture and Politics* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2007); Elizabeth McGuire, *Red at Heart: How Chinese Communists Fell in Love with the Russian Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); Yan Li, *China’s Soviet Dream: Propaganda, Culture, and Popular Imagination* (New York: Routledge, 2018); Anastasia Lakhtikova, Angela Brintlinger and Irina Glushchenko, eds., *Seasoned Socialism: Gender and Food in Late Soviet Everyday Life* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2019); Rachel Applebaum, *Empire of Friends: Soviet Power and Socialist Internationalism in Cold War Czechoslovakia* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2019); Karl Gerth, *Unending Capitalism: How Consumerism Negated China’s Communist Revolution* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

³² Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever*, 10.

³³ The adoption of the colloquial term *Bao Cấp* era instead of more generic terms like “socialist era”, or “postwar era” that were used in previous economic studies, is symbolically important, as it signifies the adoption of the Vietnamese everyday temporal perspective instead of a non-Vietnamese (Western) or high politics-centered perspective. The use thus represents an increasing proximity between English language literature and social realities in Việt Nam.

activities and land strategies in rural and suburban areas, revealed the mutually transformative relationship and interdependence between “the people” and “the state.”³⁴ These studies, especially Labbé’s, not only shed light on the everyday negotiating process through which official norms and rules were altered or nullified, but also challenged the “state/people” binary division. Too often, this dichotomy was reproduced in early studies of socialist societies as the conceptual framework for dividing society neatly into two realms: the public realm of “official” culture, surveillance, and pretension, and the private realm of “unofficial” culture, subjectivity, and resistance.³⁵ It was easy to forget that “the state” itself consisted of human agents, who were themselves members of their local communities, who had family, friends, and personal aspirations, and were entangled in structures of social norms and obligations. The state agents’ positionality within these structures informed the ways state ideologies and policies were being mediated through the agent, that is, how they were understood and practiced in reality.

Another important contribution was the elucidation of international influences on Việt Nam by the new studies that examined the various forms of encounters between Vietnamese and

³⁴ Kervliet, *The Power of*; Danielle Labbé, *Land Politics and Livelihoods on the Margins of Hanoi, 1920-2010* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2014).

³⁵ See, for example: Václav Havel and John Keane, *The Power of the Powerless: Citizens Against the State in Central-Eastern Europe* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1985); Anna Wierzbicka, “Antitotalitarian Language in Poland: Some Mechanisms of Linguistic Self-Defense”, *Language in Society* 19, no. 1 (1990), 1–59, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4168104>; Natalia Kovalyova, *Unlearning the Soviet Tongue: Discursive Practices of a Democratizing Polity* (London: Lexington Books, 2014).

Recent works in the field of Russian studies have increasingly addressed the problems with the public-private/underground binary. This has led to newer studies that emphasized moments of conflation between the two spheres, or even questioned the practicality of the “private self” concept for understanding Russian reality. See, for example: Oleg Kharkhordin, *The Collective and the Individual in Russia: A Study of Practices* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Jochen Hellbeck, *Revolution on My Mind: Writing a Diary under Stalin* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005); Irina Paperno, *Stories of the Soviet Experience: Memoirs, Diaries, Dreams* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009).

“the West/Westerners” (*Tây*).³⁶ Most notably, Christina Schwenkel’s extensive works on Eastern Europe’s Vietnamese diasporas and on socialist fellowship programs explored the everyday experiences of socialist modernity, through which was revealed the construction of “the West” as the utopian paradise within Vietnamese society, which thus had the effect of reinforcing confidence in socialist ideals.³⁷ However, the *Bao Cấp* era’s Việt Nam, particularly the North, was not constrained to conventional socialist cultures alone. Recent ethnographic and transnational studies showed that Việt Nam was also exposed to new flows of aesthetic and material sensibilities from the Western bloc through the incorporation of the South, remittance from overseas Vietnamese (*Việt Kiều*³⁸), trade with capitalist countries, or even through Eastern European channels.³⁹ These studies challenged the preconception of a colorless, static, and unilaterally imposed socialist culture, as well as the preconception of the *Bao Cấp* era’s Việt Nam as highly isolated with limited connection to only a few Eastern bloc countries.

³⁶ See, for examples: Andrew Hardy, “From a Floating World: Emigration to Europe from Postwar Vietnam”, *Asian and Pacific Migration Journal* 11, no.4 (2002), 463-84, <https://doi.org/10.1177/011719680201100406>; Martin Grossheim, “‘Revisionism’ in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam: New Evidence from the East German Archives”, *Cold War History* 5, no.4 (November 2005), 451-77, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14682740500284804>; Từ Thị Loan, “Giao Lưu Văn Hóa Việt – Nga Và Những Vấn Đề Đặt Ra Trong Thời Kỳ Hội Nhập” [Vietnamese-Russian Cultural Exchanges And Related Issues In The Age Of International Integration], *Tạp Chí Văn Hóa Nghệ Thuật* 293 (2008 Nov), accessed 2022 Feb 4, http://www.hids.hochiminhcity.gov.vn/c/document_library/get_file?uuid=4a380122-4f02-42fa-860f-24862569fc92&groupId=13025; Quinn Slobodian, *Comrades of Color: East Germany in the Cold War World*. New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 2015.

³⁷ Christina Schwenkel, “Socialist Mobilities: Crossing New Terrains in Vietnamese Migration Histories”, *Central and Eastern European Migration Review* 4, no.1 (2015 June), 13-25, http://www.ceemr.uw.edu.pl/sites/default/files/CEEMR_Vol_4_No_1_Schwenkel.pdf; Christina Schwenkel, *Building Socialism: The Afterlife of East German Architecture in Urban Vietnam* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2020).

³⁸ Although widely used today to refer to Vietnamese diasporas in general, during the *Bao Cấp* years, the term was mostly used to refer to the diasporas outside of Eastern Europe, including long-established Vietnamese communities in France and former French colonies, or former citizens of South Việt Nam.

³⁹ See, for example: Nora Annesley Taylor, *Painters in Hanoi: An Ethnography of Vietnamese Art* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2004); Ivan V. Small, *Currencies of Imagination: Channeling Money and Chasing Mobility in Vietnam* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2018); Quyền Văn Minh and Stan BH Tan-Tangbau, *Playing Jazz in Socialist Vietnam: Quyền Văn Minh and Jazz in Hanoi* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2021).

Situating “People of Hà Nội in the Bao Cấp era” in the Literature

As a study of Hà Nội residents’ lived experiences during the Bao Cấp era, my thesis represents a contribution to the fields of Vietnamese history, particularly Vietnamese social and cultural history, and the studies of everyday socialism. Going beyond the conventional interpretive framework of the “Vietnam war”, or of the “pre-*Đổi Mới*” period, the thesis explores the *Bao Cấp* era (1954-1986) as a distinctive and independent historical period. The main subject of study is not state affairs, but the everyday people of the era. The term “everyday people” here refers to ordinary individuals in their daily circumstances at home, at work, at play, and in their social circles. Their daily circumstances encompass a variety of subjective experiences that are either shared among members of a community or highly unique to the owner of such experiences. For example, these include their housing conditions, eating habits, entertainment, quarrels and cooperation, loves and hates, anxieties, aspiration in life, expectations for the future, and so on. Differing from previous studies, my work examines personal accounts not for the sake of illustrating the effects of policy making. They are primary sources for understanding the era’s diverse ways of life, and for reconstructing a portrait of the era’s society and culture in its complexities. My work is in no way a rejection of earlier historical scholarship that utilized conceptual frameworks of high politics or economic development. A history of the everyday ordinary people is indeed often defined in opposition to a history of “great men” and the workings of state institutions. Nevertheless, it should be remembered that every political leader is also a member of society, and that state institutions function within a society, meaning that they both inform and are informed by members of that particular society – the everyday ordinary people. Therefore, the everyday life and the ordinary people must be examined in conjunction

with high politics and socioeconomic structures. In situating everyday experiences in the broader political and economic context provided by previous works, my thesis demonstrates that policy making and large-scale events (e.g., the fall of Sài Gòn in 1975) informed and altered, to varying degrees, the existing set of norms and values in Hà Nội. Simultaneously, I argue that Hà Nội residents' assertion of their subjectivity through everyday behaviors and aspirations also had the effect of transforming their environment. Drawing from Alexei Yurchak's insights on the non-resistance-driven transformation in late Soviet life and culture, I further argue that the interactions between ordinary people, the government, and the larger socio-political structures were highly dynamic, and could not be theorized into a single top-down nor bottom-up model.⁴⁰ Depending on a person's affiliation to a particular social group, their specific circumstance at the time, or the specific moment of history (e.g., the bombing of Hà Nội), their interactions with the authorities and larger structures could be of oppression – resistance/compliance, or mutually beneficial and inspiring. In some instances, however, the mutual influence neither fitted neatly into any of the above two categories, and instead led to a shift in the current culture and political climate toward new directions that were not fully controlled nor anticipated by the government. This emphasis on agency, complexities, and indeterminacy is in conjunction with the growing body of social and cultural history that challenges Cold War binaries and reexamines socialist societies from various viewpoints. My findings share with these studies the observation that the interactions between people and their surrounding environment in socialist societies were extremely complex and could not easily be theorized. It is within this complexity that agency took form and social dynamics developed. No government, or party-state, no matter how

⁴⁰ Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever*.

powerful, could fully engineer its citizens and society into a uniform mold, nor could it predict its citizens' every move and the direction toward which a society was heading.

My thesis chooses to study residents of the Capital City of Hà Nội during the extended *Bao Cấp* era (1954-1986) to illuminate the larger historical context in which Vietnamese socialist experiences took form. Hà Nội, with its previous history as the colonial capital city which symbolized the *mission civilisatrice*, makes for a suitable case study for understanding the intricacies of how socialist planning – in this case, the *bao cấp* system – became a means of decolonizing the colonial order. Similarly, as the Socialist Capital City during the *Bao Cấp* era, Hà Nội was where international influence, its interaction with the *bao cấp* system and socialist ideological discourse were the most observable in the North. The larger time frame is more suitable for a more comprehensive analysis of how the so-called socialist social and cultural life under the *bao cấp* system did not emerge in a vacuum nor strictly abide by predetermined socialist ideals. They were instead constantly in dialogue with the city's colonial legacies, wartime experiences, and the changing socio-political conditions of the Cold War. Again, how these elements informed Hà Nội's social fabric was riven with paradoxes and unpredictability, making it difficult for the authorities to ascertain and establish clear meanings for the changes that were taking place in society. It was within this context that Hà Nội residents formed their cultural tastes, habits, aspirations, and how they expressed and negotiated their identities. Through these experiences of self-definition, Hà Nội residents exerted influence on larger socio-political structures that conditioned their everyday life.

Research methodology – Navigating the memories of Hà Nội during the *Bao Cấp* era

Inspired by the exhibition *Life in Hà Nội*, and Karl Gerth's use of personal accounts from online sources for his work on China's socialist revolution, my thesis collects and examines personal memories from a variety of sources. These includes memoirs and interviews published by Vietnamese domestic publishers, self-published memoirs, online posts, as well as interviews and conversations conducted by the author. I collected the bulk of text-based materials in Canada from late 2020 to late 2021. Electronic materials were collected from social media groups and online forums of different political orientations or concerns. Printed materials, including memoirs and novels, were sent from Hà Nội, Việt Nam to Canada, or were obtained in digital form. Interviews and personal correspondence were collected from late 2021 to early 2022, through emails, phone calls, or private messages on social media. Recruitment of research participants was sent through emails, social media, and by word-of-mouth. Dozens of people expressed interest in interviews, or simply wanted to talk in a casual setting (e.g., no recording, through private messages, short emails) about some of their special memories. The majority of participants was in their fifties or sixties – those who came of age during the height of the American war in Hà Nội, or during the last decade before *Đổi Mới*. The inability to travel to Hà Nội due to the COVID-19 pandemic reduced my opportunity to have individual conversations with older generations who had memories of both the colonial era and the *Bao Cấp* era. The collected personal accounts provided an enormous amount of information about the *Bao Cấp* era that conventional primary materials such as official decrees, public records, statistical data, or newspaper articles produced during the era did not reveal. Nonetheless, as has been stated in

Orlando Figes's work on the private life in Stalin's Russia, using memory as primary source is a tricky business, especially in studies on highly politicized time periods.⁴¹

It is now commonly recognized that “memory is not a passive depository of facts, but an active process of creation of meanings.”⁴² In other words, memory is an act of highlighting certain past experiences and from which it is possible to construct a representation of the past. This definition implies that memory is necessarily shaped by the subjectivity of he or she who remembers, and the specific conditions of the moment in which the act of remembering is taking place. A careful examination of these particularities of memory is necessary for understanding the principle behind the organization of random experiences into an intelligible picture of the past: for becoming aware of what was shown and what was not – of what was remembered and what was forgotten. Such an interrogation is extremely crucial for navigating the highly politicized *Bao Cấp* era discourse that is currently taking place in Hà Nội. A consideration for the specific historical and cultural contexts allows us to see through the obfuscating effects of ideological and moral accusations, to piece together purportedly conflicting or unrelated memories, and form a more inclusive representation of the *Bao Cấp* era's Hà Nội residents.

The contextualization of the *Bao Cấp* era's memory required again a revisitation of the 2006 exhibition *Life in Hà Nội in the State Subsidy Period (1975-1986)*. For the academic community, the exhibition signaled state approval of a certain approach to researching the *Bao Cấp* era. Likewise, for the general public, it offered a larger narrative within which one could find positive meanings in their otherwise random experiences, and from which to construct their

⁴¹ Orland Figes, *The Whisperers: Private Life in Stalin's Russia* (London: Penguin Books, 2007).

⁴² Alessandro Portelli, “What Makes Oral History Different,” in *The Oral History Reader*, eds. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (London: Routledge, 2006), 37-8.

personal yet relatable life stories under the *bao cấp* system.⁴³ Typical and tedious daily routines, such as raising a pig in the bathroom of a tiny apartment, or lining up from 2 a.m. to buy rice, were no longer mere fragments of an irrelevant personal past. They had been incorporated into a collective story of the whole nation overcoming hardships with resilience and creativity. This narrative, which transformed the every ordinary person into a hero of the nation and a hero of their family, was able to find a large audience. Its popularity was due to the fact that it resonated with the older generation's desire to be respected by the younger ones. Specifically, it rescued the *Bao Cấp* era's generation from the accusation of being passive, outdated, and inadaptive to the current post-*Đổi Mới* market economy. Instead, the narrative affirmed them as possessing qualities such as resilience and creativity – qualities that remained relevant in the current time.⁴⁴ Secondly, because it made sense as the logical continuity of an already existing grand narrative. The depiction of everyday people as heroes who rose up against all odds fit into the larger national story of Vietnamese heroism, known as the four thousand-year-old tradition of building and guarding the country (*bốn nghìn năm dựng nước và giữ nước*).⁴⁵ This grand narrative that neatly organized past resistances against invasions into a national epic, and that affirmed resilience and heroism as the tradition of Vietnamese people began to be promoted strongly in the 1920s and 1930s. Nationalists during the colonial era reinterpreted past historical figures into national heroes in an attempt to create a heroic narrative upon which a sense of national identity

⁴³ For a more detailed discussion of the exhibition experience, see: Ken MacLean, “The Rehabilitation of an Uncomfortable Past: Everyday Life in Việt Nam During the Subsidy Period (1975-1986),” *History and Anthropology* 19, no.3 (Sept 2008), 281-303, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02757200802449915>.

⁴⁴ Visitors of *Life in Hà Nội* had praised the exhibition for its ability to encourage in youths a sense of gratitude toward the elders. See the exhibition's reception in: Nguyen, “Life in Hà Nội”, 247-9; See an article which claimed that by engaging in Bao Cấp era-themed activities and spaces, youths will be able to “understand better their parents and grandparents, and love them even more”: Thủy Dương, “Khi Người Trẻ Tìm Về... Thời Bao Cấp” [When Youth Found Their Way Back To...The Bao Cấp Era], *Pháp Luật* (2018 Aug 7), accessed 2022 Feb 6, <https://baophapluat.vn/khi-nguoi-tre-tim-ve-thoi-bao-cap-post282934.html>.

⁴⁵ For a general discussion on the construction of this heroic narrative, see: Tai, *The Country of*, 2-3.

– perceived as crucial to the achievement of Vietnamese autonomy and independence – could be built.⁴⁶ After the end of French colonial rule, the communist party in the North then continued to use this already established heroic master narrative to justify the war effort and the building of socialism.⁴⁷

The narrative’s huge success later inspired the production of several smaller-scale exhibitions, Television programs, documentaries, and memoirs in turn fed into public discussions about the era. These cultural products further added to the heroic narrative another layer of nostalgia by emphasizing a connection between material impoverishment and a strong sense of community (“*Nghèo mà ấm áp tình người*”).⁴⁸ Specifically, the struggles for limited resources were remembered fondly as meaningful life experiences that helped foster kindness among people. Negative social problems and inequalities were primarily attributed to an un/under-contextualized poverty. Alternatively, they were rendered as the problem of a few individuals with bad personalities who only *happened to be* in positions of power, rather than a systemic issue of the *bao cấp* system. In most cases, the “antagonists,” such as the notoriously difficult staffers from state-owned stores, made their appearance in comical episodes, playing the role of minor obstacles that helped illuminate the street smarts of the protagonists – “the ordinary people” (*nhân dân*). This narrative style, called “half cry-able half laughable” (*dở khóc dở cười*), was most noticeable in the first wave of domestically published memoirs. These early memoirs

⁴⁶ David G. Marr, *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 1920-1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 252-287.

⁴⁷ Patricia M. Pelley, *Postcolonial Vietnam: New Histories of the National Past* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002), 113-62; Benoît de Tréglodé, *Heroes and Revolution in Vietnam* (Arts Link: National University of Singapore Press, 2012), 33-8; Olga Dror, *Making Two Vietnams: War and Youth Identities 1965-1975* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 169-81, 203-6.

⁴⁸ See for example, the special program that recreates a “typical” lunar new year celebration in the Bao Cấp era produced by the Việt Nam Television: *Và Tết là Hy Vọng* [And Tết is Hope], directed by Trần Quốc Trọng, aired 2016 Feb 6 on VTV1, accessed 2021 Mar 4, <https://vtv.vn/video/tet-nghia-la-hy-vong-06-02-2016-116003.htm>.

were shaped by an underlying intention of introducing to the audience an overview of the *Bao Cấp* era, and by a desire to make the author’s personal life story as relatable as possible by grafting it onto an already available collective memory.⁴⁹ The humorous, lighthearted, and heartwarming perception of the era was further amplified by a savvy leisure industry that sought to turn the *Bao Cấp* past into a marketable commodity.⁵⁰ Through an exhaustive commercializing process that tried to tap into the affection and curiosity of both the old and young, the *Bao Cấp* era was reimagined into a retro aesthetic and symbolism of spiritual purity and innocence. The consumption of artifacts or *Bao Cấp* era-inspired products became associated with romantic escapism - the “tasteful” act of seeking refuge from the busy everyday life, perceived as materially abundant yet lacking tenderness and human warmth.⁵¹

Such a perception had been subjected to criticism of romanticizing and trivializing the era’s “horri-fying” (*đáng sợ*) aspects.⁵² Nevertheless, one should acknowledge the constraints of the early memoirs’ position as being among the first to initiate a conversation about the era. Humor and positivity might have been for the authors a defense against the prying eyes of a party-state that was wary about anti-party sentiments. It might have come also from an

⁴⁹ See for example: Multiple authors, *Chuyện Thời Bao Cấp* [Stories Of The Bao Cấp Era], 4 vols (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Thông Tấn, 2014, 2016, 2017, 2018); Ngô Minh, *Sống Thời Bao Cấp* [Living The Bao Cấp Era] (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Hội Nhà Văn, 2016).

⁵⁰ See, for example, an extensive list of Bao Cấp era-inspired cafés in Hà Nội: Anna, “19 Quán Cà Phê Bao Cấp Chưa Bao Giờ Cũ Ở Hà Nội - “Đặc Sản” Thủ Đô Dành Cho Những Ai Muốn Ngược Dòng Thời Gian” [19 Bao Cấp-Styled Cafés That Never Get Old In Hà Nội – The Capital’s “Delicacy” For Those Who Seek A Return To The Past], *Kênh 14* (2019 Jul 8), accessed 2022 Feb 6, <https://kênh14.vn/19-quan-ca-phe-bao-cap-chua-bao-gio-cu-o-ha-noi-dac-san-thu-do-danh-cho-nhung-ai-muon-nguoc-dong-thoi-gian-20190704162318174.chn>.

⁵¹ See for example, an advertising article for the *Bao Cấp* era-inspired café “O kìa Hà Nội” (“Oh Hà Nội”). The article described the café as a space of tranquility and nostalgia that existed outside of modern society and thus divorced from modern anxieties: Diệu Linh, “‘O Kìa Hà Nội’ - Điểm Hẹn Cho Những Người Yêu Hà Nội Xưa” [“Oh Hà Nội” – A Rendezvous For Old Hà Nội Lovers], *VOV TV* (2019 Aug 13), accessed 2022 Feb 6, <https://truyenhinhdulich.vn/nha-hang/o-kia-ha-noi-diem-hen-cho-nhung-nguoi-yeu-ha-noi-xua-9127.html>.

⁵² Ngọc Diệp, “Thời Bao Cấp, ‘Thương Nhớ’ Bao Nhiêu Thì Đủ?” [The Bao Cap Era, How Far Should “Nostalgia” Go?], *Tuổi Trẻ Online* (2019 Apr 9), accessed 2022 Feb 9, <https://tuoitre.vn/thoi-bao-cap-thuong-nho-bao-nhieu-thi-du-20190408225031529.htm>.

assumption that the era was truly difficult, and highlighting the positives was deemed the most viable way to start the conversation, without triggering traumatic experiences that could dissuade people from participating in this dialogue. Indeed, as public discourse around the *Bao Cấp* era progressed, we could observe in more recent publications, as well as in online posts and discussions, further diversified and personalized stories about the *Bao Cấp* past.⁵³ Surely, the growing body of memoirs continued to reveal various perspectives on the *Bao Cấp* era, shedding light on the diverse experiences of different social groups under the umbrella category of *nhân dân*, or “ordinary people”. But humorous memories and positive portrayals of the era should be taken seriously, rather than being dismissed sweepingly as mere nostalgia, or at worst, irrational romanticization of the ideologically “brainwashed.”⁵⁴ Specific groups of the population did

⁵³ For a memoir that kept the humor but had a dark undertone, see: Nguyễn Quang Lập, *Ký Ưc Vụn* [Fragmented Memories], 2 Vols (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Hội Nhà Văn, 2011, 2013). For memoirs with a soft-spoken and melancholic voice, alluding to the particularity of the author’s family background, see: Trung Sỹ, *Hà Nội, Mũ Rom Và Tem Phiếu* [Hà Nội, Straw Hat and Rationing Coupons] (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Lao Động, 2019); Huệ Ninh, *Hồi Ký Thời Xuân Sắc* [Memoirs of The Youthful Days] (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Thế Giới, 2020). For a memoir that spoke with a detectable sense of anger and grudge about the author’s miseries during the era, see: Bùi Mai Hạnh, *Lê Vân: Yêu Và Sống* [Lê Vân: To Love and To Live] (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Hội Nhà Văn, 2006). Although it belonged to the first wave of memoirs, this memoir was an exception with its blunt criticism of injustices, especially its mentioning of the transcending negative effects of the late 1950s *Nhân Văn Giai Phẩm* Affair – a politicized and highly censored event in Việt Nam even to this day. However, due to that Lê Vân was an iconic actress and ballet dancer of the era, and many readers were more curious about the celebrity’s private life, the memoir received attention mainly for its depiction of Lê Vân’s family estrangement and “scandalous” love affairs. Perhaps the lack of attention to supposedly politically sensitive details in this memoir was a reason why it escaped state censorship. An opposite example is the memoir of Nguyễn Văn Lộc, or Lộc Vàng – a famous figure in the music field due to his current activities in reviving “yellow music” (*nhạc vàng*) – a term for pre-1954 romantic music and pre-1975 Southern pop music; and his involvement in the politicized 1968 “vulgar music” scandal (*vụ án văn nghệ đồi trụy*). Lộc Vàng was imprisoned for eight years due to his secret performance and enjoyment of yellow music, then banned in North Việt Nam. Although the memoir only spent a relatively small portion on the scandal, evading voicing criticism against the party-state, and despite Lộc Vàng’s effort in emphasizing his apolitical stance of both then and now, the memoir prompted a vigorous discussion online over the injustices and human tragedies caused by the party-state’s dogmatic commitment to communism. The memoir was removed from shelves within a month of its publication. For a memoir on the scandal, see: Kim Dung/Kỳ Duyên, *Cung Đàn Số Phận: Hồi Ký* [The Tune Of Fate: A Memoir] (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Hội Nhà Văn, 2018). For a memoir with a self-reflective approach, switching back and forth between cynicism and nostalgia, see: Lê Minh Hà, *Tuổi Ấy Minh Yêu* [That Age, We Fell In Love] (TP.HCM: Nhà Xuất Bản Trẻ, 2021). The *Bao Cấp* era in this account appeared despicably miserable yet simultaneously so precious, as it was a time of childhood and youth – the supposedly most pure and passionate period in a person’s lifetime.

⁵⁴ See the accusation of brainwashing in this online discussion: Phùng Ngọc Khoa, “Những Năm 1975 - 1980 Là Những Năm Rất Nghèo Ở Hà Nội” [The Years Between 1975 And 1980 Was A Period Of Extreme Poverty In Hà

receive unprecedented opportunities, security, stability, and prosperity during the *Bao Cấp* era.⁵⁵ And the lighthearted or endearing reminiscences themselves could very well provide insights into the ways the era's people made sense of their realities, how they tried to live ordinary lives in circumstances that might appear absurd in today's view but were simply the norm for that era.

On the other side of the spectrum, mostly in self-published memoirs and online forums, however, we find a representation of the *Bao Cấp* era that was almost Orwellian and bore no trace of positivity. This portrayal pointed to the unfairness and absurdity of state policies, to the vast gap between the privileged and the outcasts, and the systemic marginalization of certain social groups. Overseas readers might be more familiar with this portrayal of postwar Southern regions through the voices of the former Southern state's citizens turned refugees – the “boat people.”⁵⁶ From the Southern perspective, the era's injustices were often explained in terms of the communists' vicious execution of victor's justice against the losing Southern population. However, for critical Northerners, especially for many of those who identified as “authentic Hà Nội people” (*người Hà Nội*), or “old residents” (*người Hà Nội cũ*), the horror of the *Bao Cấp* years was explained in a more explicit language of class struggles and prosecution of “class enemies.” Concretely, it was a time of cultural and moral degeneration – a consequence of the destruction of French influence in Hà Nội, and of the intergenerational oppression against the bourgeois (*tư sản, tiểu tư sản*). From the perspective of “old residents” – many of whom self-

Nội], Facebook (2021 May 24), accessed 2021 Dec 23, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/373876840199844/posts/818275362426654/>.

⁵⁵ For an analysis of cultural policies and its results in North Việt Nam during the early *Bao Cấp* years, see: Kim N.B. Ninh, *A World Transformed: The Politics of Culture in Revolutionary Vietnam, 1945-1965* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2002).

⁵⁶ Some examples include: Nguyễn Long and Harry H. Kendall, *After Sài Gòn Fell: Daily Life Under the Vietnamese Communists* (Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, University of California, 1981); Trinh Quang Do, *Saigon to San Diego: Memoir of a Boy Who Escaped from Communist Vietnam* (Jefferson: Mcfarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2004); Huy Đức, *Bên Thắng Cuộc I: Giải Phóng* [The Winning Side I: Liberation] (California: OsinBook, 2012).

identified as former bourgeois or descendants of bourgeois individuals – the bourgeois were imagined as “culturally superior and progressive” (*giới tinh hoa*) due to their Western education (*Tây học*) and generational wealth. The oppressors against “old residents” were “new residents” (*người Hà Nội mới*) – referring to those who arrived in Hà Nội after 1954 and gained power under the favoritism of the socialist government. They were defined primarily as “poor/landless peasants” (*bần cố nông*) and “hillbillies” (*nhà quê*), who were not just uneducated, but culturally and morally inferior, and as such were responsible for the cultural and moral degeneration of Hà Nội.⁵⁷ This narrative is most prominent in online forums with a high number of Francophiles, and in discussions about French contributions to “civilizing” the then “backward” Việt Nam.⁵⁸

Moreover, in direct dialogue with the popular heartfelt narrative, “old” residents’ accounts tended to emphasize that extreme living conditions robbed people of their humanity and dignity, rather than nurturing those traits (“*Nghèo sinh hèn*” – “Poverty begets immoralities”). The damning portrayal of Hà Nội under the *bao cấp* system was often contrasted with an image of a prosperous and civilized “little Paris” prior to the takeover in 1954.⁵⁹ Memories of unjust treatment and widespread anomie were placed in juxtaposition with memories of “old” residents’ resilience in upholding the pre-1954 moral and cultural standards, as well as with uplifting

⁵⁷ See, for example, an online discussion which discussed an article that criticized the tendency in Hà Nội to use the “countryside culture” of migrants as the blanket explanation for uncivil behavior in the city. The original article voiced the concern that such a tendency perpetuated discrimination against people from rural areas. A commentor under the nickname of Tony Doan, turned the issue on its head by pointing to the degradation of high culture in Hà Nội during the *Bao Cấp* era, which according to Tony Doan was caused by “poor peasants” who migrated to the city and rose to power after 1954. In other words, Tony Doan was arguing that Hà Nội’s uncivility indeed came from the historical and systemic perpetuation of “countryside culture”: Tienlt, “Đừng Đổ Lỗi Cho ‘Văn Hóa Nông Thôn’!” [Don’t Blame “Countryside Culture”!], *Tinh Te* (2009), accessed 2022 Feb 9, <https://tinhte.vn/thread/dung-do-loi-cho-van-hoa-nong-thon.146621/>.

⁵⁸ See, for example, this online forum: “Hà Nội Tri Thức – Connaissance De Hà Nội – Knowledge of Hà Nội”, *Facebook*, accessed 2022 Feb 9, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/373876840199844/>.

⁵⁹ There have been waves of governmental crackdowns on online posts that promote alternative interpretations of the colonial era and the leadership of the Việt Minh Front. See: Phạm, “Đấu Tranh Với”; Nhóm PV/VOV1, “Xuyên Tạc Lịch”.

stories about their success and prevailing reputation despite oppression. While fraught with the rhetoric of *mission civilisatrice* and elitism, this narrative sheds light on the systemic discrimination that the *bao cấp* system perpetuated, and the traumas that purge campaigns left on Hà Nội's social life. Simultaneously, the memories in which dignified former bourgeois "old" residents maintained their old lifestyle and remained highly respected by their local community speaks of the system's limits in molding the people's minds, and illuminates the persistent legacies of Hà Nội's colonial past within the city's social fabric. This "old" residents-centered, or dehumanizing narrative, when read together with other narratives, provides insights into Hà Nội's complex everyday experiences that could not be reduced to a total transformation by an all-powerful, well-defined socialist machinery. It should be seen as having emerged out of a messy interplay between "socialist culture," "French culture/Western culture", and so-called "traditional" moralities that predated the colonial era.

Narrative was not the only means by which people remembered their *Bao Cấp* years. In online posts that mainly feature pictures, or forums that focus on youth experiences, or online marketplaces for vintage enthusiasts, it is not rare to find in the comment section discussions about material objects and consumerist practices during the era.⁶⁰ Under pictures of the *Bao Cấp* era's consumer goods or popular places, commentators often reminisce about their experiences with those goods or spaces. Some can remember the exact year of purchase, the period during which specific items came into vogue in Hà Nội, even the exact price and how expensive an item

⁶⁰ See, for example, a 45-page discussion on the *Bao Cấp* era's consumer goods: "[Funland] Trang Phục, Đồ Dùng, Câu Chuyện Thời Bao Cấp" [Clothes, Goods, And Stories Of The Bao Cấp Era], *Otofun*, accessed 2022 Feb 12, <https://www.otofun.net/threads/trang-phuc-do-dung-cau-chuyen-thoi-bao-cap.1671622/>.

was in comparison to their salary.⁶¹ These items were rare and expensive, sometimes impossible to obtain even with money, and as such became seen as symbols of wealth and prestige during the era. For that reason, their purchases were often associated with special occasions or milestones in life, such as travelling abroad, entering university, birthdays, or weddings. Hence the details of how one obtained, or how one came into contact with said items remain “unforgettable” (*nhớ mãi, không thể nào quên*) in the memories of Hà Nội residents.⁶² In addition, it appears in these online discussions that, rather than the issuance of supposedly groundbreaking governmental decrees, many people organized their memories, and further periodized the era into smaller ones of “better years” (*khá hơn*) or “worse years” (*tệ hơn*), based on the arrival of, and degrees, of accessibility to certain material things in Hà Nội. This centrality of material objects and consumption in the *Bao Cấp* era’s memories implied the need to perceive material things as a constructive element of social realities. This reconsideration for material realities extended well beyond the dichotomous and moralized conceptualization – embodied in the previously mentioned two narratives – of whether impoverished conditions rendered people humane or dehumanized them. It suggests that material realities were constitutive of identity formation, mediated through the individual’s interactions with symbolic meanings that were attributed to objects and consumer practices.⁶³ In other words, memories that centered on the

⁶¹ See, for example, how commentators attempted to identify a picture’s taken date by examining the clothing style of those in the picture: Tung Son, “Xin Chào Các Bác! Đây Là Bức Ảnh Chụp Bố Em Và Bạn” [Hello Everyone! This Is A Picture Of My Father And His Friend], *Facebook* (2021 July 12), accessed 2022 Feb 13, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/2535427579824943/permalink/4600088770025470/>. See also: Trần Minh Hải, “Ký Ức Xưa” [Old Memories], *Facebook* (2021 Jun 8), accessed 2022 Mar 20, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/721926094625837/permalink/1997423027076131>.

⁶² Chuột Arch, “Hình Ảnh Hiếm Chụp Bên Trong Bách Hóa Tổng Hợp HN” [Rare Pictures Inside The General Department Store Of Hà Nội], *Facebook* (2021 May 10), accessed 2022 Mar 20, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/2535427579824943/permalink/4411861125514903/>.

⁶³ This approach is commonly referred to as “New Materialism”, which in recent years has become a prominent sub-field in studies focusing on the experiences of socialist modernity. For an overview of New Materialism, see: Diana

material elucidated the interface between consumerist culture and the formation of social identities, as well as social hierarchies in society – a process that was both structured and spontaneous, which the party-state participated in, yet on which it could not exercise total control.

Each of the three types of memories above, as has been explained, highlighted certain aspects of the *Bao Cấp* era, while hardly paying attention to, or being dismissive of other aspects. This divergence in perspective was derived from the differences in the specific time and the social circle in which each type of memories was constructed. With an awareness of the characteristics of respective types of memories, this study proceeds to cross-examine them against one another so as to evaluate their respective claims about certain events or phenomena of the era. Certainly, memories are also cross-examined against materials that were produced during the *Bao Cấp* era to verify the accuracy or consistency in terms of dates and events. These materials include official documents, speeches, newspaper articles, photographs, jokes, slang, and creative works such as films and literature that were produced at the time. Through rigorous comparison of various memories and cross-examination with contemporaneous materials, this study seeks to obtain a more inclusive and multidimensional portrait of life during the *Bao Cấp* era. The goal is to reconcile the two supposedly antithetical major narratives, go beyond the oversimplifications inherent in each narrative, and illuminate the nuances in the social landscape of Hà Nội. While “old residents” and “new residents” were real social categories with distinctive

Coole and Samantha Frost, *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010).

Some examples of application include: Olga Gurova, “The Life Span of Things in Soviet Society: Notes on the Sociology of Underwear”, *Russian Studies in History* 48, no.1 (2009 Jul 1), 46-57, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10611428.2009.11065356>; Eleonory Gilburd, *To See Paris and Die: The Soviet Lives of Western Culture* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2018); Alexey Golubev, *The Things of Life: Materiality in late Soviet Russia* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2020); Laurence Coderre, *Newborn Socialist Things: Materiality in Maoist China* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2021).

collective experiences, a singular focus on this binary can obscure or sideline the shared norms and values, as well as other forms of identity that were embraced by members of both groups. Likewise, it can lead to an oversight of the very reality that not all experiences under socialist rule were negative for “old” residents, nor entirely positive for “new” residents. The relation between these two groups did not always conform neatly to the zero-sum scenario in which the misery of one group necessarily led to the thrive of the other. Interactions between “old” and “new” residents were not always ridden with tension and animosity. They came in different shades and forms, intertwined with other forms of identity-based behaviors, and were subjected to changes during the three decades of the *Bao Cấp* era.

The Structure of “People of Hà Nội in the Bao Cấp era”

This thesis is divided into two parts. The first half narrates the transition of Hà Nội from a colonial city to a socialist city, which took place between 1954 and 1975. It examines the reconstruction of Hà Nội’s built environment and social relations, as well as the adoption of the planning system known as the *bao cấp* system. It argues that the socialist transition generated unprecedented opportunities for upward mobility for previously less privileged groups, such as those from poor families outside of Hà Nội. In contrast, the transition ended or seriously undermined the situation of the affluent citizens of the city. Nevertheless, a careful look at personal accounts, popular sayings, and humour show that the transition did not result in a total uprooting of colonial orders, nor in a classless and equal society. New forms of hierarchies and norms were built upon existing ones, and informed Hà Nội residents’ sociability.

The second half of the thesis proceeds to explore the everyday experiences of Hà Nội residents, mainly between 1975 and 1986. In this section, the transformations in the lives of Hà Nội residents are discussed within the context of Việt Nam's changing domestic conditions and international relations. Paying close attention to the material culture and consumerist behaviors of this era, I argue that during this period, consumerism and the prioritization of personal happiness over collective causes became the main concerns in Hà Nội. This changing perception reflected Hà Nội residents' fatigue with wars and their demand for compensation for their war efforts. The authorities' attitude toward this new condition was ambiguous and inconsistent. This was not only a manifestation of the tension between ideological loyalty and pragmatism within the Politburo and between different levels of bureaucracy. It was also the result of constant interactions and negotiations in various forms between the ordinary people and the authorities at different levels. Against this backdrop, social norms and the *bao cấp* system itself was gradually readjusted, which informed new transformations in the everyday life of Hà Nội residents, and vice versa.

Chapter One: The Birth Of Socialist Hà Nội, 1954-1975

1.1. The Rehabilitation of “Little Paris” Hà Nội

The end of the Anti-Colonialist French Resistance War (1945-1954)⁶⁴ came with the beginning of a new life for the colonial city of Hà Nội.

Five city gates welcome the soldiers’ return

Like a blooming flower showing its welcome with five scarlet petals⁶⁵

The Việt Minh’s victorious return envisioned five years earlier in musician Văn Cao’s *Returning to Hà Nội (Tiến về Hà Nội)*⁶⁶ had come true. Khải – then fourteen years old, and Hung – seven years old, remembered vividly the morning of October 10, 1954, when the city was adorned with red and white banners, musicians performed merrily outside, and young ladies - in their best *áo dài* - together with wealthy middle-aged women, tossed bouquets of fresh flowers towards the troops to show their warmest welcome.⁶⁷ Such an affirming attitude, albeit the most observable and well-recorded, was, however, only one sentiment amongst the multitude of feelings and anxieties experienced by the inhabitants of Hà Nội, especially those in the business sector, since the signing of the Geneva Accords that would divide Việt Nam into two states for the next two

⁶⁴ In Vietnamese: *Cuộc kháng chiến chống thực dân Pháp*. Outside of Việt Nam, the war is more often referred to as the First Indochina War.

⁶⁵ Original text: “Năm cửa ô đón mừng đoàn quân tiến về/Như đài hoa đón mừng nở năm cánh đào”

⁶⁶ Văn Cao, *Tiến về Hà Nội* [Returning to Hà Nội] (Hà Nội, 1954).

⁶⁷ Lê Phú Khải, *Lời Ai Điếu* [Whose Funeral Oration] (USA: Người Việt Books, 2016), 21; Ngau Hung Luu, “Ngày Tiếp Quân” [The Day Of Takeover], *Facebook* (2020 Nov 18), accessed 2022 Feb 21, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/373876840199844/permalink/701664290754429/>.

decades.⁶⁸ Nevertheless, even for supporters of the Việt Minh, who made the decision to remain in Hà Nội, and who had intended to participate in the new nation building, the joy of having been freed from French wartime surveillance did not last long. The new government’s plan for building socialism in the North and transforming Hà Nội into the model “Socialist Capital” (*Thủ đô xã hội chủ nghĩa*) caused significant disruptions in the material conditions as well as the social relations of people in Hà Nội. The new socialist order generated unprecedented opportunities for education, careers, and provided various welfare benefits for individuals of modest background, particularly those from outside of Hà Nội. As for “old” residents who had made Hà Nội home since the colonial era, the new order unfortunately brought demise to their fortunes and privileges.

During Hà Nội’s eighty years under French rule (1873-1954), especially after it became the capital of French Indochina in 1887, the colonial authorities had put tremendous effort in molding the city into the symbol of the *mission civilisatrice* – of French power and its commitment to keep its promise of modernizing backward lands into worthy civilizations. The maze-liked built environment – a result of its historical status as a major commercial center – and the ways of life of Hà Nội – informed by Confucianism, Buddhism, and other folk beliefs – were deemed by French administrators as incomprehensible, lacking order, village-like, and hence a

⁶⁸ For a detailed study on the exodus of Northerners to the South around the signing of the Geneva Accords, see: Ronald Bruce Frankum, *Operation Passage to Freedom: The United States Navy in Vietnam, 1954-55* (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 2007).

For personal accounts, see for example: Ái Vân, *Để Gió Cuốn Đi* (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Hội Nhà Văn, 2016), 35-7; Vũ Thư Hiên, “Phố Nhà Rượu” [Wine House Street], *Đàn Chim Việt* (2018 Sep 17), accessed 2022 Mar 14, <https://www.danchimviet.info/pho-nha-ruou/09/2018/11490/>; Tran Trung Cuong, “Hồi Ức Những Ngày Cuối Cùng Trước Khi Hà Nội Được Tiếp Quản Năm 1954” [Memories Of The Last Days Before The Takeover Of Hà Nội], *Facebook* (2021 Oct 7), accessed 2022 Mar 24, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/373876840199844/permalink/905391197048403/>; Tran Trung Cuong, “Nhà Tôi Là Hiệu Sách Bình Minh” [My Home Was The Bình Minh Bookstore], *Facebook* (2021 Oct 9), accessed 2022 Mar 24, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/373876840199844/permalink/906298776957645/>.

sign of native inferiority.⁶⁹ Such a chaotic, backward, quasi-urban village must therefore be enlightened with French modernity (*văn minh*) – which was defined in terms of scientific rationality and progress, noble moralities, higher forms of aesthetics, and superior standards of living, particularly of hygiene.⁷⁰ Hà Nội’s labyrinthine layout then was gradually replaced by sharply defined boulevards, Beaux-Arts buildings, symbolic monuments, impressive French residential villas, and luxurious spaces for leisure activities.⁷¹ Many of them were strategically placed at historical sites that held cultural and religious importance to the natives, and as such symbolized French dominance over the city.⁷² Access to these sites and the “modern” French lifestyle (*văn minh*), however, was deliberately made exclusive to the French, and later opened to a small number of bourgeois natives.⁷³ This segregation of Hà Nội contradicted to the claim of the *mission civilisatrice*, yet French monopoly of wealth, as well as the affluent lifestyle of the Francophone indigenous elite, simultaneously perpetuated the ideology of French supremacy and French modernity.

⁶⁹ Archives Nationales, Centre des Archives d’Outre-mer d’Aix-en-Provence, Fonds de Agence Economique de la France d’Outre-mer, carton 236, dossier 294: “Hanoi hier et aujourd’hui” (1938). See also: Jean Baptiste Alberti, *L’Indochine d’autrefois et d’aujourd’hui* (Paris: Société d’éditions géographiques, Maritimes et Coloniales, 1934), 307-10, 379; Pierre Gouron, *Indochine Française: Le Tonkin* (Macon: Protat Frères, 1931), 315.

A vernacular name for Hà Nội, which could be dated back to the fifteenth century, was *Kê Chợ*: “Kê” means “village”, and “Chợ” means “market.”

⁷⁰ Gwendolyn Wright, *The Politics of Design in French Colonial Urbanism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 161-234; Michael G. Vann, “White City on the Red River; Race, Power, and Culture in French Colonial Hanoi, 1872-1954”, PhD diss. (University of California, Santa Cruz, 1999); 116-7, 149-51; Ben Tran, *Post-Mandarin: Masculinity and Aesthetic Modernity in Colonial Vietnam* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), 1-4.

⁷¹ On the French’s reconstruction projects for colonial Hà Nội, see: Wright, *The Politics of Design*, 161-234; Christian Pedelahore, “Constituent Elements of Hanoi City”, *Vietnamese Studies* 12, no.82 (1986), 105-59.

⁷² Some examples include: Báo Thiên Pagoda was bulldozed to allow the construction of St. Joseph’s Cathedral; the statue *Liberty illuminating the world* was erected on top of the shrine at the center of Hoàn Kiếm Lake/Petit Lac. See: Nguyen Van Ky, “Chapter Two: The French Model” in Georges Boudarel and Nguyen Van Ky, *Hanoi – City of the Rising Dragon William* (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2002), 47-55; William S.S. Logan, *Hanoi: Biography of a City* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000), 80-2.

⁷³ For a study on French efforts to maintain racial segregation and the Vietnamese natives’ resistance to racist policies in Hà Nội, see for example: Vann, “White City on.”

With the transfer of power from the French to the new socialist government, Hà Nội once again underwent a major transformation of streetscapes and lifestyle. “Hà Nội, by all means, must become a Socialist Capital”⁷⁴. The new government then embarked on a rehabilitation (*cải tạo*) plan to convert Hà Nội from a consumerist city to a productive city.⁷⁵ Concretely, the plan’s goal was to obliterate the presence of the *mission civilisatrice* that currently permeated the city’s conditions – including its built environment, its people, and social relations – and transform them into an example of socialist modernity. In doing so, the plan sought to dethrone France from its position as the paragon of modernity and progress in the psyche of Hà Nội residents, and instead erect the socialist bloc, particularly the USSR, as the new object of admiration and emulation. Henceforth, throughout the next three decades, monuments in the style of Constructivism – made possible with the financial and technological aid of Eastern bloc countries – took over the streetscape of Hà Nội.⁷⁶ These monuments, with their austere, geometric cubist design, made tangible the ideals of socialist modernity, including the celebration of industrialization, technological progress, and productivism. They also served as symbols of socialist international cooperation between Việt Nam and the socialist bloc. Their increasing presence challenged the

⁷⁴ *Hồ Chí Minh: Toàn Tập* [The Complete Works Of Hồ Chí Minh], vol.12 (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Chính Trị Quốc Gia – Sự Thật, 2011), 172-3.

⁷⁵ Bộ Chính Trị, “Nghị Quyết Của Bộ Chính Trị Số 98-NQ/TW Về Quy Hoạch Cải Tạo Và Mở Rộng Thành Phố Hà Nội” [Resolution No.98-NQ/TW By The Political Bureau On The Plan To Rehabilitate And Expand The City Of Hà Nội], 1959 Sep 12, in *Văn Kiện Đảng Toàn Tập* [The Complete Party Documents], vol.21-1960 (Hà Nội: Nhà xuất bản Chính trị quốc gia, 2004), 2.

⁷⁶ Constructivism was an art/architectural movement that began in the USSR in the 1920s and spread to other socialist countries. In the USSR, Constructivism fell out of favor in 1932 and was revived in the 1960s. See, for example: Stephen V. Bittner, “Remembering the Avant-Garde: Moscow Architects and the “Rehabilitation” of Constructivism, 1961–64”, *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 2, no.3 (Summer 2001), 553-76, <https://doi.org/10.1353/kri.2008.0022>; David Crowley, “Staging for the End of History: Avant-garde Visions at the Beginning and the End of Communism in Eastern Europe”, in *Socialist Internationalism in the Cold War*, eds. Patryk Babiracki and Austin Jersild (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-32570-5_5.

For a detailed documentation of Hà Nội streetscapes’ socialist transformation, see: Logan, *Hanoi: Biography of*, 67-113.

hitherto dominance of Beaux-Arts and of French culture, which symbolized the domination of socialist progress and modernity over the obsolete *mission civilisatrice* in Hà Nội.⁷⁷

These monuments were not mere objects for showcasing socialist aesthetics that were to be observed from afar. They were interactive sites filled with socialist materiality and activities that were conducive to multidimensional sensorial experiences of socialism. This meant that through everyday interactions with socialist spaces, which entailed the forming of positive experiences and intimate connections with them, occupants and observers would familiarize themselves with the socialist sensibility that these spaces represented, and simultaneously develop a sense of affinity for socialism and the socialist bloc. Such was the case of Hà Nội Polytechnic University (HPU), which was built and operated with the funds and assistance of Soviet experts.⁷⁸ Nghĩa, like many of his fellow high school students during the Bao Cấp years, recalled his admiration for the university's parabola-shaped gate – a Soviet modernist design that stood out from the surrounding landscape, and the school's modern facilities and equipment for research, to which access was exclusive to only the brightest.⁷⁹ The social prestige associated

⁷⁷ While Beaux-Art/Neoclassical architecture dominated in the Hà Nội landscape, the colonial period was also subjected to other architectural influences such as Art Deco. One of the well-known buildings in the style of Art Deco was the Clinique Building – built in the 1920s on *Boulevard Carreau*. Art Deco, although initially representative of glamour and exuberance, bore some resemblances with Constructivism in its use of geometric designs and the celebration of technological advancement. For that reason, it could be said that the break between socialist architecture and French architecture after 1954 was not decisively abrupt.

⁷⁸ Trung Tâm Lưu Trữ Quốc Gia III, *Hợp Tác Việt Nam Và Liên Bang Nga Trong Lĩnh Vực Đào Tạo Qua Triển Lãm Tài Liệu Lưu Trữ* [Cooperation Between Việt Nam And The Russian Federation In The Area Of Education Through An Exhibition Of Archival Documents] (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Chính Trị Quốc Gia, 2011).

⁷⁹ The difficult entrance exam and the university's unique architecture inspired a popular saying: "The parabola gate was so high, that out of the ten climbers who almost made it, nine fell down eventually" (*cổng parabol cao vời vợi, mười thằng leo tới, chín thằng rơi*).

See a short story that portrayed the life of HPU students during the late 1970s: Trần Đức Trung, "Những Ngọn Sóng Soliton" [Soliton Waves], *tranductrung abc* (2021 Dec 19), accessed 2022 Mar 3, http://tranductrungabc.blogtiengviet.net/?title=mar_i_tanh_a_aosu_2109&more=1&c=1&tb=1&pb=1.

See also the comment section in: Dũng Lê, "Đại Học Bách Khoa Những Năm 1960" [Polytechnic University in the 1960s], *Facebook* (2021 Dec 21), accessed 2022 Mar 2, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/2535427579824943/permalink/5128519213849087/>.

with HPU, the time studying and working with respectable Soviet experts and Soviet-trained professors, encounters with like-minded fellow students, scholarships from the government, as well as opportunities for studying abroad and state employment, these positive experiences strengthened students', staff's, and HPU admirers' belief in socialism as the right path to progress, and reinforced the image of the USSR as a model and friendly country to which Việt Nam should look up.⁸⁰

⁸⁰ See the poem written by a former HPU student turned staff, which expressed his love and gratitude for HPU and the USSR/Russia: Bùi Minh Trí, “Cả Một Đời Tôi Với Đại Học Bách Khoa Và Nước Nga” [My Whole Life With Hà Nội Polytechnic University And Russia], *Facebook* (2022 Feb 5), accessed 2022 Mar 3, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/hoainiemlienxo/permalink/6984384134967952/>.



Figure 1-1: Hà Nội Polytechnic University in the 1960s. Taken at the Việt Nam National Museum of History.

In addition, spaces that were considered icons of colonial Hà Nội's wealth and modernity were kept in use, but under new names and/or operated under new principles that reflected socialist ideals. In reusing rather than destroying these established objects of admiration, the government was able to convert symbols of the *mission civilisatrice*'s success into symbols of socialist rehabilitation, and into powerful sites where affective experiences of socialism were enhanced. One of such places was the *Jardin des enfants* (Áu trĩ viên) on *boulevard Amiral-Courbet* which became the Youth Club (*Câu lạc bộ Thiếu niên*) in 1954. It underwent a

renovation in 1977, funded by Czechoslovakia, and became the House of Children’s culture (*Nhà văn hóa thiếu nhi*). Once a luxurious playground exclusive to French *colons* and a minority of affluent natives, after 1954 it had become the public space for after-school societies, clubs, and cultural events of Hà Nội youngsters.⁸¹ The House was under the management of the Hà Nội Youth Union – a subordinate organization of the party-state. Its announced goal was the cultivation of skills and talent in children so that they would become “useful citizens of the Capital” (*công dân có ích của Thủ đô*)⁸² thus making it one of the centers for socializing youth into the New Man (*con người mới*) role – the ideal person for building socialism. Activities at the House were diverse and could be categorized into five types: Technology and Science, Sports, Foreign Languages, Arts, and General Education, which included the teaching of Young Pioneer group rituals (*nghi thức Đội*).⁸³ They represented socialist modernity ideals: a commitment to socialism, faith in scientific rationality and progress, good manners at home and in public, hygienic practices, an active lifestyle, and an appreciation for arts.⁸⁴ And indeed, for generations of youth like Ngọc and Tú, who frequented the House during the *Bao Cấp* years, this was where they developed an appreciation for socialist state organizations, socialist values, and learned socialist rituals. Their affinity for socialism was mediated through fascinating experiences with

⁸¹ “Lịch Sử Hình Thành: Cung Thiếu Nhi Hà Nội - 60 Năm Xây Dựng Và Phát Triển” [History: Hà Nội Children’s Palace -60 Years Of Development], *Cung Thiếu Nhi Hà Nội* (2020), accessed 2022 Mar 1, <https://cungthieunhi.org.vn/gioi-thieu/lich-su-hinh-thanh.html>.

⁸² “Lịch Sử Hình Thành”.

⁸³ Some examples of Young Pioneer group rituals were marching, saluting, singing anthems, playing drums, and flying the national flag. The goal was to teach children self-discipline skills and a love for the socialism. Many people have fond memories of these rituals, agreeing that they helped them become more disciplined, have good posture, and gain new friends.

⁸⁴ Hội Đồng Chính Phủ, *Nghị Định Của Hội Đồng Chính Phủ Số 251-Cp Ngày 12 Tháng 6 Năm 1981 Về Giải Thưởng Hồ Chí Minh Và Giải Thưởng Nhà Nước* [Decree 251-CP 1981 June 12 on the Hồ Chí Minh Award and the Government Award], 1981 Jun 12, accessed 2022 Nov 16, <https://thuvienphapluat.vn/van-ban/Van-hoa-Xa-hoi/Nghi-dinh-251-CP-giai-thuong-Ho-Chi-Minh-va-giai-thuong-Nha-nuoc-42453.aspx>; Sở Văn Hóa Thông Tin, *Người Hà Nội Thanh Lịch* [Guidelines For Becoming A Sophisticated Hà Nội Resident] (Hà Nội: Sở Văn Hóa Thông Tin, 1971); *Hồ Chí Minh: Toàn Tập* [The Complete Works Of Hồ Chí Minh], vol.13 (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Chính Trị Quốc Gia – Sự Thật, 2011), 65-72.

recreational activities that were once an unreachable dream, mentorships with talented and passionate Youth Union cadres, a sense of self-improvement and acknowledgement especially from participating in important cultural events and competitions, and the joy of making friends.⁸⁵



Figure 1-2: A photo of Hà Nội Youth Club’s children with President Hồ Chí Minh and international children from the socialist bloc (Hà Nội, 1965). Reproduced by permission of Nguyễn Thị Thúy.

⁸⁵ Hà Thụ, “Cung Thiếu Nhi Hà Nội: ‘Ngỡ Đã Xa Xăm Bỗng Về Quá Thênh Thang’” [Hà Nội Children’s Palace: ‘Once Thought To Have Been Forgotten Yet Suddenly Surged Back Overwhelmingly’], *Rea Magazine* (2021 May 4), accessed 2022 Mar 3, <https://reatimes.vn/cung-thieu-nhi-ha-noi-ngo-da-xa-xam-bong-ve-qua-thenh-than-2020122400002531.html>.

Mạnh Phan, “Ấu Trĩ Viên-Cung Thiếu Nhi.Một Thời Để Nhớ” [Jardin Des Enfants -Children’s Palace. A Memorable Time], *Facebook* (2020 Oct 27), accessed 2022 Mar 3, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/373876840199844/permalink/683742699213255/>.

Admiration for the USSR and other socialist countries' high culture and socialist modernity were nurtured through the translated novels of Leo Tolstoy, Nikolai Ostrovsky, Alexander Belyaev, and so on, that were available at the House's library, or through the classical music of Tchaikovsky and Rachmaninoff taught at music clubs.⁸⁶ Even for Sỹ, a child from a former bourgeois family with family members who were critical of the new government and the new social condition of Hà Nội, his family background could not prevent him from developing a sense of admiration for the beautiful and technologically advanced USSR, and a sense of connection with a larger world. Sỹ attributed his early fascination with the socialist world to leisure activities at the House. These included his immersion in children's songs about international solidarity that were taught and performed at the House, watching imported movies that featured the USSR's beautiful nature and abundant, industrialized urban cities, as well as the exposure to other cultural products that Sỹ could freely enjoy there.⁸⁷

Nevertheless, the government did not rely solely on the gradual approach of teaching socialism through the reformed built environment of Hà Nội. In pursuing the goal of transforming Hà Nội residents from colonial subjects into the New Men, it had also adopted an aggressive approach of vilifying "old" residents (*người Hà Nội cũ*) as the common enemy, and infusing the city with new "ideologically pure" migrants – the "new" residents (*người Hà Nội mới*).⁸⁸ For Khải's family, and many others who owned a business, or worked white-collar jobs

⁸⁶ Susan Bayly, "Vietnamese Narratives of Tradition, Exchange and Friendship in the Worlds of the Global Socialist Ecumene", in *Enduring Socialism: Explorations of Revolution and Transformation, Restoration and Continuation*, eds. Harry G. West and Parvathi Raman (New York: Berghahn Books, 2009), 131.

⁸⁷ Trung, *Hà Nội, Mũ*, 95-7.

⁸⁸ The influx of migrants and the increasing number of residents was also intended to accommodate Hà Nội's industrialization, and as well it resulted from Hà Nội's expansion in 1961 and in 1979. See: Quốc Hội, *Nghị Quyết Về Việc Mở Rộng Thành Phố Hà Nội* [Resolution On The Expansion Of The City Of Hà Nội], 1961 Apr 20, accessed 2022 Jul 19, <https://thuvienphapluat.vn/van-ban/Bo-may-hanh-chinh/Nghi-Quyết-mở-rộng-thành-phố-Hà-Nội>

in colonial Hà Nội, this meant the drastic and traumatic loss of social status and economic power. From the culturally sophisticated and modern (*thanh lịch, văn minh*) figure in accordance with the colonial standards of modern lifestyle into which they were born, within the new discourse of socialist modernity, their very existence – their disposition and everyday habits – were indiscriminately denied in public as *Tạch tạch sè*⁸⁹ (petit bourgeois) – mere vestiges of the corrupted and backward colonial culture.⁹⁰ Their accumulated wealth became perceived as evidence of capitalistic exploitation, making them the enemy in the current class struggle. Hung, a grade schooler in 1954, remembered his mother, a Lycée Albert-Sarraut⁹¹ graduate and owner of a draper’s store, quietly putting away her everyday-wear *áo dài* and accessories, and then only wearing her most modest blouses. Similarly, his father insisted on wearing old clothes from his Việt Minh days and avoided visiting wealthy relatives after having returned to Hà Nội with the Việt Minh troops.⁹² Both were doing this as an effort to distance themselves from the *Tạch tạch*

[Noi-42689.aspx](#); Quốc Hội, *Nghị Quyết Phê Chuẩn Việc Phân Vạch Lại Địa Giới Thành Phố Hà Nội, Thành Phố Hồ Chí Minh, Các Tỉnh Hà Sơn Bình, Vĩnh Phú, Cao Lạng, Bắc Thái, Quảng Ninh Và Đồng Nai* [Ratification Resolution On The Redefining Of The Administrative Boundary Of The City Of Hà Nội, Hồ Chí Minh City, The Provinces Of Hà Sơn Bình, Vĩnh Phú, Cao Lạng, Bắc Thái, Quảng Ninh, And Đồng Nai], 1978 Dec 29, accessed 2022 Jul 19, <https://thuvienphapluat.vn/van-ban/Bo-may-hanh-chinh/Nghi-quyet-phe-chuan-viec-phan-vach-lai-dia-gioi-thanh-pho-Ha-Noi-TPHCM-cac-tinh-Ha-Son-Binh-Vinh-Phu-Cao-Lang-Bac-Thai-Quang-Ninh-va-Dong-Nai-42744.aspx>.

⁸⁹ *Tạch tạch sè* derived from “TTS”, the abbreviation for “*Tiểu tư sản*” (petit bourgeois). The term had been used in a pejorative manner. However, it has recently been reclaimed by the former petit bourgeois and their descendants. The experience of being labeled as “*tạch tạch sè*” in the past has today become a source of pride for many.

⁹⁰ In rural areas, the “New Man” and “New Way of Life” were strongly associated with maintaining hygienic standards, possessing scientific knowledge, and actively participating in cooperatives – as opposed to individual farming, private landownership, formally practicing religions, and believing superstitions. In urban settings like Hà Nội, the “New Man” mindset – as opposed to the “petit-bourgeois” – was often understood in terms of anti-individualism, community spirit, and a focus on being productive rather than on consumption and indulgence. See: *Hồ Chí Minh: Toàn Tập* [The Complete Works of Hồ Chí Minh], vol.11 (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Chính Trị Quốc Gia – Sự Thật, 2011), 600-12.

On the everyday language for describing the bourgeois/petit bourgeois, see for example, a personal account of workplace politics mentioned in this article: Bùi Tín, “*Tầng Lớp ‘Tạch Tạch Sè’, Lực Lượng Cứu Nguy Của Dân Tộc*” [The Petit-Bourgeois Class, The Savior Of The Nation], *VOA* (2015 Aug 4), accessed 2022 Feb 24, <https://www.voatiengviet.com/a/tang-lop-tach-tach-se-luc-luong-cuu-nguy-cua-dan-toc/2896857.html>.

⁹¹ The Lycée Albert-Sarraut was a French lyceum in Hà Nội between 1919 to 1965. It was considered an exclusive institution for children of the rich and powerful in colonial Hà Nội.

⁹² Luu, “*Ngày Tiếp Quản*”.

sè image. Furthermore, Hung’s family, like many other Hà Nội residents, would soon “donate” its fortune to the new government and welcome new housemates into their home during the 1958-1960 *Bourgeois Rehabilitation (cải tạo tư sản)* campaign,⁹³ in order to demonstrate their support for the new government and to avoid public shaming for lacking the spirit of collectivism.⁹⁴ Hung was lucky to have pleasant housemates who were also his father’s co-workers, partly thanks to his perceptive father’s initiative to donate their fortune prior to the campaign’s commencement.⁹⁵ Less fortunate households like Minh’s were assigned housemates

⁹³ Official name: *Rehabilitation of the Private Sector Campaign (cải tạo công thương nghiệp tư doanh)*. In principle, the campaign aimed at persuading private businesses in Hà Nội to join cooperatives of their own volition. In reality, similar to the 1953-1956 land reform campaign, party cadres would attempt to convince the staff at private stores and workshops that they were being exploited by the owner, therefore it would be justifiable for the government, as the legitimate representative of workers - the true owners, to confiscate and nationalize these private businesses. See: Đức Vương, *Việt Nam Từ Thời Kỳ Bao Cấp Đến Thời Kỳ Đổi Mới* [Việt Nam From The Bao Cấp Era To The Đổi Mới Era] (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Chính Trị Quốc Gia, 2014), 22-3.

⁹⁴ Thủ Tướng Chính Phủ, *Nghị Định 296-Ttg Quy Định Tạm Thời Hệ Thống Cơ Quan Quản Lý Thủ Công Nghiệp Và Công Nghiệp Tư Bản Tư Doanh* [Decree 196-Ttg On Temporary Regulations Of The System Of State Agencies Responsible For The Managing Of The Handicraft Industry And Capitalist Private Manufacturers], 1958 Jun 13, accessed 2022 Jul 19, <https://thuvienphapluat.vn/van-ban/Bo-may-hanh-chinh/Nghi-dinh-296-TTg-quy-dinh-tam-thoi-he-thong-co-quan-quan-ly-thu-cong-nghiep-va-cong-nghiep-tu-ban-tu-doanh-21093.aspx>; Hội Đồng Chính Phủ, *Nghị Định Của Hội Đồng Chính Phủ Số 19-Cp Ngày 29-6-1960 Về Chính Sách Đối Với Việc Cho Thuê Nhà Của Tư Nhân Ở Các Thành Phố Và Thị Xã* [Decree No.19-Cp 29-6-1960 By The Council Of Government On Private Housing Rental Policy In Cities And Towns], 1960 Jun 29, accessed 2022 Jul 19, <https://thuvienphapluat.vn/van-ban/Bat-dong-san/Nghi-dinh-19-CP-chinh-sach-cho-thue-nha-cua-tu-nhan-o-cac-thanh-pho-va-thi-xa-43002.aspx>.

Although the “donation” campaign, and later the nationalization policy, were initially aimed at the petit-bourgeois class and above, in an atmosphere of fierce vilification of wealth and personal gains, homeowners in Hà Nội in general, were under the pressure to turn their home, regardless of its modest size, into a “shared house”.

See: E. Cerise and L. Pandolfi, “Chapter 4. Breaks With The Traditional City: The Colonial And Collectivist Eras”, in *Hà Nội, A Metropolis In The Making: The Breakdown in Urban Integration of Villages*, ed. Sylvie Fanchette (Marseille: IRD Éditions, 2016), <https://books.openedition.org/irdeditions/26214>; See also these online threads on the “donation” of houses after 1954: Nhật Minh Tôm, “Các Tiền Bối Cho Cháu Hôi Về Cái Vụ ‘Chiếm - Mượn - Phân Chia’ Nhà” [Could The Elders Tell Me About The “Seize – Borrow – Divide” Of Houses], *Facebook* (2020 Dec 3), accessed 2022 Mar 14, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/373876840199844/permalink/712575886329936/>; Ngọc Tuan Nguyen, “Nhà Gác 2 Sau Cuộc Tịch Thu Tài Sản” [The 2nd Floor After The Confiscation], *Facebook* (2021 Feb 4), accessed 2022 Feb 19, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/373876840199844/permalink/751341009120090/>.

⁹⁵ This was a typical phenomenon for families with relatives in the Việt Minh. The Việt Minh members, immediately upon their return to Hà Nội, would advise their families to liquidate or donate their assets to avoid future troubles with the new government. See also Khải’s account: Lê, *Lời Ai Điều*, 26.

Others received advice to immediately initiate donations from their Chinese neighbors who were informed by their relatives of the nationalization campaign and its results in China after 1949. See: Long Ngo The, “Phố Hàng Bò Và

whose lifestyle - described as “rustic” (read: backward) – conflicted seriously with the owner’s “cultivated” Western-style lifestyle.⁹⁶ Or in the case of Tiến’s family, the new housemates blatantly looked down on and treated his family badly because Tiến’s family was a former affluent bourgeois family.⁹⁷ And even Hung, whose father was a Việt Minh member, could not completely escape social marginalization. A fellow student with whom Hung shared a classroom desk at his elementary school had made very clear her aversion to Hung by drawing a white chalk line between them on the desk surface to “establish border between different classes.”⁹⁸ Nevertheless, some also recalled happy memories of gaining new close friends, and a sense of connection with newcomer families who appreciated the original owner of the house.⁹⁹

Despite the condemnation of French influence in the city as economic and cultural exploitations (*bóc lột về kinh tế, nô dịch về văn hóa*), and despite the widespread public denunciation campaign, the reputation of “old” residents as the embodiment of high culture and modernity (*văn minh*) never completely disappeared. An explanation for this reality could be attributed to the similarity between the colonial era’s concept of modernity and the *Bao Cấp* era’s socialist modernity. Both shared an emphasis on technological advancement, education, the

Dòng Họ Đặng Trần. (Tiếp Theo)” [Hàng Bò Street And The Đặng Trần Clan (Continuation)], *Facebook* (2021 Feb 10), accessed 2022 Mar 25, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/373876840199844/permalink/755217872065737/>

⁹⁶ Cerise and Pandolfi, “Chapter 4. Breaks With The”.

⁹⁷ Trần Tiến, *Ngẫu Hưng* [Spontaneity] (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Hội Nhà Văn, 2016), 15.

⁹⁸ Ngau Hung Luu, “Đồng Phục Học Sinh Hà Nội Trước 1954” [Hà Nội Student Uniform Before 1954], *Facebook* (2020 Dec 17), accessed 2022 Mar 24, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/373876840199844/permalink/721526175434907/>.

See a similar experience in: Hoàng Long Tham, “Chân Dung Thảm Hoàng Tín – Tranh Bùi Xuân Phái” [Portrait Of Thảm Hoàng Tín – Painting By Bùi Xuân Phái], *Facebook* (2020 Feb 23), accessed 2022 Mar 24, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/373876840199844/permalink/506756796911847/>.

⁹⁹ Trung, *Hà Nội, Mũ*, 14-15; Nguyễn Ngọc Giao, “Nhà số 5” [House no.5], *Facebook* (2020 Nov 2), accessed 2022 Mar 25, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/373876840199844/permalink/688929665361225/>; Tho Nguyen, “Ký ức Hà Nội – Nhà Số 8 Lê Thánh Tôn” [Memories Of Hà Nội – House No.8 Lê Thánh Tôn Str.], *Facebook* (2020 Nov 20), accessed 2022 Mar 23, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/373876840199844/permalink/703315730589285/>.

cultivation of artistic sensibility, hygiene and health, and good manners for maintaining a harmonious and civilized environment. Moreover, becoming modern was imagined during both eras as the key to Việt Nam's survival and prosperity. Under French rule, many Vietnamese, particularly those who received formal education, believed that by embracing the French standards of modernity, they could become equal to the *colons* and thus entitled to the same privileges and opportunities. For nationalist thinkers who were less inclined to violence, without adopting Western/French modern culture, Việt Nam as a people and a culture would be annihilated under the logic of Social Darwinism.¹⁰⁰ In a similar fashion, socialist modernity was promoted as the only means for Vietnam's survival against neo-colonialism and "hostile forces" (*thế lực thù địch*).¹⁰¹ In the early years after the takeover, when the Bourgeois Rehabilitation campaign had yet been thoroughly executed, many intellectuals who were educated under the colonial or French education system had little difficulty in embracing socialist modernist ideals, and it was their belief in these ideals that served as the basis for their support of the new government despite political differences.¹⁰²

A second explanation for the enduring prestige enjoyed by "old" residents, particular the highly educated who were commonly referred to as Western-educated intellectuals (*trí thức Tây học*), laid in their continuing authoritative position as experts of advanced knowledge throughout the *Bao Cấp* era. Professionals who previously worked in traditionally prestigious areas such as

¹⁰⁰ Hue-Tam Ho Tai, *Radicalism and the Origins of the Vietnamese Revolution* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1992), 20-31.

¹⁰¹ Lê Duẩn, "Báo cáo chính trị của ban chấp hành trung ương Đảng, tại đại hội đại biểu toàn quốc lần thứ V" [Political Report of the Party Executive Committee at the fifth national representative meeting], in *Văn Kiện Đảng Toàn Tập* [The Complete Party Documents], vol.43-1982 (Hà Nội: Nhà xuất bản Chính trị quốc gia, 2004), 38-172. The word "modernity" (*văn minh*) was accompanied by words such as "healthy modern lifestyle" (*nếp sống văn minh lành mạnh*), "technological development", "industrialization", "modernization", and "national defense."

¹⁰² McHale, "Vietnamese Marxism, Dissent," 24-5; Zinoman, "Nhân Văn-Giai Phẩm," 70-1.

education and the medical field were able to maintain their jobs after 1954.¹⁰³ They taught, mentored, treated, and inspired generations of “new” residents, who in turn appreciated, respected, and admired their teachers, doctors, and nurses.¹⁰⁴ Through these everyday close interactions with Western educated intellectuals and their families, which engendered feelings of affection and gratitude, the prestige of “old” residents was preserved. The idealized image of “old” residents as possessing the most elegant demeanors and styles, high morality, and a highly educated, modern, and progressive mindset continued to persist throughout the three decades of the *Bao Cấp* era.

Nonetheless, a larger number of “old” residents, especially former business owners in the center of Hà Nội (*phố Hàng*), found it difficult to navigate the new social order and find employment that matched their credentials in an increasingly centralizing political and economic system. Difficulties in securing a job, social humiliation, and for some residents who were salaried workers during the colonial era, the fear of being associated with or perceived as *Tách tách sè*, or of being forced into participating in the public denunciation of their employers, had driven a number of Hà Nội residents to return to their hometown (*về quê*) or to migrate to

¹⁰³ For positions which required specialized knowledge, the new government continued to hire former employees of former colonial institutions, who were referred to as “kept for use” (*lưu dụng/lưu dụng*). The medical field, the academia, and the teaching profession were areas with the highest number of *lưu dụng* employees. Between 1954 and 1960, the monthly salary of *lưu dụng* employees was much higher than the average salary for newly employed public employees, which enabled their families to maintain an above average lifestyle. Starting from 1959, there were campaigns and study sessions that urged *lưu dụng* employees to voluntarily submit to their workplace a letter that renounced their *lưu dụng* wage rates. See: Vũ Ngọc Tiên, “Điều Tra Đời Sống Cư Dân Đô Thị Bắc Việt Nam” [A Survey On The Life Of Urban Residents In North Việt Nam], *Văn Việt* (2016 Mar 3), accessed 2022 Jun 18, <http://vanviet.info/tu-lieu/dieu-tra-doi-song-cu-dn-d-thi-bac-viet-nam/>.

¹⁰⁴ Vũ, *Kim Liên Một*: 65-6; Tạ Mỹ Giang, “Mẹ tôi – ‘Bà đỡ Hải’” [My mother – “the midwife Hải”], in *Chuyện Người Hà Nội* [Stories About Hà Nội Residents] (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Hà Nội, 2021), 129-37.

See also this thread about the Lycée Albert-Sarraut after 1954: Long Ngo The, “Thuở Học Trò – Nhớ Lại (Tiếp Theo Và Hết)” [Reminiscing The Student Years (Continuation And End)], *Facebook* (2022 Jan 17), accessed 2022 Mar 22, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/373876840199844/permalink/972046313716224/>; Phung Ngoc Khoa, “Những Mẩu Chuyện Ở Bệnh Viện Bạch Mai” [Short Stories At The Bạch Mai Hospital], *Facebook* (2021 Aug 21), accessed 2022 Mar 16, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/373876840199844/permalink/873974260190097/>.

recently uninhabited lands.¹⁰⁵ The government, rather than employing existing Hà Nội residents – whose presence itself evoked the colonial past and *mission civilisatrice* ideology – preferred to recruit individuals from other provinces, especially those with poor/landless peasant (*bản cố nông*) background.¹⁰⁶ The placing of these latter groups in leadership positions within the newly established bureaucracy, or in managerial positions within nationalized workshops, factories, and construction sites in the model capital city Hà Nội was highly symbolic and provided a pedagogical experience for migrants. It represented the vision of the proletariat’s decisive victory in class warfare; and moreover, it carried the message of equality and success that derived from one’s own effort and not class privilege under socialist rule. The hitherto perpetuated impoverishment of certain social groups, and the stark contrast between the rich “little Paris” Hà Nội and the migrants’ poorer hometowns was a result of systemic violence inflicted by the colonial authorities and the bourgeois.¹⁰⁷ In contrast, under the new government, all individuals,

¹⁰⁵ Kim, *Cung Đàn Số*, 35; Trung, *Hà Nội, Mũ*, 195-6.

For those who migrated to the highlands under the *Reclaiming Virgin Soils Campaign* (*đi khai hoang*), an unknown number of them eventually returned to Hà Nội due to the harsh conditions of the highlands. By that time, the government had already established a migration and residence control system called the household registration system (*hộ khẩu*). The people who returned to Hà Nội were not registered and could not re-register into the system, making them illegal residents. They were thus not entitled to any resource in Hà Nội, could not find employment in any state institute, and had no choice but to take part in the “outside” market. See: Nguyễn Ngọc Tiến, “Hộ Khẩu Thời Bao Cấp” [Household Registration In The Bao Cấp Era], *Hà Nội Mới* (2013 Jul 27), accessed 2022 Mar 16, <https://hanoimoi.com.vn/tin-tuc/Phong-su-Ky-su/599980/ho-khau-thoi-bao-cap>.

For a detailed study on the history of Việt Nam’s virgin soils campaigns and its effects mainly on the rural population, see: Andrew Hardy, *Red Hills: Migrants and the State in the Highlands of Vietnam* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2003).

¹⁰⁶ Bộ Y Tế, *Thông Tư 06-Byt/Tt Về Kế Hoạch Và Tiêu Chuẩn Tuyển Sinh Các Lớp Bổ Túc Chuyên Môn Lên Trung Cấp Và Cao Cấp Năm 1961* [Circular 06-Byt/Tt On Admission Requirements And Quotas For Prerequisite Courses For College Programs And Above For The Year 1961], 1961 Apr 5, accessed 2022 Jul 19, <https://thuvienphapluat.vn/van-ban/Giao-duc/Thong-tu-06-BYT-TT-ke-hoach-tieu-chuan-tuyen-sinh-lop-bo-tuc-chuyen-mon-len-trung-cap-cao-cap-nam-1961-20465.aspx>.

¹⁰⁷ This perception resonated with the language used by cadres during the Mass Education Movement (1945-1950) to persuade illiterate peasants to attending night classes in rural areas of the North. See, for example: Interview Of Unidentified Cadre 183, *UQAM – Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities: The Indochina War (1945-1956)*, accessed 2022 Feb 22, <https://indochine.uqam.ca/en/drv-cadre-interviews/1827.html>.

regardless of gender or upbringing, were guaranteed an equal chance for prosperity, so long as they were committed to socialism (*có nhiệt tình xã hội chủ nghĩa*) and trained themselves accordingly.¹⁰⁸ Yet, as the life stories of Khải, Hung, and even of those who originally had no ties to colonial Hà Nội have previously shown, such an egalitarian promise often served as a façade for new forms of systemic discrimination and social inequalities.

If Khải and Hung’s first encounter with socialism was characterized by a sense of rupture, arbitrary denial of personal everyday experiences, and a diminishing level of living standards, such was not the case for many others among the new residents of Hà Nội after 1954, including migrants and Hà Nội natives. As mentioned earlier, migrants’ access to Hà Nội’s exclusive environment – once the privilege of a very small population during the colonial era – was primarily due to the socialist government’s development policies, and the new system of redistribution – the *bao cấp* system. For Chiển, who was born into a family of rural background and without any previous ties to Hà Nội “old” residents, his family’s stable settlement in the city after 1954 could not have been possible without his parents’ employee benefits that came with their new jobs at the central government.¹⁰⁹ Among these benefits, state provision of public housing was extremely significant for newcomers, as it not only accommodated their material needs, but also assisted them in carving out a sense of community in the new environment of Hà Nội. Since housing provisions were based on one’s affiliation to state institutions,

The problem of prioritizing “correct” background over abilities in employment was implied in Hồ Chí Minh’s emphasis on the need to produce cadres who were both committed to socialism and qualified in his 1969 final will: “Toàn Văn Di Chúc Của Chủ tịch Hồ Chí Minh” [The Complete Testament Of President Hồ Chí Minh], *Báo Điện Tử Chính Phủ* (2014 Aug 21), accessed 2022 Feb 22, <https://baochinhphu.vn/toan-van-di-chuc-cua-chu-tich-ho-chi-minh-102169104.htm>.

¹⁰⁸ Commitment to socialism was a criterion for acceptance in educational programs, or employment in state institutions. See, for example: *Thông Tư 06-Byt/Tt*.

¹⁰⁹ Vũ Công Chiển, *Kim Liên Một Thuở: Ký Ức Hà Nội Từ Những Khu Nhà Cũ...* [Kim Liên Once Upon A Time: Memories Of Hà Nội In Old Communal Apartments...] (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Thế Giới, 2019).

factories/workshops, or construction projects, co-workers often became neighbors. Children in the same neighborhood as well often attended the same school since admission to public school was based on place of residence.¹¹⁰ It is undeniable that the lack of privacy and the overlap between workplace, schoolground, and living space caused discomfort for the residents, especially when conflicts at work spilled over into petty disputes between neighbors, or worse, into everyday surveillance, driven by ideological commitment, jealousy, or a desire to sabotage workplace enemies.¹¹¹ Nevertheless, it had also made possible the formation of close-knit communities – illustrated by Chiến’s fond memories of his communal apartment – where co-workers’ children grew up together like siblings, and where neighbors who knew each other’s routines could help with daily chores, during difficult times or special occasions.¹¹² An informant born well after 1954 into a family whose grandparents were petit-bourgeois residents of colonial Hà Nội, also harbored similar memories.¹¹³ In her collective living quarter, neighboring

¹¹⁰ Bộ Nội Vụ, *Thông Tư 34-Nv/Dc Về Việc Cấp Phát Và Thi Thực Những Giấy Tờ Cho Học Sinh Đi Học, Đi Thi* [Circular 34-Nv/Dc On The Issuance And Authorization Of Documents For Students And Examinees], 1958 Ma 2, accessed 2022 Jul 19, <https://thuvienphapluat.vn/van-ban/Dich-vu-phap-ly/Thong-tu-34-NV-DC-cap-phat-thi-thuc-giay-to-hoc-sinh-di-hoc-di-thi-23256.aspx>.

The personal account of an informant illustrated the strong connection between children of the same neighborhood. This informant entered a junior high school (*trường cấp II*) in the central area of Hà Nội which he had originally not been entitled to attend. This was possible because one of his parents, who believed that the school in the central area was of the highest quality, had connections with important figures in the education sector. The informant then was placed in an environment where the majority of his classmates were children of families in the trading business and who were neighbors with one another. The informant recognized a sense of cultural difference between himself and the rest of his class. Despite efforts to fit in by imitating his classmates’ manners and tastes, he frequently felt ostracized. The parents saw his change in behavior as undesirable and made him attend high school (*trường cấp III*) in the originally designated area.

Unidentified informant no.2, Facebook message to author (2022 Mar 16).

¹¹¹ See for example, a petty fight at a collective living quarter for employees of a state institution in Lê Minh Hà, “Phố Vẫn Gió (Kỳ 2)” [Wind Still Blows Through The City (Part 2)], *Văn Việt* (2020 Jun 2), accessed 2022 Feb 27, <http://vanviet.info/van/pho-van-gi-ky-2/>.

See also: Phung Ngoc Khoa, “Nhà Lắp Ghép” [Prefabricated Apartment], *Facebook* (2020 Nov 8), accessed 2022 Mar 12, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/373876840199844/permalink/708780670042791/>.

¹¹² Phan Cẩm Thượng and Nguyễn Quang Vinh, “Nhà Tập Thể” [Communal Apartment], in *Chuyện Thời Bao Cấp*, 3, 290-5.

¹¹³ Unidentified informant no.1, Facebook message to author (2022 Mar 4).

teenagers, and young adults, who were children of her parent's co-workers and members of the local Youth Union, would assume the task of organizing events for younger children in the quarter, or of looking after them in case the parents had to work overtime. For her, the most memorable activity organized by Youth Union "brothers and sisters" – as she referred to these young cadres – was the "help your neighbors in secret" campaign. In this campaign, children were encouraged to emulate the "secret hero" figure and help families in need with their everyday tasks, such as filling their empty water tanks. Each good deed would be rewarded with a golden star, which was inspired by Arkady Gaidar's *Timur and His Squad* (1940) – a popular Soviet children's book at the time. Furthermore, the neighborhood's collective cultural activities had left a positive impression and, according to the informant, had even influenced her future career choice. These activities ranged from group trips, musical shows, sport events, to art or cooking classes, and so on; all were free of charge and constituted ideal places for socializing.



Figure 1-3: Children of the 58A Trần Nhân Tông living quarter during an event organized by the local Youth Union (Hà Nội, circa 1981-1982). Reproduced by permission of Phan Ngọc Hoa.

Due to the similarities between residents in terms of occupation and schooling, and their long time together, each community was perceived to have its own distinctive culture, and as such became a source of identity for many residents. One of the most well-known communities of this sort was the Nam Đồng Military district (*Quân khu Nam Đồng*), a residential area exclusive to military families. Individuals who grew up in Nam Đồng were nicknamed “military district’s folks” (*dân quân khu*), and were often associated with the “military brat” (*con lính*) image – unbelievably mischievous, hot-blooded, and prone to gang fighting with other districts’

children, yet at the same time they were deemed courageous, heroic, and resilient.¹¹⁴ During the American war years (1964-1975), and the war with Cambodia and China (1975-1989), affiliation with institutions or place of residence once again served as sites from which the state could draft and train potential soldiers. Neighbors, classmates, and co-workers then became comrades-in-arms during life-and-death moments, which had the effect of deepening their sense of community. This collectivist condition, enabled by state policies, helped generations of newcomers in adjusting to Hà Nội's unfamiliar urban environment. Concretely, the collectivist condition generated more opportunities for forming long-lasting relationships between fellow residents, and for developing collective identities not as external to, but as part of Hà Nội. Moreover, these collective identities, often neighborhood-based identities, not only helped connecting "new" residents with each other, but also between "old" and "new" residents. As such, neighborhood-based identities potentially contributed to the lessening of the divisive "old" - "new" resident tension in the city. This was particularly the case for "old" residents who were born around the end of French occupation of Hà Nội (1946-1954), or "old" residents' descendants who were born after 1954. Their lack of memories of the colonial era and the Bourgeois Rehabilitation campaign, together with their experience of growing up alongside neighboring "new" residents and their descendants made it easier for this younger generation to adopt the neighborhood-based identity, and through which to develop a stronger sense of affinity toward "new" residents. However, the adoption of new collective identity by children of "old" residents did not necessarily mean that they had stopped to identify as an "old" resident, nor were they immune to entertaining stereotypes of "new" residents when conflicts occurred. The same informant above, whose grandparents were "old" residents, and who spoke affectionately

¹¹⁴ For a memoir about life in the Nam Đồng District, see: Bình Ca, *Quân Khu Nam Đồng* [Nam Đồng Military District] (TP.HCM: Nhà Xuất Bản Trẻ, 2015).

of her living quarter's collective spirit and meaningful activities, also frequently referred to the "new" resident status of her neighbors when she talked about episodes where her neighbors spied on or badmouthed her family.

Hà Nội's fate changed dramatically in 1954 when the Việt Minh formally took over the city from the French. Under the new socialist government, the former "little Paris" needed to denounce its past as the symbol of the *mission civilisatrice*, and reinvent itself as the Socialist Capital. This transitioning to socialism led to a redistribution of wealth and opportunities from the affluent population to the less privileged. As such, for beneficiaries, particularly new migrants who were able to make Hà Nội their new home due to state provisions, the rehabilitation generated great confidence in socialism and in the state's leadership. In contrast, those who lost their social status and wealth during this period of rehabilitation, who were vilified as the common enemy in a grand class struggle, felt humiliated and frustrated with the increasingly dominating presence of new migrants. Nevertheless, the rehabilitation could not obliterate all norms and values of the previous era. Similarly, class-based hostility was only one of the many forms of interactions and sentiments that took place between the "old" and the "new" residents. The government's continuing reliance on "old" residents' expertise, intersections between socialist modernity, colonial modernity, and preexisting ethics of social harmony, as well as the very new socialist conditions that engendered new forms of identity that both groups could embrace, made possible the formation of positive interactions and intimate relations between supposed class enemies.

1.2. **The Bao Cấp System and Its Effects on the Everyday Life of Hà Nội Residents**

The Love-Hate Relationship With Rationing

One of the defining characteristics of building socialism in The Democratic Republic of Việt Nam (1954-1976), and later in the Socialist Republic of Việt Nam (1976-present) was the pursuit of a Soviet-inspired central planning system – the *bao cấp* system.¹¹⁵ From a state perspective, this system encompassed the nationalization of existing industries and private capital, the illegalization of the private sector, the creation of national developmental plans, and the expansion of bureaucratic machinery for overseeing production and distribution.¹¹⁶ In a postcolonial and wartime context, the *bao cấp* system was intended to control resources and to capture surplus capital. The final goal was to effectively channel resources into wartime efforts, as well as into developmental and industrialization projects that sought to rectify an unbalanced economy – a result of colonial exploitative policies. It was also a tool for curbing consumption, ensuring widespread access to decent living in face of shortages, preventing the hoarding and profiteering tendencies of the bourgeois, and gradually improving the average living standards.¹¹⁷ For rural populations, the *bao cấp* system’s authority was most felt in the presence of collective farming cooperatives, the renewed pressure to produce according to crop quotas and tax obligations, and the artificially low purchasing price that the government imposed on

¹¹⁵ Đặng, *Tư Duy Kinh*, 57-69.

¹¹⁶ It should be noted that the suppression of the private sector was not uniformly enforced throughout the three decades under the *bao cấp* system. In times of crisis, private production and trades were tolerated, if not encouraged so as to lessen the burden of management for the government. This practical approach of freeze and thaw was what sustained and simultaneously undermined the *bao cấp* system. For detailed studies on the Bao Cấp era’s economic system, see: Nigel Thrift and Dean Forbes, *The Price of War: Urbanization in Vietnam* (Oxon: Routledge, 2007); Đặng, “*Phá Rào*” Trong.

¹¹⁷ “Báo Cáo Về Nhiệm Vụ Kế Hoạch Ba Năm (1958-1960) Phát Triển Và Cải Tạo Kinh Tế Quốc Dân” [Report On The Three-Year Plan (1958-1960) Of Developing And Rehabilitating The National Economy], *Văn Kiện Đảng Toàn Tập* [The Complete Party Documents], Vol.19-1958 (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Chính Trị Quốc Gia, 2002), 451-524.

agricultural products – in other words, state intervention in production processes.¹¹⁸ For Hà Nội – historically a commercial city whose residents’ livelihoods depended primarily on commercial activities and white-collar jobs, the *bao cấp* system’s monopoly of distribution of goods and services had left a greater impact on its residents. Rural areas fared much better in maintaining economic independence from state monopoly, particularly regarding foodstuffs, since households could subsist on their privately owned land plots. The same degree of private husbandry and commercial activities was not possible in Hà Nội, at least not until the changing economic conditions starting from the late 1970s. Its urban physical constraint pertaining to lack of space and dense population made Hà Nội unsuitable for agricultural activities. Furthermore, the social proximity that was characteristic of workplace affiliation-based residential planning also made possible a higher degree of surveillance in Hà Nội, and hence stronger self-discipline among its residents. Indeed, although present day Hà Nội residents may differ in their attempts to make sense of the *Bao Cấp* era, one memory remains uncontested: the perpetual shortage of all sorts of goods, and the reliance on state distribution through rationing. Combined, these two aspects of the *Bao Cấp* era became the matrix for new forms of urban stress, daily routines, human relations, social identities, and social hierarchies.

Distribution during the *Bao Cấp* era was arranged based on the principle of “work according to one’s abilities, receive according to one’s labor” (*làm theo năng lực, hưởng theo lao*

¹¹⁸ Kerkvliet, *The Power of*, 71, 118, 133-4, 170.

Present memories of and literary works about rural populations were predominantly centered around production issues, especially the appropriation of resources intended for collective production by corrupt cadres, rather than issues pertaining to distribution for personal consumption. See, for example: Trần Khắc, “Người Đàn Bà Quỳ” [The Kneeling Woman], *Tuần Báo Văn Nghệ* (1987 Dec 7); Phùng Gia Lộc, “Cái Đêm Hôm Ấy...Đêm Gì?” [That Night... What Night?], *Tuần Báo Văn Nghệ* (1988 Jan 23), available at *Tuổi trẻ*, accessed 2022 Mar 8, <https://tuoitre.vn/phung-gia-loc---cai-dem-hom-ay-dem-gi-114622.htm>; Kiều Mai Sơn, “Làng Tôi Hôm Nay” [My Village Today], *Nông Nghiệp Việt Nam*, accessed 2022 Mar 8, <https://nongnghiep.vn/lang-toi-hom-nay-d211730.htm>.

động).¹¹⁹ To put it simply, the more demanding the job was, and the more productive a worker was, the more the worker was entitled to receive. The principle was institutionalized into a rationing system consisting of coupons, stamps, certificates, and special permits for foodstuffs, basic commodities, services including healthcare, education, professional and vocational training, leisure activities, as well as luxury goods.¹²⁰ This system's goal was to ensure that each worker would be compensated adequately for their work and provide access to a good life appropriate to his or her social role. The system would enable workers to maintain a healthy, productive body and mind, and to remain motivated at work. As such, ration quantity and quality were not uniform for all population but divided into several subordinate ranks (*bậc tiêu chuẩn*). Each rank was allotted different quantities and types of goods and services so as to accommodate different workforces with presumably distinctive levels of needs.¹²¹ For instance, rank ĐB/A1 was reserved for political leaders of the highest echelon; rank A, B, C1, and C2 were for upper and mid-level governmental officials; rank D, E1 and E2 were for low level officials and employees; rank I, II, and III were for manual workers; rank N was for individuals before legal working age (age 7 to age 17), and those without affiliation to any state institution; rank TR and

¹¹⁹ Đức, *Việt Nam Từ*, 142-3.

This coordination was initially considered a temporary measure for encouraging productivity and accelerating industrialization. The final goal was Marx's vision of "from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs," seen as only achievable in an abundant society, which Việt Nam at the time was not. See: Karl Marx, "Critique of the Gotha Programme, part I", *Marx Engels Archive* (1999), accessed 2022 Mar 8, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1875/gotha/>.

¹²⁰ The imposition of rationing did not happen all at once. Items were gradually incorporated or removed, and ration amounts were adjusted throughout the three decades, depending on the availability of these items and the government's ability to secure resources and manage their distribution. See: Ngọc Anh, "Đôi Nét Về Bộ Sưu Tập Tem Phiếu Thời Kỳ Bao Cấp Tại Bảo Tàng Lịch Sử Quốc Gia" [Brief Information About The Collection Of Bao Cấp Era's Rationing Coupons At The Việt Nam National Museum Of History], *Việt Nam National Museum of History* (2020 Feb 3), accessed 2022 Mar 11, <http://baotanglichsu.vn/vi/Articles/3096/71317/djoi-net-ve-bo-suu-tap-tem-phiieu-thoi-ky-bao-cap-tai-bao-tang-lich-su-quoc-gia.html>.

¹²¹ Similar to the imposition of rationing, the categorization of coupons was a gradual process that reflected the increasing division of labor and bureaucratic expansion.

TE were for young children (below age 7).¹²² Among Hà Nội residents, these ranks were broadly recategorized into three groups: the “elites” (*cán bộ trung cao*) (ranks A to C), the “ordinary public employees”¹²³ (*cán bộ viên chức bình thường*) (ranks D and E), and the “commoners” (*nhân dân*) (rank N). The granted amount of ration goods for each category significantly decreased as the rank descended from the elites to the commoners. For example, in terms of meat, before 1975, the elites were entitled to 6-7.5 kg/month, ordinary public employees were entitled to 1 kg/month, whereas commoners were entitled to a meager 0.3 kg/month.¹²⁴ Furthermore, there were special rations for special events, such as national holidays like Independence Day, traditional festivities like the Lunar New Year and the Mid-Autumn Festival, weddings, and childbirth. There were also rations for people with exceptional circumstances, such as military veterans who had sustained permanent injuries, children of soldiers who died while serving, patients, postpartum mothers with no milk supply, and orphans.¹²⁵ In addition to

¹²² Nguyễn Ngọc Tiến, “Ký ức Thời Bao Cấp - Kỳ 1: Xếp Loại A, B, C Để Mua Hàng Hóa” [Memories Of The Bao Cấp Era – Part 1: The Categorization Into A, B, C For Purchasing Goods], *Thanh Niên* (2015 May 18), accessed 2022 Jun 4, <https://thanhnien.vn/ky-uc-thoi-bao-cap-ky-1-xep-loai-a-b-c-de-mua-hang-hoa-post470648.html>.

Currently there is no survey that can verify the exact number of ration ranks that were issued during the three decades of the *Bao Cấp* era. It is very likely that there were more ranks than the ones listed in this thesis.

¹²³ Since the private sector was in theory obliterated, and every industry had been nationalized and managed by the *bao cấp* system, the public employee category encompassed almost every occupation in society, with the exception of merchants.

¹²⁴ Ngọc, “Đôi Nét Về”.

Among sub-ranks within the commoner categories, manual workers in exceptionally harsh conditions – rank I generally had a higher amount of food rations than the supposedly more privileged ordinary public employee category. With respect to meat rations before 1975, I-ranked workers were entitled to 1.5 kg/month.

¹²⁵ Bộ Nội Thương, *Thông Tư 345-Nt Bổ Sung Chế Độ Cung Cấp Hàng Hóa Cho Người Đẻ, Sảy Thai Và Một Số Đối Tượng Khác* [Circular 345-Nt On Additional Provision Of Goods For Postpartum Women, Women Who Suffer Pregnancy Loss, And Others], 1968 May 25, accessed 2022 Jul 19, <https://thuvienphapluat.vn/van-ban/Lao-dong-Tien-luong/Thong-tu-345-NT-bo-sung-che-do-cung-cap-hang-hoa-nguoi-de-say-thai-va-doi-tuong-khac-18551.aspx>; Bộ Nội Thương, *Thông Tư 31-Nt Hướng Dẫn Việc Khai, Cấp Phát, Quản Lý Sử Dụng, Thu Hồi Tem Phiếu Mua Hàng Năm 1974* [Circular Guide 31-Nt On The Declaration, Provision, Management, And Revocation Of Rationing Coupons For Goods In The Year 1974], 1973 Sep 22; accessed 2022 Jul 19, <https://thuvienphapluat.vn/van-ban/Thuong-mai/Thong-tu-31-NT-ke-khai-cap-phat-quan-ly-su-dung-thu-hoi-tem-phiếu-mua-hàng-năm-1974-23298.aspx>; Bộ Giáo Dục – Bộ Thương Binh Và Xã Hội, *Thông Tư Liên Bộ 2-TT/LB Bổ Sung Một Số Điểm Về Công Tác Chăm Sóc, Giáo Dục Con Liệt Sĩ* [Joint Circular 2-TT/LB On Additional Points

the standardized rations, employees at state institutions could receive bonus ration coupons as rewards for their productivity. Similarly, employees who made mistakes or were disruptive at work could be subject to coupon reductions.¹²⁶

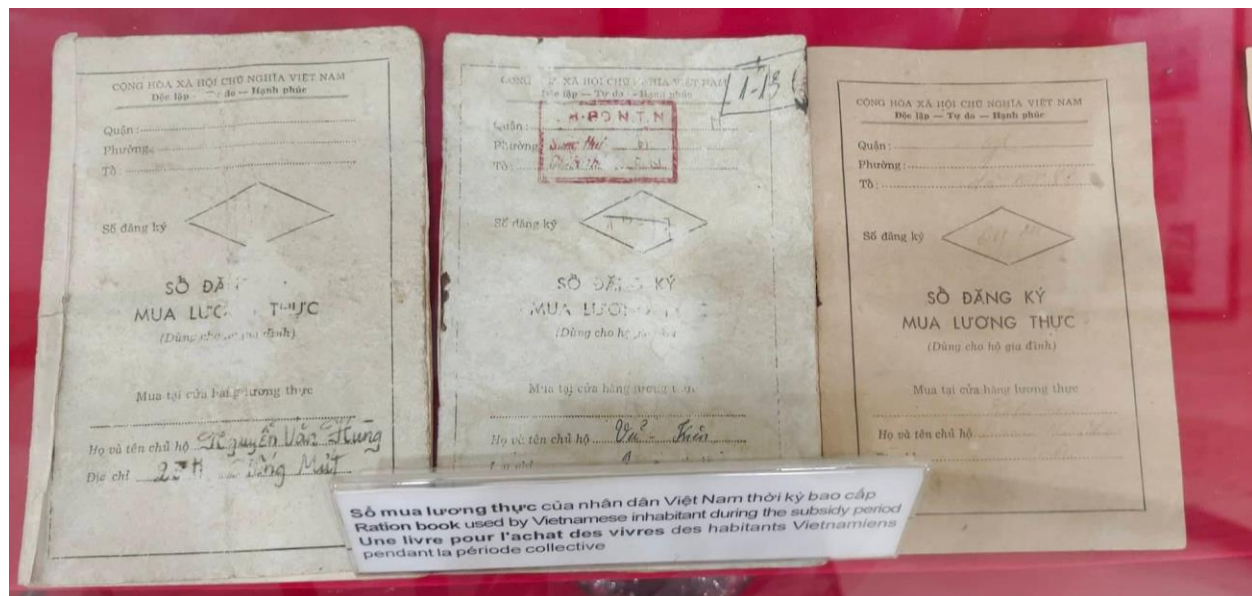


Figure 1-4: Ration books for foodstuffs. Taken at the Việt Nam National Museum of History.

Concerning Supports And Education For Children Of Deceased Military Service Members], 1979 Apr 6, accessed 2022 Jul 19, <https://thuvienphapluat.vn/van-ban/Giao-duc/Thong-tu-lien-bo-2-TT-LB-bo-sung-cong-tac-cham-soc-giao-duc-con-liet-si-58909.aspx>.

¹²⁶ Bộ Lao Động – Bộ Công An – Bộ Nội Thương, *Thông Tư Liên Bộ 29-Tt/Lb Hướng Dẫn Việc Kê Khai Cấp Phát Tem Phiếu Mua Hàng Năm 1975 Kết Hợp Với Việc Quản Lý Lao Động* [Joint Circular Guide 29-Tt/Lb On The Declaration And Provision Of Rationing Coupons For Goods In The Year 1975, Combined With Labor Management], 1974 Oct 12, accessed 2022 Jul 19, <https://thuvienphapluat.vn/van-ban/thuong-mai/thong-tu-lien-bo-29-tt-lb-huong-dan-ke-khai-cap-phat-tem-phiếu-mua-hàng-nam-1975-ket-hop-quan-ly-lao-dong-23070.aspx?v=d>.



Figure 1-5: Left: Rank A fabric ration coupon card (bìa) in 1985. Right: Rank CBI (equivalent to rank A) fuel ration coupon card in 1988. Taken at the Việt Nam National Museum of History.

The left card was worth 2.5 meters of fabric and consisted of 10 coupons. Card owners could redeem each coupon individually for 10, 20, 30, or 40 cm, or combine them for a larger amount according to one's needs. Coupons usually had an expiry date of 3 months (*quý*) from the issue date. On the card, in brackets: "Lost coupons cannot be reissued."

The rationing system had indeed offered a level of security and motivation for many people, especially during the American war. Minh, then a university student in Hà Nội, recalled with gratitude the government's special wartime provisions for students originally from other provinces.¹²⁷ These student privileges had secured for Minh and generations of students in Hà Nội a relatively stable environment for studying, as a panacea to the instability and destruction of war. Furthermore, during the sporadic bombings of the city between 1965 and 1973, which forced the majority of the city's population to evacuate to other provinces, rationing was an

¹²⁷ Ngô, "Thời Sinh Viên" [Student Years], in *Sống Thời Bao Cấp*. See also: Quyên Quyên and Quỳnh Trang, "Chuyện Kể Về 6 Năm Đất Nước Không Có Kỳ Thi Đại Học" [A Story About The Six Years Of No University Entrance Exam], *Zing News* (2018 Jun 30), accessed 2022 Mar 24, <https://zingnews.vn/chuyen-ke-ve-6-nam-dat-nuoc-khong-co-ky-thi-dai-hoc-post852855.html>.

extremely important source of material and psychological reassurance for Hà Nội residents. During this time, children and parents, husbands and wives were often separated from each other since people were required to evacuate with their affiliated workplace or school, so that production and education would not be disrupted. Family separation exacerbated the stress of displacement, and in some cases, especially in children, led to the trauma of feeling abandoned by parents.¹²⁸ Amidst this wartime confusion and uncertainty, coupon redeeming days, although not always scheduled regularly due to wartime interruptions, provided a sense of normalcy for evacuees. For Đức – an artist who was separated from his family in 1973 due to his job relocation-, and Tuấn – a young boy who evacuated to a poor village 80 kilometers from Hà Nội- ration coupons that could still be redeemed despite the bombings gave them greater reassurance about their family’s survival, and that their war efforts were not futile.¹²⁹ The coupons’ redeemability and the continuing flow of state ration goods were perceived as the proof of North Việt Nam’s survival as a still functioning state despite intense American destruction. The link between ration goods and everyday normalcy was also manifested in the common practice of organizing long-distance family visits around redeeming days. Displaced persons or soldiers usually chose to travel to separated family members’ evacuation areas after having stocked up enough ration goods or after having redeemed fresh foodstuffs.¹³⁰ For many of those who spent their childhood during the evacuation period, memories of parents’ visits were almost always

¹²⁸ Bùi, *Lê Vân: Yêu*.

¹²⁹ Đỗ Đức, “Bao Cấp - Một Thời Để Nhớ, Một Thời... Để Sợ” [Bao Cấp – An Era Worth Remembering, An Era Worth...Fearing], *Thế Thao & Văn Hóa* (2016 Feb 10), accessed 2022 Mar 16, <https://thethaovanhoa.vn/van-hoa/bao-cap-mot-thoi-de-nho-mot-thoi-de-so-n20160201103754330.htm>; Trần Đăng Tuấn, “Thời ‘Đong Gạo’” [A Time Of “Stocking Rice”], *Reatimes* (2018 Nov 22), accessed 2022 Mar 12, <https://reatimes.vn/thoi-dong-gao-31150.html>.

¹³⁰ Thái Anh, “Những Ký Ức Hạnh Phúc Đơn Sơ Thời Bao Cấp” [Memories Of Simple Happiness In The Bao Cấp Era], *Dân Trí* (2022 Jan 14), accessed 2022 Mar 12, <https://dantri.com.vn/an-sinh/nhung-ky-uc-hanh-phuc-don-so-thoi-bao-cap-20220114085854404.htm>.

synonymous with the image of heavy bags of newly redeemed ration foodstuffs that were tied on their parents' bicycle.¹³¹ For some children the ration goods that their parents left behind were perceived as a physical proof of the parents' existence and their love for them during a time of physical distance. Vân, who was separated from both parents and rarely received visits, remembered with bitterness the image of her empty wooden box that was used for storing ration goods. The contrast between her empty box and other children's filled boxes, or the sight of fellow evacuee children enjoying the Hà Nội-exclusive state-brand biscotti (*bánh bít-cốt*), made Vân feel jealous and inferior. The lack of ration goods symbolized the lack of her parents' presence in her life and deepened the feelings that she was an unloved child.¹³² In creative works produced during the war, the film *Girl from Hà Nội* (*Em bé Hà Nội*) also portrayed ration coupons as a form of life certificate that would be revoked once the person was confirmed dead. The most famous scene in this movie featured the protagonist Hà, who had lost her family during the 1972 Christmas Bombing of Hà Nội, taking her family's coupon book to a ration store to redeem rice. The saleslady, knowing that Hà's family was dead, asked Hà how much rice she wanted to redeem, and she would sell as much as Hà wanted, which could be interpreted as an expression of condolence. The saleslady took the coupon book, and before she could cross out the name of the dead family members on it, Hà – unable to accept her family's death – begged: “Please don't cross out my mom's name, my sister's name...”¹³³

Appreciation for the stability and security that the *bao cấp* system brought, however, was not a unanimous attitude toward the system. Hà Nội residents also felt deeply frustrated with the

¹³¹ Phan Cẩm Thượng, “Đời Sống Bao Cấp (Bài 13): Chuyện Sơ Tán (Phần 1)” [Life During The Bao Cấp Era (Article No.13): On Evacuating (Part 1)], *Thể Thao & Văn Hóa* (2014 Aug 6), accessed 2022 Ma 23, <https://thethaovanhoa.vn/van-hoa/doi-song-bao-cap-bai-13-chuyen-so-tan-phan-1-n20140725151726840.htm>.

¹³² Bùi, *Lê Vân: Yêu*, chapter 1+2.

¹³³ *Em Bé Hà Nội* [Girl From Hà Nội], directed by Hải Ninh (Hà Nội: Xưởng Phim Truyện Việt Nam, 1974).

system's failure to meet consumer's rightful demands according to their ration rank. Many Hà Nội residents were acutely aware that this failure could not be entirely explained away with external factors like French colonial legacies, constant wars, economic embargos, fluctuations in international aid or natural disasters.¹³⁴ Unresolved bottlenecks and lack of incentive mechanisms in the *bao cấp* system itself played a significant role in perpetuating shortages and the low quality of ration goods.¹³⁵ This awareness could come from personal experiences such as working at state-owned workshops, conversations with rural peasants, and from observation of peasants' lifestyle during evacuation periods or short-term trips.¹³⁶ The awareness of ration goods' inferiority motivated the practice of bartering. Consumer goods that were only available in Hà Nội were bartered for foodstuffs in the countryside. Ration goods were bartered for privately cultivated agricultural products for a differential rate. Some of the common bartering examples included: ration rice for vermicelli, ration noodles for rice, and rice for wine. Bartering took place between Hà Nội residents and merchants who made daily trips from the countryside to the center of Hà Nội to barter or sell their products. Additionally, people frequently bartered with fellow Hà Nội residents who possessed advanced skills in culinary and other crafts. For example, during the festive season of the Lunar New Year, when there was a high demand for high quality food, many households in Hà Nội bartered redeemed cooking ingredients or ration

¹³⁴ For extensive studies of the chronic shortage and its causes, see: Melanie Beresford, *Vietnam: Politics, Economics and Society* (London and New York: Pinter Publishers, 1988); Thrift and Forbes, *The Price of*; Đặng Phong, *Lịch sử kinh tế Việt Nam 1945-2000* [Economic History of Việt Nam 1945-2000], 3 vols (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Khoa Học Xã Hội, 2005).

¹³⁵ The earliest sign of Hà Nội residents' aversion to ration goods was in the immediate aftermath of the 1954 Hà Nội takeover. During the occupation period (1946-1954), rice was mainly imported from Sài Gòn, which was of superior quality to the ration rice that the new government provided afterwards. The lower quality of ration rice was due to the new government's struggle in taking over and managing the rice processing process, as well as transportation. Many Hà Nội residents refused to purchase ration rice despite its cheaper price and continued to purchase rice from rural peasants. See: Lê Văn Ba, "Nửa Trăm Năm, Chuyện Giờ Mới Kể" [Half A Century, A Story That Is Only Told Now], *Tiền Phong* (2009 Oct 11), accessed 2022 Mar 15, <https://tienphong.vn/nua-tram-nam-chuyen-gio-moi-ke-post174251.tpo>.

¹³⁶ Đoàn Tử Diễm, *Chuyện Thời Bao Cấp*, 4, 143-6.

coupons for homemade cookies from non-state-affiliated bakers.¹³⁷ Children also participated in bartering. It was common for children to collect metal scraps, used papers, wooden sticks, and other byproducts on the street or at home, and trade them for candies and popsicles at mobile street vendors.¹³⁸

Other than bartering, there was the conventional method of purchasing with money, and the carrying of foodstuffs from the countryside back to Hà Nội as gifts. While bartering was easily conducted and rather tolerated as it did not involve using money, the act of buying from non-state sellers was considered illegal and thus frequently raided by market surveillance officers or the police. Likewise, carrying souvenirs was constantly targeted under the suspicion of smuggling. Thích, a resident who lived near Đuống Bridge – an entry point to Hà Nội that had two market surveillance booths at both sides of the bridge – had witnessed several attempts by officers at offender profiling, bureaucratic harassment, and confiscations of as small an amount as a pack of cigarettes.¹³⁹ In these instances, officers provoked and exacerbated the dissatisfaction toward the *bao cấp* system among Hà Nội residents, who saw their own actions as appropriate and inevitable in a time of shortages and terrible quality of rationed goods. As a result, many Hà Nội residents did not relinquish such practices and instead poured more efforts into evading, bribing, and even sabotaging law enforcement out of spite. A young man from Thích’s neighborhood, after having witnessed officers at Đuống Bridge confiscating from an old woman a small bag of tea leaves – a wedding gift to her son – was enraged and decided to prank

¹³⁷ Lê, *Tuổi Ấy Minh*, 84-5; Việt Nga, “Ơi Một Thời Xốp, Gai...!” [O The Old Days Of Crumbly Scalloped Cookies...!], *Trí Thức & Cuộc Sống* (2012 Aug 7), accessed 2022 Ma 24, <https://kienthuc.net.vn/thu-0-gio/oi-mot-thoi-xop-gai-138169.html>.

¹³⁸ Kiều LêKiều, “Tóc Rối Đồi Kẹo Kéo” [Tangled Hair For Taffy], *Facebook* (2021 Jul 29), accessed 2022 Ma 24, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/721926094625837/permalink/2038612769623823>.

¹³⁹ Quý Thích, “Vài Mẫu Chuyện Thời Bao Cấp” [Some Stories About The *Bao Cấp* Era], in *Chuyện Thời Bao Cấp*, 2, 182-4.

these officers as payback. He intentionally acted suspicious while carrying a large package on his bicycle. When the officers asked him to let them investigate the package, he ran away with the package, causing the officers to chase after him. They were later dumbfounded to find out that the package contained only a rock, and the chase was a complete waste of time and effort.¹⁴⁰ As for Diễm, he was suddenly visited by a group of relatives, and had no other option but to buy vermicelli from an illegal seller to make dinner for the guests. The purchase took place in a dark alley to avoid the police, and the fear of being caught by the police followed Diễm all the way until he arrived home.¹⁴¹ Thắng, a soldier on leave, was much more confrontational with surveillance officers. When an authoritarian officer was about to confiscate Thắng's small bag of vermicelli – a gift for his family – he showed his gun and threatened to shoot the officer in the face. Thắng was almost arrested, but after some negotiation, he was able to come home with his vermicelli.¹⁴²

The perception of unsympathetic, authoritarian, if not corrupt market surveillance officers provided another layer of justification for disobedience and participation in commercial activities outside of the state plan, whose normalization in turn reinforced the distaste for ration goods and the rationing system. Nevertheless, almost no Hà Nội resident could afford not to use ration

¹⁴⁰ Quý, *Chuyện Thời Bao Cấp*, 2, 184-185.

¹⁴¹ Đoàn, *Chuyện Thời Bao Cấp*, 4, 11-13.

¹⁴² Trương Đức Thắng, “Nỗi Niềm Của Tôi” [My Feelings], in *Chuyện Thời Bao Cấp*, 1, 182-5.

Thắng's case was rather extreme, but confrontation or negotiation between soldiers or vets and surveillance officers was a common phenomenon throughout the *Bao Cấp* era. Soldiers and vets often appealed for sympathy and forgiveness on the basis that their sacrifice for the country deserved preferential treatments (*chủ nghĩa công thân*). The tactic worked especially for vets with perceivable injuries. Officers felt obligated to overlook out of their own conscience, or because of the pressure from the surrounding onlookers. See: Phan Cẩm Thượng, “Đời Sống Thời Bao Cấp (Bài 7): Chợ Đen” [Life During The *Bao Cấp* Era (Part 7): The Black Market], *Thế Thao & Văn Hóa* (2014 Jun 14), accessed 2022 Jun 7, <https://thethaovanhoa.vn/van-hoa/doi-song-thoi-bao-cap-bai-7-cho-den-n20140611153441454.htm>; Hồ Bắc, “Quân Với Dân Một Ý Chí” [Soldiers And Civilians Sharing The Same Will], *Trường Đại Học Chính Trị* (2018 Mar 27), accessed 2022 Jun 7, <http://daihocchinhtri.edu.vn/vi/gioi-thieu/Van-hoc-nghe-thuat/QUAN-VOI-DAN-MOT-Y-CHI-109/>.

goods, since they were far cheaper than goods from the “outside” market. This dilemma was reflected in a memory provided by Cương, a university professor from the early 1970s through the 1980s. One time, when his wife could not redeem rice for lunch¹⁴³ because the line was too long, the professor decided to borrow money from his neighbor to go buy rice in the marketplace. Luckily, his wife came back with ration rice right before he made the purchase. The seller then begged him to buy and experience how different her rice was compared to the rationed rice, to which Cương replied: “I’m too poor so there is no choice but to eat ration rice.”¹⁴⁴ Indeed, this frustration toward the *bao cấp* system’s ambition to satisfy citizens’ every need, and its failure to meet those goals, while most Vietnamese had no choice to rely on it, was well captured in a popular verse written by the author Thanh Tịnh: “Rationing even the crappiest things, but everything was rationed like crap” (*Cái cắt gì cũng phân, mà phân thì như cắt*).¹⁴⁵

Social Hierarchy Under The Bao Cấp System

The *bao cấp* system’s failure to supply enough goods to back up the issued rationing coupons had become a major source of stress and inconvenience for Hà Nội residents in their daily life. Moreover, the inequitable distribution of goods and services was also dividing society into the haves and have nots, and simultaneously generating new social hierarchies based on a

¹⁴³ Rice shortage made it almost impossible to redeem a large quantity of rice at once. It was not uncommon for people to go redeem rice a few times a week.

¹⁴⁴ Hoàng Phương, “Chuyện 'Cười Ra Nước Mắt' Thời Tem Phiếu” [Stories That Were Both Depressing And Hilarious In The Rationing Coupon Era], *Vnexpress* (2016 Dec 13), accessed 2022 Mar 14, <https://vnexpress.net/chuyen-cuoi-ra-nuoc-mat-thoi-tem-phieu-3509053.html>.

¹⁴⁵ Vũ Trình Tường, “Từ Một Vế Xuất Đói Của Nhà Văn Thanh Tịnh” [From Author Thanh Tịnh’s Spontaneous Parallelist Verse], *Hội Trường Sơn* (2018 Aug 12), accessed 2022 Mar 10, http://hoitruongsong.vn/tin-tuc/2119_54050/tu-ve-xuat-doi-cua-thanh-tinh-htm.

person's proximity to *real* access to goods. As has been mentioned previously, there was a ranking system of ration privileges, and the assignment of ration rank depended largely on the occupation and workplace position of individuals. Nevertheless, what made the elites the most privileged was more than the number of coupons that they received every month. It was also the guarantee of coupon redeemability despite the ubiquitous shortages that too often rendered coupons of other categories nothing more than pieces of paper. This was possible due to the establishment of ration stores that were exclusive to the elites, the most famous included the ration store on Tông Đản street for rank B and above,¹⁴⁶ and three others for rank C on Văn Hồ street, Nhà Thờ street, and Đặng Dung street.¹⁴⁷ According to the economic historian Đặng Phong, the Tông Đản store was created first in the late 1950s after the takeover of Hà Nội following the Ministry of Public Security's demand for the protection of elite officials from health issues and poisoning.¹⁴⁸ Therefore, from its very concept, goods sold at the Tông Đản store had been of higher quality; its restocking was guaranteed and prioritized by the Ministry of Domestic Trade, hence its consistent abundance of goods, including those that were increasingly becoming unavailable in ration stores for commoners. The Tông Đản store became a precedent for the establishment of three other stores for rank C officials, which were the result of these officials' pressure on the Ministry of Domestic Trade for protection against shortages of goods.¹⁴⁹ Furthermore, due to the high status of the customers and their limited number, courtesy

¹⁴⁶ The Tông Đản store was famous also because of its colonial past as the grand retail store of Michaud company which specialized in French food imports.

¹⁴⁷ In addition, officers rank B and above were permitted to purchase goods at Intershops, which were stores originally reserved for foreign visitors. Intershops were frequently stocked with rare consumer goods and imports. Some goods such as cigarettes had a quantity cap per month, while others such as confectionaries could be bought with no restriction. For a detailed study of Intershops, see: Beresford and Đặng, *Economic Transition in*, 102-7.

¹⁴⁸ Đặng, *Tư Duy Kinh*, 231.

¹⁴⁹ Đặng, *Tư Duy Kinh*, 232.

toward customers was well maintained.¹⁵⁰ The shopping experience at these elite stores was vastly different from the experience at ration stores for commoners, which was reflected in a popular saying:

Tông Đản is for the kings and aristocrats (the A and B ranks),

Nhà Thờ is for the sycophants (the C ranks)

Đồng Xuân is for merchants (unlawful merchants)

The pavement is for our heroic commoners.¹⁵¹

At ration stores for commoners, goods ran out quickly, especially essential foodstuffs like rice or meat, forcing people to line up an hour or two before the store was open. During festive seasons, people queued from as early as one in the morning or even the night before to make sure they would get the best quality goods.¹⁵² Customers were often anxious and irritable, and petty fights occurred frequently when someone was suspected of cutting the line, or when goods were running out. In addition to that, they had to endure the trademark authoritarian attitude of ration store salesladies. Customers could not complain and had to remain courteous regardless of the situation. This was the result of fears that salesladies would discriminate against them, selling them only goods with the worst quality, underweighing their rations, or refusing to sell them any

¹⁵⁰ Nguyễn Ngọc Tiên, “Tiêu Chuẩn A, B, C Và N?”, in *Đi Xuyên Hà Nội* [Going Through Hà Nội] (TP.HCM: Nhà Xuất Bản Trẻ, 2015).

¹⁵¹ Original Vietnamese text: “*Tông Đản là của vua quan/Nhà Thờ là của trung gian nịnh thần/Đồng Xuân là của thương nhân/Via hè là của nhân dân anh hùng.*”

“The pavement is for our heroic commoners” referred to the typical scene when customers could not redeem their coupons and instead had to buy goods from illegal pavement vendors; or they had run out of coupons/were not entitled to coupons and had to beg for food on the street).

¹⁵² Vũ Lua and Ngọc Trang, “Xếp Hàng Sắm Tết, Đánh Nhau 'Sứt Đầu' Vì Viên Gạch Vỡ” [Lining Up For Lunar New Year Shopping, Punching Each Other On The Head Over A Piece Of Broken Brick], *Vietnamnet* (2016 Dec 28), accessed 2022 Mar 15, <https://Vietnamnet.vn/vn/doi-song/gia-dinh/chuyen-xep-hang-sam-tet-thoi-bao-cap-348942.html>.

at all.¹⁵³ Dân as a young boy was scared and embarrassed when he saw his mother “buttering up” to a saleslady, so that the woman would sell his mother slightly better-looking wrapping leaves for making sticky rice cakes.¹⁵⁴ Rarely did customers confront salesladies for their poor service. Minh remembered the incident when he was enraged and threw eight kilograms worth of rice coupons in the face of the disrespectful head of staff while shouting: “To hell with you!” His action shocked the entire store. Fellow customers later came up to praise Minh, not without expressing worries for the consequence of his action. As for Minh’s wife, after hearing the story, she burst out in tears: “Doing that will only drive our child to starvation!”¹⁵⁵

¹⁵³ Nguyễn Quang Lập, “Mậu Dịch Viên Hot Girl Thời Bao Cấp” [Ration Store Salesladies – The Hotties Of The Bao Cấp Era], *Thanh Niên* (2010 Dec 29), accessed 2022 Mar 20, <https://thanhnien.vn/mau-dich-vien-hot-girl-thoi-bao-cap-post90876.html>; Hồng Long, “Tiền Lê Hơn Thẻ Thương Binh” [Small Changes Over Wounded Military Vet Certificate], in *Chuyện Thời Bao Cấp*, 2, 59-66.

¹⁵⁴ Quan Thế Dân, “Tết Nghèo Trong Tôi” [Tết Of The Poor In Me], *Sức Khỏe & Đời Sống* (2022 Jan 29), accessed 2022 Mar 20, <https://suckhoedoisong.vn/tet-ngheo-trong-toi-169220129161809699.htm>.

¹⁵⁵ Ngô, “Thời Phân Phối” [Rationing Era], in *Sống thời Bao Cấp*.



Figure 1-6: Lining up to buy foodstuffs at ration stores during the Bao Cấp era. Taken at the Việt Nam National Museum of History.

For those reasons, getting to shop at elite stores was a matter of having food security, if not entitlement to luxuries, *and* being treated with dignity. As such, the elites assumed the highest status in the *Bao Cấp* era's society due to their privileged access to exclusive goods, services, and experiences. Chiến remembered his mother's sense of superiority over their neighbors because his father was a rank C, and therefore entitled to shop at the Vân Hồ store, which was not common in his neighborhood.¹⁵⁶ Similarly, Nhi idolized her classmate because her father was the head of the Việt Nam-Cuba Friendship Hospital. The father's elite status

¹⁵⁶ Vũ, *Kim Liên Một*, 60.

enabled his daughter to have an “extremely abundant” (*xa xỉ*) lifestyle, such as having pork hock stew on an ordinary day, which was consistently considered a luxury throughout the *Bao Cấp* era.¹⁵⁷ Having a relative or having an intimate relationship with a rank C-holder and above was highly desirable as well, since it opened up more access to goods and other opportunities for the lower rank relatives and friends. For example, acquaintances of elite families could gain access to elite stores by accompanying family members of the elites when they went shopping, since these stores also accepted the elites’ “relatives” as customers.¹⁵⁸ The expectation for the elites to give favors to their circle of friends and families was endorsed by the *bao cấp* system itself, due to the acknowledged practice of using handwritten special permits and reference letter (*giấy bảo lãnh, giấy giới thiệu*) by an authority to gain prioritized access to goods, services, and job opportunities.¹⁵⁹ Special permits were sometimes omitted because ration store staffs were already aware of the customer’s connection with the elites. However, skipping the procedure of checking for permits solely based on trust also created opportunities for scams. Bình was a low-level geologist at a research institute, who was not entitled to special treatment from ration store salesladies. The lunar new year season was approaching, and the local ration store was running out of foodstuffs. Inspired by a scamming incident that he witnessed recently, where the con artist pretended to be a military vet working under the vice chairman of the local people’s committee, Bình decided to borrow his acquaintance’s old military uniform to go shopping. With the right appearance, and with his charisma, Bình was able to trick ration store salesladies into

¹⁵⁷ Nhi Nguyễn Huyền, “Hà Nội – Ký Ức Xưa” [Hà Nội – Faraway Memories], *Facebook* (2021 Jan 20), accessed 2022 Mar 18, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/721926094625837/permalink/1884349011716867/>.

¹⁵⁸ Lê, *Lời Ai Điều*, 90.

¹⁵⁹ See a story of a ration store staff who gave special treatment to a customer whom she took a liking in, causing the queuing customers to feel dissatisfied. She then quickly justified herself with the reason that the customer held a reference letter, which immediately calmed down the queue: Hoàng Yên, “Nhớ Về Thời Bao Cấp: Chuyện Tình Của Bố Tôi” [Remembering The Bao Cấp Era: My Father’s Love Story], *24h* (2012 Dec 12), accessed 2022 Mar 18, <https://www.24h.com.vn/tin-tuc-trong-ngay/chuyen-tinh-thoi-bao-cap-c46a505149.html>.

selling him a large amount of high-quality pork meat, which he later shared with his colleagues.¹⁶⁰

The awareness of the elites' privileges, and the benefits of having connections to the elites, had shaped the social behaviors of generations of people during the *Bao Cấp* era, particularly concerning romantic relationships and marriage. For instance, the desirability of the elites as marriage partners, and the social expectation for women to marry an elite or their family members was reflected in a popular saying:

Doesn't matter if the husband is an old geezer
He has *Tông Đản* coupons and a private home.¹⁶¹

Or:

Listen and remember well my dear,
Pick the kid of a 'big shot', even if they're ugly and thin
Your dad and grandad were miserable enough
Grab any big fish when you can, luck is reserved only for those who dare.¹⁶²

¹⁶⁰ Vũ Ngọc Tiến, “Ký ức Hà Thành Thời Bao Cấp (Kỳ 2)” [Memories Of Hà Nội During The Bao Cấp Era (Part 2)], *Văn Việt* (2019 Nov 12), accessed 2022 Mar 18, <http://vanviet.info/van/k-uc-h-thnh-thoi-bao-cap-ky-2/>.

¹⁶¹ Original Vietnamese text: “*Chồng già thì mặc chồng già/Có phiếu Tông Đản, có nhà ở riêng*”

¹⁶² Original Vietnamese text: “*Nghe cha nhớ kỹ điều này/Phải con ông “cốp”, xấu gầy cũng yêu/ Ông cha cực khổ đã nhiều/ Ô dù bám lấy, phải liều mới may*”. This is an excerpt from a poem written by an anonymous author titled “A letter from a father to his child who was studying in the USSR in the twentieth century” (*Thư cha gửi con học Liên Xô thế kỷ XX*). Read the full poem at: Nguyễn Văn Minh, “Thư Cha Gửi Con Học Liên Xô Thế Kỷ 20” [A Letter From A Father To His Child Who Was Studying In The USSR In The Twentieth Century], *minhankiev* (2021 Dec 11), accessed 2022 Mar 17, <http://minhankiev.blogspot.com/2012/12/thu-cha-gui-con-hoc-lien-xo-ky-20.html>.

Vũ's experience during her senior year at the university illustrated well this social expectation and pressure.¹⁶³ Each time her suitors came to visit, Vũ's mother would spend time chatting with them to investigate the men's background. She would ask about their future prospects, their parents' and siblings' current position, and entitled privileges as well as the potential of asking the other party for favors. After having finished her investigation, Vũ's mother enthusiastically suggested Vũ to date and marry the man whom she saw as holding the most privileges, despite Vũ's disinterest in marriage at the time. As for men from less privileged families, Thành and Lập – who held bitter memories of feeling inferior to the elites or future elites during courtship – represented a common experience in the *Bao Cấp* era. The two men did not feel confident in pursuing beautiful women because of their complexes over being not as well-dressed, not able to afford expensive gifts and dates like the elites; and most of all, they were not able to give the promise of a materially abundant lifestyle to their love interest.¹⁶⁴

Behind the elites in the *Bao Cấp* era's social hierarchy, particularly before 1975, were the ordinary public employees (hereafter, employees). While the employees did not have their own privileged stores and thus had to endure the same treatment from store staff as the commoners, their access to goods could be significantly improved with additional benefits provided by their workplace. For example, employees were entitled to supplementary goods provided by the employing institution. A state institution could demand monetary budget or goods from the central government on the grounds of maintaining or improving performance by providing

¹⁶³ Linh Vũ, “Mẹ Tôi Kén Rê” [How My Mother Picked Her Son-In-Law], in *Chuyện Thời Bao Cấp*, 1, 140-51.

¹⁶⁴ Xzone, “Chuyện 'Tán Gái' Thời Bao Cấp” [How To Get A Girl In The Bao Cấp Era], *Ngôi Sao* (2021 Nov 29), accessed 2022 Jul 17, <https://ngoisao.vnexpress.net/chuyen-tan-gai-thoi-bao-cap-2627786.html>; Nguyễn, “Cái Mặc Thời Bao Cấp Và Môi Tình Nửa Năng” [Clothes In The Bao Cấp Era And Unrealized Love], in *Ký Ức Vụn*, vol.2.

employees with adequate equipment and nourishment.¹⁶⁵ Money or goods received would be redistributed to employees through the institution’s labor union. This internal distribution saved employees from wasting time on queueing or checking up ration stores for the arrival of rare goods. The central government, however, did not fund state institutions equally, hence the gaps in living standards between employees of the same ration rank but who worked for different institutions. One informant, whose parent worked in the Ministry of Public Security – an institute well-known for its exceptional employee benefits, recalled the occasional sales organized by the Ministry inside the living quarters of its employees and their families. The goods for sale could include foodstuffs considered delicacies at the time, such as powdered milk, sausages, and beer.¹⁶⁶ In periods of heightened shortages, labor unions – whose functions encompassed “*by all means* gradually improve the material and cultural life of employees for the sake of productivity improvement”¹⁶⁷ – would design their own plans to help reduce employees’ everyday life stress. For example, it was common for employees to hand over their ration coupons to their workplace’s labor union, and the union would appoint staff to go redeem ration goods for the

¹⁶⁵ Bộ Tài Chính – Bộ Nội Thương – Ngân Hàng Nhà Nước, *Thông Tư Liên Bộ 21-TT/LB Hướng Dẫn Thi Hành Chỉ Thị Số 153-Ttg/Tn Ngày 21/12/1965 Của Thủ Tướng Chính Phủ Về Việc Cho Cán Bộ, Công Nhân, Viên Chức Vay Tiền Mua Xe Đạp Và Xe Mô Tô (Hoặc Xe Đạp Máy)* [Joint Circular Guide 21-TT/LB By Prime Minister On The Provision Of Loans For Public Employees To Purchase Bicycles And Motorcycles (Or Motorized Bicycles)], 1966 Jun 30, accessed 2022 Jul 19, <https://thuvienphapluat.vn/van-ban/tien-te-ngan-hang/Thong-tu-lien-bo-so-21-TT-LB-huong-dan-chi-thi-153-TTg-TN-cho-can-bo-cong-nhan-vien-chuc-vay-tien-mua-xe-dap-va-xe-mo-to-hoac-xe-may-19766.aspx>; Hội Đồng Bộ Trưởng, *Quyết Định Số 134-Hđbt Ngày 17 Tháng 8 Năm 1982 Về Một Số Chế Độ Đãi Ngộ Đối Với Công Nhân, Viên Chức Nhà Nước* [Decision no.134-Hđbt on 1982 Aug 17 by the Council of Ministers on some benefits for public employees], 1982 Aug 17, accessed 2022 Jul 19, <https://thuvienphapluat.vn/van-ban/Lao-dong-Tien-luong/Quyet-dinh-134-HDB-che-do-dai-ngo-cong-nhan-vien-chuc-nha-nuoc-43952.aspx>.

¹⁶⁶ Unidentified informant no.1, Facebook message to author (2022 Mar 4).

The Ministry of Public Security, together with the Military, were institutions that were entitled to the highest privileges. They were not required to provide detailed explanations for their material demands and estimated budget. See: *Thông Tư 31-Nt*.

¹⁶⁷ Quốc Hội, *Luật Công Đoàn Số 108-S1/L10* [Labor Union Law No.108-S1/L10], 1957 Nov 5, accessed 2022 Jul 20, <https://thuvienphapluat.vn/van-ban/Lao-dong-Tien-luong/Luat-Cong-doan-1957-108-SL-L-10-36821.aspx>.

entire workplace.¹⁶⁸ Furthermore, a few months prior to the Lunar New Year – the most important holiday of the year – labor unions’ staff and finance departments’ staff would begin obtaining special permits and reference letters for purchasing goods at state prices. Alternatively, they could negotiate directly with peasants, factories, and workshops for goods. The goal was to enable employees to enjoy a greater abundance of goods during the holiday.¹⁶⁹

In the late *Bao Cấp* era (1975-1986), state institutions’ capability in securing goods for their employees drastically decreased due to the *bao cấp* system’s inability in capturing resources.¹⁷⁰ This resulted in the decline of employees’ living standard to fall far below that of many commoners. Nevertheless, employees were nonetheless considered of higher social standing than commoners who worked as merchants in the “outside” market (*con buôn, phe phẩy*). Employees’ perceived superiority lay in their status as law-abiding citizens, their benefits of lifetime employment, including lifetime monthly pension after retirement, and the opportunity for achieving the elite rank. These characteristics created an impression of dignity and stability

¹⁶⁸ Trần Thu Dung, “Tết Về Nhớ Chuyện Xếp Hàng Thời Bao Cấp” [Reminiscing Stories About Lining Up During The Bao Cấp Era As Tết Is Coming], *Nông Nghiệp Việt Nam* (2019 Feb 2), accessed 2022 Mar 16, <https://nongnghiep.vn/tet-ve-nho-chuyen-xep-hang-thoi-bao-cap-d234730.html>; Hiền Thanh, “Chuyện Về Giáo Dục Thời Bao Cấp” [Stories About The Education System In The Bao Cấp Era], *Công Thông Tin Điện Tử Huyện Ủy – HĐND – UBND – UBMTTQVN Huyện Phú Ninh* (2021 Nov 15), accessed 2022 Mar 16, <http://phuninh.gov.vn/index.php/y-ban-nhan-dan/giao-d-c/6178-chuy-n-v-giao-d-c-th-i-bao-c-p>.

¹⁶⁹ Hoàng Hữu Lượng, “Tết Công Chức Thời Bao Cấp” [Tết For Public Employees During The Bao Cấp Era], *PetroTimes* (2017 Jan 30), accessed 2022 Mar 18, <https://petrotimes.vn/tet-cong-chuc-thoi-bao-cap-490901.html>; Ánh Vương, “Tết Tập Thể” [Collective Tết], *Hà Nội Mới* (2018 Feb 17), accessed 2022 Mar 16, <https://HaNoimoi.com.vn/Tin-tuc/Van-hoa/892916/tet-tap-the>; Đồng Phước, “Thưởng Tết Thời Bao Cấp: Tháng Lương 13, Chia Thịt Tại Cơ Quan Cho 3 Ngày Tết” [Tết Bonus In The Bao Cấp Era: The 13th Month Paycheck, Dividing Meat At Workplace For The Three Days Of Tết], *Thanh Niên* (2020 Jan 22), accessed 2022 Mar 16, <https://thanhnien.vn/thuong-tet-thoi-bao-cap-thang-luong-13-chia-thit-tai-co-quan-cho-3-ngay-tet-post918724.html>.

¹⁷⁰ See chapter two of this thesis for further explanation.

that many considered more attractive, and more beneficial in the long term than the affluence of merchants in the “outside” market.¹⁷¹

While ordinary public employees were generally entitled to less privileges than the elites, one type of employee stood out for possessing superior access to goods: the ration store salesladies (*mậu dịch viên*, hereafter salesladies). As mentioned previously, salesladies had left a deep impression on generations of Hà Nội residents as they were perceived as the tyrannical overlords of everyday life. Their menacing facial expressions, and rude “serving” attitude as if bestowing mercy (*ban ơn*) onto customers were in total contrast with the interior of the store – often adorned with slogans such as “Customers enter willingly and exit satisfied” (*vui lòng khách đến, vừa lòng khách đi*), or “Weighing and packing correctly” (*cân đong đo đếm đầy đủ*).¹⁷² At ration stores for commoners and ordinary public employees, it was considered best practice for customers to “serve” salesladies to gain favor. These included such favors as pushing carts or carrying rice bags.¹⁷³ Some pushed their service spirit even further, by volunteering to help salesladies with office/managerial job tasks or with private affairs.¹⁷⁴ Poor customer service was the result of a lack of penalties and incentives for encouraging better services despite salesladies’

¹⁷¹ This preference for government jobs over working in the private sector persisted at least until the late 2000s in Hà Nội, and could still be observed in some population in more rural areas today. See this online discussion: xaugailaidaugau, “Còn Ai Còn Hy Vọng Muốn Làm ‘Nhà Nước’” [Who Still Wish To Work In State Institutions], *Webketoan* (2014 Jul 5), accessed 2022 Mar 20, <https://webketoan.com/threads/2573536-co-ai-con-hy-vong-muon-lam-nha-nuoc/>; See also a story of a man who was rejected by his girlfriend’s parents in the late 1990s because he was not a public employee with a lifetime employment: Nguyễn Khắc An, “Bỏ Biên Chế Trọn Đời, Bước Tiến Đây Quyết Đoán” [Ending Lifetime Employment, A Decisive Step Forward], *Nghệ An* (2019 Nov 28), accessed 2022 Mar 20, <https://e.baonghean.vn/suy-ngam/bo-bien-che-tron-doi-buoc-tien-day-quyet-doan/>.

¹⁷² Nhi Nguyễn Huyền, “Một Thời Đã Qua” [A Time Of The Past], *Facebook* (2021 Jul 31), accessed 2022 Mar 20, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/721926094625837/permalink/2039855132832920>.

¹⁷³ Kim Thu, “Thời Bao Cấp” [The Bao Cấp Era], *KGU* (2012 Oct 22), accessed 2022 Mar 20, http://www.studentkgu.vn/public/news/detail/sec_7/id_1908/; Trần Minh Hải, “Hành Trình Gạo” [The Rice Journey], *Facebook* (2021 Sep 25), accessed 2022 Mar 20, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/721926094625837/permalink/1997423027076131>.

¹⁷⁴ Bùi Ngọc Tấn, *Viết Về Bạn Bè: Tập Chân Dung Văn Nghệ Sĩ* [Writing About Friends: A Collection Of Portrayals Of Artists] (TP.HCM: Nhà Xuất Bản Trẻ, 2014), 278-9.

stressful working environment. The 1963 official code of conduct for salesladies - the *Some Regulations On The Duties And Accountability Of Sales Units* – placed strong emphasis on loss prevention, yet there was no mention of punishment or reward for customer service.¹⁷⁵ The absence of accountability fostered an environment for salesladies to profit from their direct access to cheaply priced ration goods at the expense of customers. Particularly in the late *Bao Cấp* era (1975-1986), it had become an open secret that salesladies were pilfering, counterfeiting coupons, switching goods, and selling higher quality ration goods to unlawful merchants (*con buôn, phe phẩy*¹⁷⁶). This was an extremely lucrative business for both parties. Salesladies could negotiate for a price higher than the fixed price or trade for goods in the “outside” market. Likewise, unlawful merchants could resell rations at a cost many times higher than the fixed price.¹⁷⁷ For these reasons, salesladies were often stereotyped in everyday conversations and in literature as filthy rich women who lacked basic social etiquette, sometimes spoke with an accent, or behaved in ways that clearly indicated their recent migrant status, low level of education, and/or as having non-Hà Nội “roots.”¹⁷⁸ “Old” residents often referred to salesladies

¹⁷⁵ Bộ Nội Thương, *Quyết Định 47-NT Về Việc Ban Hành “Một Số Quy Định Về Chế Độ Trách Nhiệm Của Tổ Bán Hàng”* [Decision 47-NT On The Issuance Of “Some Regulations On The Duties And Accountability Of Sales Units”], 1963 Jan 15, accessed 2022 Jul 19, <https://thuvienphapluat.vn/van-ban/Thuong-mai/Quyiet-dinh47-NT-Mot-so-quy-dinh-ve-che-do-trach-nhiem-cua-to-ban-hang-19039.aspx>.

See also the interview of former ration store staff members and the comments section, which was filled with negative comments from the audience in: Ký ức Vui Vẻ, “Nhớ Về Thời Tem Phiếu Bao Cấp Qua Lò Kê Của Các Cô Mậu Dịch Viên” [Reminiscing The Bao Cấp Rationing Coupon Era Through Lens Of Ration Store Salesladies], *Facebook* (2021 Jan 2), accessed 2022 Mar 15, <https://fb.watch/bLVik8fzEu/>.

¹⁷⁶ “Phe”, or sometimes “Áp-phe”, originated from “faire affaire”.

¹⁷⁷ Lê, *Lời Ai Điếu*, 89; Vũ Ngọc Tiến, “Ký ức Hà Thành Thời Bao Cấp (Kỳ 1)”, *Văn Việt* (2019 Sep 28), accessed 2022 Mar 20, <http://vanviet.info/van/b-tuat-phe/>.

From the 1980s onwards, the phenomenon of public employees in general selling goods or state resources to merchants had become widespread and was known by the name “interlocking” (*móc ngoặc*). See an example of “interlocking” in: Beresford and Đặng, *Economic Transition in*, 107.

¹⁷⁸ Some literary works which featured this stereotype included: Dương Thu Hương, *Bên Kia Bờ Áo Vọng* [Beyond Illusion] (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Phụ Nữ, 1988); Bùi Ngọc Tuấn, *Chuyện Kể Năm 2000* [A Story Told In 2000] (Toronto: Thời Mới, 2000); Dạ Ngân, *Gia Đình Bê Mọn* [An Insignificant Family] (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Phụ Nữ, 2005).

and corrupt public employees in terms of being foreign (*ngoại tỉnh*) and uncultured/uncivilized (*văn hóa thấp, kém văn minh*).¹⁷⁹ In doing so, they were expressing disapproval of the “new” residents’ presence and their rise to power in Hà Nội. “New” residents – represented by salesladies – were seen as bearers of a “low” culture that had soiled the pre-1954 civilized and “true” Hà Nội – a superior cultural and moral space to which only “old” residents held access. As such, it was the “old” residents who were the “true” owners of Hà Nội, whereas “new” residents were illegitimate aliens in the city. As for “new” residents, othering by emphasizing education level was a way of distancing themselves from the criticism of lowly “rural” culture and establishing themselves as the cream of the post-1954 migrants. Unlike the uneducated and unworthy migrants – represented by salesladies – the worthy migrants were immune to low culture due to their education and self-discipline, hence their status as rightful residents of Hà Nội.

Although salesladies were generally despised by their customers, almost every Hà Nội resident wished to be acquainted with salesladies and their families, hoping that by doing so their everyday quest for goods would be less stressful. Similar to the elites, most families of salesladies were guaranteed a materially better living standard as compared with families whose members were commoners or ordinary public employees. Salesladies reserved goods with the best quality for their family and relatives, hence freeing them from the time-consuming and costly burden of queueing. Furthermore, as salesladies usually made acquaintance with fellow salesladies at different stores, their family benefitted from prioritized access to every ration store

See also Phạm Hồng Thế, “Mậu Dịch Viên” [Ration Store Salesladies], *Facebook* (2020 Nov 29), accessed 2022 Mar 21, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/373876840199844/permalink/709911739929684/>.

¹⁷⁹ “Văn minh” also meant modernity. “Kém văn minh” meant uncivilized as well as lacking the qualities of being a modern person.

with which the salesladies were on friendly terms. Salesladies could also give out extra rationing coupons or reference letters for buying goods at other stores.¹⁸⁰ Loan, as a daughter of a saleslady at a foodstuff rationing store, acknowledged that many classmates wanted to befriend her, and teachers tended to give her preferential treatment because of her mother's occupation. Loan recalled a teacher who initially disliked her, but after having heard of her mother, he changed his attitude, and even offered to remove one of Loan's bad marks if she helped him ask her mother to sell him 1kg of pork meat for a special occasion.¹⁸¹

¹⁸⁰ Bùi, *Viết Về Bạn*, 187.

¹⁸¹ Nguyễn Ngọc and Thảo Trang, “Mẹ Làm Mậu Dịch, Con Gái Được Bạn Yêu, Thầy Quý, Đắt Chồng” [Having Saleslady As Mother Means Being Loved By Friends, Teachers, And Men], *Vietnamnet* (2019 May 13), accessed 2022 Mar 21, <https://Vietnamnet.vn/vn/doi-song/gia-dinh/thoi-bao-cap-me-lam-mau-dich-con-gai-duoc-ban-yeu-thay-quy-dat-chong-530569.html>.



Figure 1-7: Salesladies at the ration store for auto parts no. 1 on 9 Tràng Tiền Str. (Hà Nội, 1975). Reproduced by permission of An Thị Lộc.

The first woman from the left had phi-dê (frisé) hairstyle. The second woman wore a women's wristwatch, which was smaller and rarer than men's wristwatches. The second and the third woman wore colored or patterned shirts, as opposed to the typical off-white shirt that dominated the Hà Nội streetscape until the late 1970s. These items and hairstyle were considered symbols of wealth during the Bao Cấp era.

Because of their convenient and direct access to goods, all strata of society, from the elites to the commoners, wished to establish connections with salesladies. Through these connections, salesladies in turn gained a significant amount of access to state resources that they could buy and sell in the “outside” market, and access as well to job opportunities for their

family.¹⁸² Yet unlike the elites, the idea of marrying a saleslady remained a controversial subject among Hà Nội residents. Some observants and salesladies themselves claimed that they were considered the most desirable life partner of the *Bao Cấp* era and thus were aggressively pursued by even the elites.¹⁸³ Yet, others held the opposite opinion. An informant, who was a saleslady in the center of Hà Nội from the late 1970s until the end of the *Bao Cấp* era, and who was married to an ordinary public employee, stated that none of her acquaintances, including salesladies at the Tông Dẫn store, had an elite spouse. She then added: “the elites would never marry the likes of those in the service industry.”¹⁸⁴ Another informant who was related to two salesladies – both were married to ordinary employees – shared the same opinion. She asserted that if educated men (*trí thức*) married salesladies, it was mostly out of desperation with their extremely low rationing privileges. Pertaining to why salesladies were undesirable as a life partner, she explained:

While they [the salesladies] had more money, society still considered them second-class (*thứ cấp*). They made a living out of dirty tricks. Other people pretended that they needed them [the salesladies], but secretly we looked down on them. They were foul-mouthed, had no respect for anyone, and loved to show off their wealth. Society considered them uneducated (*bọn ít chữ*) [...] They were in the same category as the likes of unlawful merchants (*lũ con buôn*).¹⁸⁵

The informant further talked about her relatives’ married life and referred to their dysfunctional families as “the price of wealth.” What this meant was that while Hà Nội residents might want to establish a good relationship with salesladies to take advantage of their power and privilege, for

¹⁸² Búi, *Chuyện Kể Năm*, chapter 49.

¹⁸³ Nguyễn, “Mậu Dịch Viên Hot Girl”; Hoàng Phương, “Mậu Dịch Viên – Một Thời Thét Ra Lừa” [Ration Store Salesladies – A Powerful Figure Of The Past], *VnExpress* (2016 Dec 14), accessed 2022 Mar 22, <https://vnexpress.net/mau-dich-vien-mot-thoi-thet-ra-lua-3509934.html>.

¹⁸⁴ Unidentified informant no.3, Facebook Messenger video call (2022 Mar 22).

¹⁸⁵ Unidentified informant no.1, Facebook message to author (2022 Mar 21).

some families in Hà Nội, these benefits could not outweigh the salesladies' bad reputation to make them into appealing marriage candidates. The job of a saleslady was heavily stigmatized as fraudulent and unworthy of Hà Nội families from proper backgrounds. Furthermore, in families that placed great importance in manners and education, there was the fear of conflicts in values and lifestyle due to the stereotype of salesladies as uncultured individuals. Salesladies therefore had become an ambivalent figure within the social hierarchy of the *Bao Cấp* era. Their employment enabled by the *bao cấp* system had helped them gain material advantages and career opportunities for their circle of family and friends, hence making them the subject of envy and desire. Yet their lucrative job and their tendency to abuse their authority also led to their stigmatization in Hà Nội.

Against the backdrop of chronic shortages of just about everything, the *bao cấp* system's unequal redistribution of resources, despite its rhetoric of class abolition, was in truth erecting new forms of social hierarchies and power relations. At the top of the hierarchy was the educated white-collar public employee (*cán bộ*), and at the bottom was the unaffiliated (*dân tự do*),¹⁸⁶ which consisted of mostly unlawful merchants in the “outside” market. Such a reality frustrated and at the same time cultivated in generations of youths a desire to become white-collar employees. Furthermore, the rhetoric of equal opportunities, or “receive according to one's labor”, and the *bao cấp* system's various assistance programs and subsidization had convinced many that becoming a white-collar employee was an achievable and promising career, so long as one put enough effort and obeyed the rules. And indeed, many youths benefitted from the *bao cấp* system as they became the first in their family to receive a university degree and obtained a fulfilling career as a white-collar employee in the capital city of Hà Nội – once an exclusive

¹⁸⁶ In terms of ration rank, the unaffiliated belonged to the commoner rank – the lowest rank in the rationing system.

domain of the affluent Vietnamese during the colonial era.¹⁸⁷ Nevertheless, for a significant number of youths, the pathway to a university education and lifetime employment in Hà Nội was already closed from the beginning, regardless of their abilities and efforts.¹⁸⁸ Certain social groups were subjected to systematic discrimination, including those from bourgeois/petit bourgeois/landlord families, those with immediate family members who worked for the French as soldiers or white-collar employees, those with relatives who fled to the South in 1954, and those with immediate family members or themselves who were involved in political scandals and accused of disloyalty to the party-state.¹⁸⁹ These individuals were generally referred to as “individual of bad background” (*người có lý lịch xấu*). The most common means of excluding individuals of “bad background” from the route to become a white-collar employee and

¹⁸⁷ See for example, the case of HBT4 in: Sakurai Yumio, Nguyễn Thị Phương Anh, and Yanagisawa Masayuki, *Lịch Sử Hình Thành Cư Dân Đô Thị Hà Nội* [History Of The Formation Of The Urban Population In Hà Nội] (Kyoto: Center for Integrated Area Studies, 2014), 46.

HBT4 was a female farmer who benefited from the 1950s land reforms and various educational programs (*bổ túc văn hóa*) in the 1950s – 1960s. She married a fellow farmer in the same village. The couple later became workers for state factories in the center of the capital city. Their daughter, however, was able to attend Hà Nội Medical University – the oldest and most prestigious university in Hà Nội – and had a successful career as a director of a medical center.

The scholarship system and free-of-charge or very affordable housing for students were frequently mentioned by those who came from a farmer background, or even low-level public employee background, as the reason why they or their children could pursue higher education in the capital city.

¹⁸⁸ See for example, the case of NQĐ - a former affluent merchant born in 1917 in: Vũ, “Điều Tra Đời”.

NQĐ was sent to a reeducation camp for six months after 1958, his entire business and personal assets were confiscated, and his children, despite having high academic performance, could not go to a university nor secure stable jobs in the city. He attributed his children’s struggles to three factors: his family had three generations of being wealthy landlords and merchants; his brother worked for a French airline company and moved to the South in 1954; and his refusal to perform self-criticism and denounce his business practices as exploitative during the early stage of the Bourgeois Rehabilitation campaign. See similar anecdotes in this discussion: Lê Kiều, “Tạch Tạch...Sè!”, Facebook (2021 Aug 28), accessed 2022 Mar 25, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/721926094625837/permalink/2062698860548547/>.

¹⁸⁹ The most prominent political scandals during the Bao Cấp era included the late 1950s *Nhân Văn – Giai Phẩm Affair* and the 1960s *Revisionist/Anti-Party Affair* (*Vụ án Xét Lại – Chống Đảng*).

On the *Nhân Văn – Giai Phẩm Affair*, see footnote no.14. For detailed studies of the *Revisionist/Anti-Party Affair*, see: Sophie Quinn-Judge, “The Ideological Debate in the DRV and the Significance of the Anti-Party Affair, 1967-68”, *Cold War History* 5, no.4 (November-December 2005), 479-500, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14682740500284838>; Liên-Hàng T. Nguyễn, “The War Politburo: North Vietnam’s Diplomatic and Political Road to the Tết Offensive”, *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 1, no.1-2 (2006), 4-58, <https://doi.org/10.1525/vs.2006.1.1-2.4>.

achieving upward mobility was by limiting access to higher education. Furthermore, stripping individuals of “bad background” of their educational opportunities was itself an act of humiliation, and an attempt at eliminating their family’s social prestige as the highly educated – a reputation accumulated throughout and sometimes well before the colonial era. During most of the *Bao Cấp* era, in order to get accepted into university, concerning academic qualifications, applicants in principle needed to satisfy two main requirements: having graduated from high school (*trường cấp III*) and pass the national entrance exam. Yet, several youths, despite possessing high academic achievements, repeatedly failed the exam even after several years of attempts at passing it, forcing them to give up their educational aspirations and to join the manual labor workforce, or lower their expectations to less reputed and therefore undesirable schools.¹⁹⁰ These students possessing a solid academic foundation failed mainly because they were deemed as individuals of “bad background,” and as such did not meet the political criteria of the university’s selection process.¹⁹¹

The story of Khải best illustrates the shared struggles of individuals of “bad background” under the *Bao Cấp* era’s education system. Khải was born in Hà Nội in 1942, making him an “old” resident. In 1961, he graduated high school with honors and was eager to pursue higher

¹⁹⁰ See: Bùi Tín, *Hoa Xuyên Tuyết* [Snowdrop flower] (Paris, 1991), chapter IV.

See also the interview with Lê Kiên Thành – son of Lê Duẩn – in which he talked about his petit bourgeois in-laws and the discrimination pertaining to education opportunities: KT Le, “Đối Thoại (Tiếp)” [Dialogue (Continue)], *Facebook* (2020 Nov 26), accessed 2022 Mar 24, https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=920689741670848&id=100011894928988.

¹⁹¹ Political orientation was a prioritized criterion; however, it did not mean that those of “bad background” would de facto be rejected. Furthermore, the political criterion was rather vaguely defined, which left space for interpretation and mitigation. See: Ninh, *A World Transformed*, 218-23.

For courses which were considered demanding and required exceptional skills, exam results and academic performance were prioritized over political commitment. For example, the applied mathematics course of the Hà Nội Polytechnic University throughout the wartime period was dominated by individuals of “bad background”. See: “Một Thời Sinh Viên” [University Student Years], *Hội Cựu Sinh Viên Toán Bách Khoa* (2001 Oct 15), accessed 2022 Mar 26, <http://svtoanbk.vn/Articles/19/161/Mot-thoi-sinh-vien.html>.

education. Yet, despite having finished the entrance exam with ease, Khải was not admitted into the University of Education – a school considered “easy” at the time.¹⁹² In contrast, classmates with poor academic performance easily passed the exam, leading Khải to believe that he was rejected not because he lacked abilities, but because he was not a member of the Youth Union.¹⁹³ After three years of failing, fortunately a distant in-law who was an elite heard of the story and decided to intervene. He asked the university’s headmaster for the reason and was informed that Khải was rejected because he was categorized as a person of bourgeois background. The in-law then wrote a reference letter for Khải and handed it to the headmaster on the spot, resulting in the delivery of a letter of acceptance on the next morning. Later, also through connections, Khải found out that he was blacklisted for three years simply because a local police officer saw that his grandfather regularly spoke French, hence the assumption of a bourgeois background, and thereby the officer wrote and sent a critical report to the local people’s committee. Khải’s experience illustrated the bias university admissions process, where individuals deemed of having a “bad background” were held at a disadvantage, and whose pass or fail sometimes hinged upon arbitrary accusations and subjective decision making. The discrimination was

¹⁹² The University of Education was unpopular among students since most graduates would become teachers – an occupation notorious for having extremely low rationing privileges. Students at this university also held a reputation for being underprivileged as compared to students from other universities. Some popular saying which illustrated this reality included: “Students at the University of Education eat like monks, and live like prisoners” (*Ăn như Sư, ở như Phạm*), or “Only cornered rats will enter the University of Education” (*Chuột chạy cùng sào mới vào Sư Phạm*).

¹⁹³ For similar personal accounts, see: Le Minh Nguyen, “Thầm Lặng” [Tranquility], *Facebook* (2020 Nov 17), accessed 2022 Mar 25, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/373876840199844/permalink/701156584138533/>.

Youth Union membership was not specified as a requirement in any governmental guideline on admission screening, but rather as an unwritten rule. Many Hà Nội residents who were considered individuals of “bad background” mentioned the lack of Youth Union membership as the reason for their university rejection. Their suspicion was not baseless, as some students were informed of their exam results, which were above the passing marks, yet were not offered a letter of acceptance. Interestingly, the belief that Youth Union membership is a requirement for graduating high school and taking the university entrance exam persists, as recently as 2021, when political commitment is no longer a criterion for applicant screening. See this Q&A session on website about laws: “Chưa Kết Nạp Đoàn Có Được Thi Đại Học?” [Can I Take The University Entrance Exam Without A Youth Union Membership?], *Thư Viện Pháp Luật* (2021 Sep 20), accessed 2022 Mar 25, <https://hoidap.thuvienphapluat.vn/hoi-dap/5548F-hd-chua-vao-doan-co-duoc-thi-dai-hoc.html>.

particularly severe during the First War of Destruction (*Chiến Tranh Phá Hoại Lần Thứ Nhất*) (1965-1968),¹⁹⁴ when the university entrance exam was suspended, and admission was decided solely on the applicant's background.¹⁹⁵ Nevertheless, the non-standard and ambivalent nature of the selection process did allow a measure for maneuvering, given that the individual of “bad background” in question was qualified and had personal connections. For other cases such as that of Minh, who did not have an elite relative like Khải, his university admission was entirely based on luck. Minh's father was wrongly executed during the land reform, yet he remained on the blacklist of the local government. Fortunately, his high school homeroom teacher Quát, who was determined to help his brightest student, had tirelessly and successfully petitioned for Minh's eligibility to attend university.¹⁹⁶

Nevertheless, discrimination continued to follow individuals of “bad background” after entering university. Many people, who attended university in the 60s and early 70s, recalled being bullied by fellow students, and receiving warnings from the school board because of their *Tạch tạch sè* (petit bourgeois) mannerisms. These mannerisms included speaking with a Hà Nội

¹⁹⁴ Also known as Operation Rolling Thunder in the US.

¹⁹⁵ The entrance exam was suspended for six years (1965-1966) and recommenced in 1971: Bộ Giáo Dục, *Quyết Định 221-QĐ Ban Hành Quy Chế Tuyển Sinh Vào Các Trường Đại Học Và Trung Học Chuyên Nghiệp Năm Học 1965 – 1966* [Decision 221-QĐ On The Issuance Of Admission Regulations For Universities And Vocational Colleges, School Year 1965 - 1966], 1965 Apr 9, accessed 2022 Jul 19, <https://thuvienphapluat.vn/van-ban/Giao-duc/Quyết-dinh-221-QĐ-quy-che-tuyen-sinh-vao-truong-dai-hoc-trung-hoc-chuyen-nghiep-nam-hoc-1965-1966-18148.aspx>; Bộ Đại Học Và Trung Học Chuyên Nghiệp, *Quyết Định 2451-QĐ Ban Hành Quy Định Tuyển Sinh Vào Các Trường, Lớp Đại Học Và Trung Học Chuyên Nghiệp Tại Chức* [Decision 2451-QĐ On The Issuance Of Admission Regulations For Universities, University Courses, Vocational Colleges, And In-Service Training Programs], 1970 Nov 14, accessed 2022 Jul 19, <https://thuvienphapluat.vn/van-ban/Giao-duc/Quyết-dinh-2451-QĐ-quy-dinh-tuyen-sinh-vao-cac-truong-lop-dai-hoc-va-trung-hoc-chuyen-nghiep-tai-chuc-19351.aspx>.

Some recalled that between 1971 and 1973, universities did not publicize exam results and only issued letter of acceptance. This had led to situations where the letter did not reach the candidate, resulting in the misunderstanding that the candidate had failed the exam hence could not complete their admission by the deadline. This was either an accident or due to the local people's committee deliberately withholding the letter. From 1974 onwards, universities began publicizing exam results to improve transparency in the admission process.

¹⁹⁶ Ngô, “Đôi Dép Quê Và Lý Lịch Xấu” [Outdated Sandals And A Bad Background], in *Sống Thời Bao Cấp*.

accent that was typical among “old” residents, using “too polite” language, saying “thank you” too often, or saying “hello” every time they passed by someone. In terms of appearance, ironing clothes daily, wearing *áo dài* too frequently, or having a “too-nicely combed” hairstyle were heavily criticized as signs of extravagance and self-indulgence. Those who possessed these mannerisms and appearance were often accused of lacking a “collective spirit” or of trying to stand above others. They could be sent to a self-criticism session (*kiểm điểm*), where they were denounced by members of the school board and fellow students and were forced to accept and repeat the denouncement.¹⁹⁷

Discrimination extended to the post-graduation work experience. The new graduates did not have to do job hunting after graduation since they would be assigned jobs and workplaces by the government. Many Hà Nội residents of “bad background” were assigned to distant rural areas, which they believed was an attempt to remove them permanently from Hà Nội, from their family, and to prevent their access to opportunities for promotion.¹⁹⁸ Again, with personal connections, some managed to get transferred back to Hà Nội. A Hà Nội young man who was assigned a teaching position at a military school in Central Việt Nam was able to transfer to a newly established and promising public enterprise in Hà Nội. This transfer was the work of the enterprise’s president, who happened to be the parent of one of the young man’s older brother’s students.¹⁹⁹ Individuals of “bad background” also attempted to overcome discrimination by marrying, or having their children marry those with a “good background.” Some examples of individuals of “good background” included former Việt Minh members, “new” residents who

¹⁹⁷ Lê Kiều, “Tạch Tạch...Sè!”.

¹⁹⁸ Trần, *Ngẫu Hưng*, 141; Lê, “Phố Vãn Gió (Kỳ 2)”.

¹⁹⁹ Unidentified informant no.1, Facebook message to author (2022 Mar 4).

were public employees, and the elites.²⁰⁰ During the war, a common way for men to “rehabilitate” their background was by becoming soldiers, which in the early years of the American war was considered a privilege to which individuals of “bad background” were not entitled.²⁰¹ Hung – son of a Lycée Albert-Sarraut graduate mother and a Lycée du Protectorat graduate father – initially had to give up his university dream and become a factory worker. Fortunately, after ten years in the army and having achieved the sergeant’s rank, Hung was finally able to pursue his dream, and received his degree when he turned forty, which made his mother tremendously happy and proud.²⁰² By the late 1970s, discrimination against individuals of “bad background” had become significantly less severe. In 1979, Ánh, who was of petit-bourgeois family background and whose parents were not party members, was even chosen for studying abroad in Czechoslovakia – an out of reach dream for individuals of “bad background” of her previous generation.²⁰³ Nonetheless, those who were involved in political scandals and

²⁰⁰ Lê Minh Hà, “Phố Vẫn Gió (Kỳ 4)” [Wind Still Blows Through The City (Part 4)], *Văn Việt* (2020 Jun 6), accessed 2022 Mar 25, <http://vanviet.info/van/pho-van-gi-ky-4/>; Nguyễn Minh Vũ, “Cuộc Đời Thật Truân Chuyên!” [Life Is Full Of Sufferings!], *Facebook* (2021 Feb 20), accessed 2022 Mar 25, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/373876840199844/permalink/761407138113477/>; Nguyễn Thanh Hóa, “Phiếu Mua Hàng Cưới” [Rationing Coupons For Wedding Preparations], *Facebook* (2021 Jun 27), accessed 2022 Mar 25, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/373876840199844/permalink/838954667025390/>.

In the immediate after 1954, former Việt Minh soldiers were strongly discouraged from marrying bourgeois/petit bourgeois Hà Nội women by their superiors. See: Lê, “Đổi Thoại (Tiếp)””; Codet Hà Nội, “‘Vi Sao Hộ Mệnh’ Của Nhà Thơ Trần Dần” [The Guardian Star of Poet Trần Dần], *Thanh Niên* (2022 Mar 8), accessed 2022 Mar 25, <https://thanhnien.vn/vi-sao-ho-menh-cua-nha-tho-tran-dan-post1436505.html>.

Nevertheless, due to the changing nature of memories, and the construction of narratives to rationalize past events, it is almost impossible to know whether these “cross-class” unions at the time were purely strategic or involved feelings.

²⁰¹ Ái, *Để Gió Cuốn*, 110-1; Đặng Huy Giang, “Nhà Văn Cẩm Sơn: ‘Phớ Lớ’, ‘Thiệt Tinh’, Và ‘Dám Chơi Dám Chịu’” [Author Cẩm Sơn: “Free-Spirited”, “Eccentric”, And “Daring”], *Công An Nhân Dân Online* (2016 Sep 12), accessed 2022 Mar 26, <https://cand.com.vn/Tu-lieu-van-hoa/Nha-van-Cam-Son-Pho-Lo-thiet-tinh-va-dam-choi-dam-chiu-i403512/>.

²⁰² Luu, “Ngày Tiếp Quân”; Ngau Hung Luu, “Mẹ Tôi” [My Mother], *Facebook* (2020 Dec 3), accessed 2022 Mar 26, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/373876840199844/permalink/712191526368372/>.

²⁰³ Nguyễn Hoàng Ánh, “Du Học Sinh Việt Và ‘Con Lốc’ Ở Đông Âu” [Vietnamese International Student And The “Storm” In Eastern Europe], *Vietnamnet* (2014 Aug 5), accessed 2022 Mar 26, <https://Vietnamnet.vn/vn/tuanVietNam/du-hoc-sinh-viet-va-con-loc-o-dong-au-188924.html>.

their descendants remained heavily discriminated against throughout the *Bao Cấp* era. The children of Tấn – a writer who was arrested in 1968 on the ground of propagandizing reactionary materials – continued to be denied opportunities for higher education and to careers throughout the 1980s.²⁰⁴

The unequal system of distribution – the *bao cấp* system – was a powerful tool through which the government attempted to organize and discipline the everyday life and social relations of the population. Nevertheless, this system was far from the all-powerful totalitarian machinery as depicted in George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.²⁰⁵ It was never able to execute a thorough reengineering of the people in accordance with a predetermined vision of an ideal citizen and ideal socialist order. This was because there did not exist a “central government” (*nhà nước*) that had absolute power over a passive “people” (*nhân dân*). The state institutions that oversaw the execution of the *bao cấp* system themselves consisted of real human beings. The execution of laws and rules were therefore predicated on human subjective decision making. The gap between the system’s intended functions and its reality was also the result of pragmatic and flexible measures to adapt to unfavorable postcolonial and wartime conditions, and the imperfect management of an ambitious bureaucratic system. The combination of these realities engendered an environment which allowed for a plurality of norms and ethics. It also allowed for the exercise of agency that was inherent in the process of navigating such complex realities for making a meaningful life for oneself. After 1975, as the *bao cấp* system was met with new

²⁰⁴ Bùi Ngọc Tấn, *Hậu Chuyện Kể Năm 2000: Thời Biến Đổi Gian* [After Stories To Be Told In 2000: An Era Of Mutation] (Virginia: Tiếng Quê Hương, 2014); See also the story of pianist Đặng Thái Sơn: Hoàng Khởi Phong, “Đặng Thái Sơn: Công Cha, Nghĩa Mẹ, On Thầy” [Đặng Thái Sơn: Father’s Labor, Mother’s Love, Mentor’s Favor], *talawas* (2005 Mar 29), accessed 2011 Mar 26, <http://www.talawas.org/talaDB/showFile.php?res=4163&rb=0302>.

²⁰⁵ George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (London: Secker & Warburg, London, 1949).

factors coming from major transformations in Việt Nam's domestic and international situation, new ways of navigating the changing realities and new subjectivities also emerged, which complicated, dynamized, and shifted the already complex urban environment of Hà Nội toward new directions that the government could neither anticipate nor fully control.

Chapter Two: The Roaring Post-Reunification, 1975 – 1986

2.1. Postwar Psychological Healing: Embracing Consumerism And Individualism

With the end of the war against America and the Republic of Việt Nam, Chiến could finally return to his family in the Kim Liên communal apartment of Hà Nội.¹ The fast-paced walkers and the fidgeting figures on the train of returning soldiers spoke of their overflowing longing and excitement to reunite with loved ones. Their hope for a better future, to pursue personal dreams, disrupted by the war, and to compensate for their absence at home were illustrated through the things that they brought home as souvenirs or as future investments. For Chiến, it was a 21kg bag of white rice; and for others, there were sturdy bike frames, jointed dolls with blinking eyes, or pretty clothes for parents, siblings, and children.²

¹ Vũ, *Kim Liên Một*, 200-6.

² Trần, *Ngẫu Hứng*, 35.

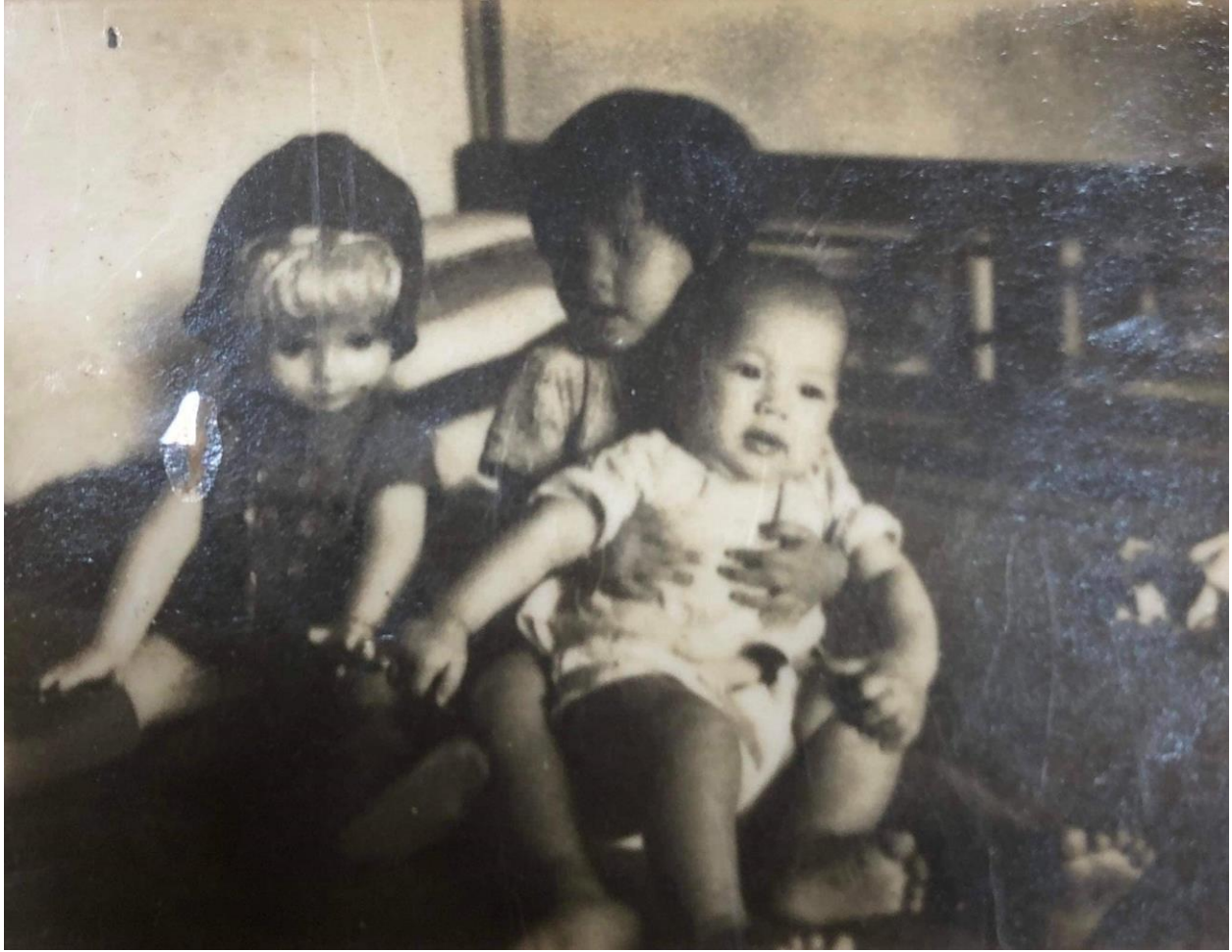


Figure 2-1: Hà Nội Polytechnic University in the 1960s. Taken at the Việt Nam National Museum of History.

Dolls were among the most popular choice of Southern souvenirs in Hà Nội and other Northern provinces. These dolls often had European features, had moving eyelids, made of plastic, and dressed in colorful western clothes. They were distinctively different from the common dolls in North Việt Nam, which were often handmade rag dolls that were made of low-quality fabric or paper.

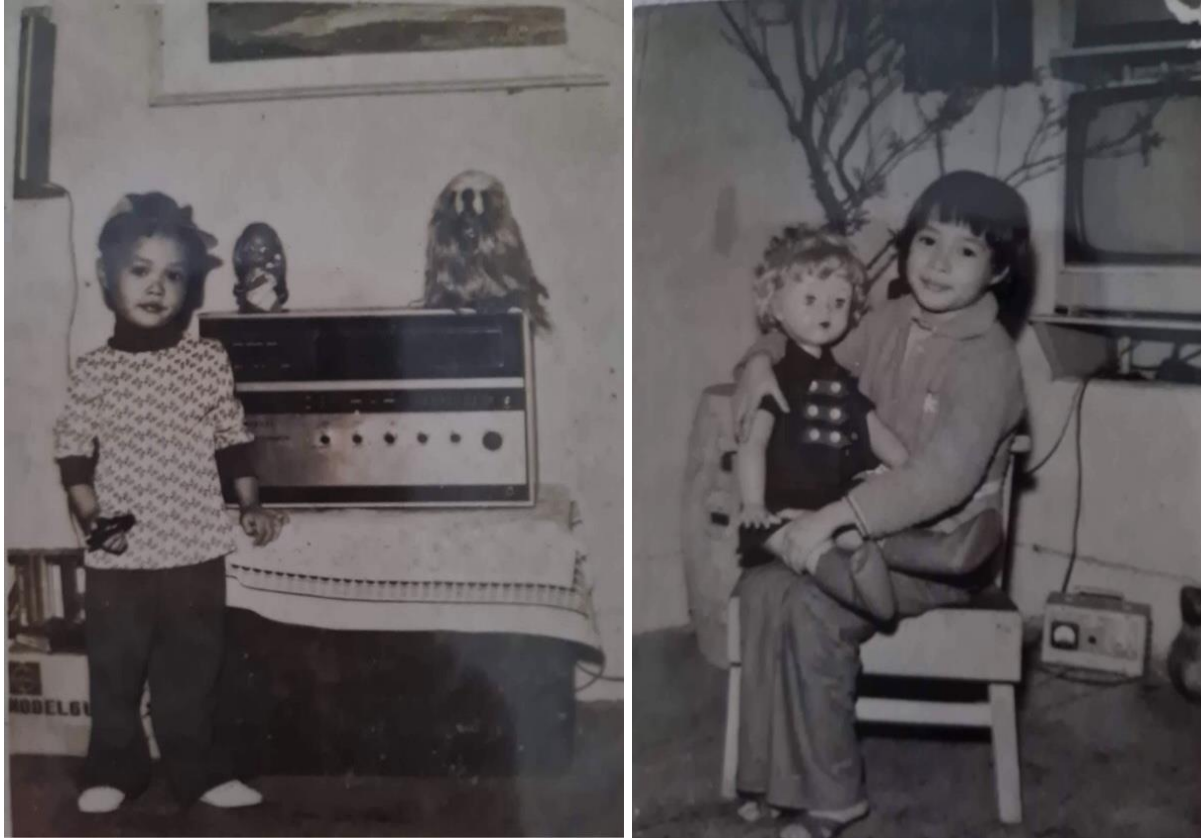


Figure 2-2: Goods from Sài Gòn (Left: Hà Nội, Sept 1975; Right: Hà Nội, circa late 1970s). Reproduced by permission of Nguyễn Thanh Phương.

Phương's father was a scenic painter who received order to go to Sài Gòn and participate in the making of celebratory events and entertainment shows. He returned home with several souvenirs. In the left picture, the clothes and shoes that Phương were wearing, the Japanese branded Akai stereo next to her, and the stuffed dog toy on top of the stereo were all souvenirs from Sài Gòn.



Figure 2-3: Trendy students from the Hà Nội University of Foreign Language Studies (ĐHSPNN) (Hà Nội, 1981). Reproduced by permission of Đặng Thị Hải Yến.

The students were wearing bell-bottom pants, round sunglasses, and carrying a straw bag. According to one of the girls, she modeled her look after Sài Gòn fashion. Students in foreign language studies had a reputation of being highly sensitive to fashion trends. ĐHSPNN female students, in particular, were well-known during the Bao Cấp era for their attractive looks.³

In the immediate years after the fall of Sài Gòn, consumer goods in the South were exceptionally affordable to Northerners. Discriminatory monetary policies imposed upon the

³ A popular saying that rated the looks of female students from different universities in Hà Nội rated ĐHSPNN female students at number two: “Celestial beings from the Dance Academy, princesses from No.3 University (a nickname for ĐHSPNN), monsters from the Polytechnic University, ghosts from the General University.” (*Tiên trường múa, công chúa trường ba, quỷ bách khoa, ma tổng hợp*).

South had made the Northern *đồng* into an incredibly powerful currency.⁴ Discriminatory monetary policies, however, were not the only reason why Southern goods were accessible. Many Southerners fled the country in a rush, leaving all their property and their possessions behind. Others who were still in preparation for departure sold their assets at a cheap price for quick liquidation, as well as to avoid the accusation of being a “comprador bourgeoisie” (*tu sản mại bản*) by the new government. These conditions created an opportunity for Northerners to indulge in what was considered extravagant in Hà Nội. University student Vân was one of those luckiest who visited Sài Gòn immediately after the takeover, when the Northern *đồng* was worth approximately one third of the US dollar in Sài Gòn.⁵ With only a meager allowance of 18 Northern *đồng*, she could already afford a custom-fitted set of trendy bell-bottom jeans and a tight blouse, while still being able to frequent Sài Gòn’s street vendors for meat sandwiches and grilled clams every evening.⁶ Meanwhile in Hà Nội, savory street foods with meat were associated with special occasions; a secondhand suit around 1975 could cost up to 140 *đồng*, and the price of a pair of jeans in the 1970s was counted in gold coins (*chỉ vàng*).⁷ Waves of

⁴ The new monetary policy was enacted on September 22, 1975, which included the fixing of exchange rates for the Southern *đồng* at 500:1, and a cap on the amount of Northern *đồng* one could exchange with their Southern *đồng*. Furthermore, the new government only allowed Southern populations 12 hours to exchange money. For these reasons, Southerners were willing to sell their merchandises and properties for cheap to Northerners to acquire more Northern *đồng*. See personal accounts that described the chaos after the imposition of the new monetary policy: Nguyễn Hiến Lê, *Hồi Kí Nguyễn Hiến Lê* [Memoirs Of Nguyễn Hiến Lê], chapter XXX (Long Xuyên: 1980); Huy Đức, *Bên Thắng Cuộc I*, chapter III; Hà Minh Thảo, “Ba Lần Đổi Tiền” [Three Times Of Money Exchange], *RFA* (2015 Apr 24), accessed 2022 Mar 28, <https://www.rfa.org/Vietnamese/SpecialTopic/40years-april30/change-money-haminhthao-04242015124546.html>.

⁵ Vân was able to exchange her Northern *đồng* with a rate of 1:1000. The official rates for the US dollar in 1975 was 1:151; and at the black market when Vân exchanged her money in May 1975 was approximately 1:2650, according to one source: Clyde M. Reedy, “A Historical Study: Banknotes of South Vietnam,” *International Bank Note Society Journal* 22, no.2 (1983), 43.

⁶ Ái, *Đề Gió Cuốn*, 156-61.

⁷ Ngô Xuân Hội, “Tôi Mua Xe Đạp” [I Bought A Bicycle], in *Chuyện Thời Bao Cấp*, 2, 168; Suu Tầm Ảnh Xưa, “Mình Muốn Hỏi Các Bác U70-80 Trong Nhóm Đây Là Trước 1975 Ở Hà Nội Có Thấy Ai Mặc Quần Jeans Không A” [I Would Like To Ask People Under 80 In This Group About Whether There Was Anyone In Hà Nội Who Wore Jeans Before 1975], *Facebook* (2021 Apr 2), accessed 2022 Mar 30, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/373876840199844/permalink/785985932322264/>.

Southern consumer goods at a more than reasonable price, including anything from everyday plastic kitchen utensils to luxurious cars and pianos, provided an immediate relief to Hà Nội residents' chronic shortages of goods and lessened the burden of distribution for the rationing system. Goods of high value that used to be a rare sight and which had required registration at the local police station, such as bicycles and stereo sets, were now widely available to Hà Nội consumers.⁸

Prior to 1975, the purchase of these goods was heavily restricted through limited rationing quantities and bureaucratic registration procedures. This was because the economy had to prioritize production of goods and services that supported war efforts over manufacturing consumer goods. In the case of stereo sets, there was a fear that US and South Việt Nam's propagandistic radio programs would negatively affect the home front's morale, hence the restriction of their possession. Now, as the American war was over, the concern over psychological warfare had also become irrelevant. This changing atmosphere, together with the difficulties in monitoring individual use of an unprecedentedly large number of goods, led to the abandonment of registration procedures. Diễm, a returning soldier who brought home a Southern bicycle not long after the fall of Sài Gòn initially could not register his bicycle at the local police station due to a lack of special permits from state institutions. It took him three months to obtain all necessary documents, only to be informed by the police that the registration system for bicycles had been abolished since there were too many unregistered Southern bicycles in Hà Nội.⁹ The reduction of red tape on consumer purchases made previously limited goods no longer an exclusive symbol of status for the elites. However, it did not necessarily render them any less

⁸ Đặng, *Lịch Sử Ngân*, 145.

⁹ Đoàn, *Chuyện Thời Bao Cấp*, 4, 15-20.

desirable, as their accessibility and normalized usage also prompted their demand among the non-elites. The “outside” market did not take long to capitalize on Hà Nội’s heightened appetite for consumer goods and the relaxation of restrictions. Immediately after the fall of Sài Gòn, a great number of Hà Nội residents began applying for permission to visit the South under the official reason of visiting relatives, though these trips were also motivated by a desire to go shopping in Sài Gòn, or to purchase goods for acquaintances/clients.¹⁰ This phenomenon, known as the “the South receives relatives, the North receives goods” (*miền Nam nhận họ, miền Bắc nhận hàng*), was ubiquitous throughout the late Bao Cấp era.

The government, as early as May 1975, had been aware of this illegal trade and the potential negative effects it could bring to the *Bao Cấp* system’s monopoly of distribution, as well as how Northerners’ consumerist behaviors in Sài Gòn would undermine the government’s socialist rehabilitation plan for the South.¹¹ It therefore attempted to restrain the activity by issuing new measures to discourage people’s movement between the two regions, and new restrictions on the types and the number of goods one could bring out of the South.¹² In addition, state institutions were constantly producing and circulating the official rhetoric that condemned

¹⁰ See how a family in Hà Nội mobilized their connections and relatives to purchase a piano from Sài Gòn in: Phung Ngoc Khoa, “Chiếc Piano U1 Và Câu Chuyện Kinh Hoàng...” [The U1 Piano And Its Terrifying Backstory...], *Facebook* (2021 Aug 24), accessed 2022 Mar 27, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/373876840199844/permalink/876247363296120/>.

¹¹ Thủ Tướng Chính Phủ, *Chỉ Thị 181-Ttg Về Việc Tăng Cường Kiểm Soát Sự Ra Vào Các Vùng Mới Giải Phóng* [Directive 181-Ttg On Strengthening Monitoring Entry And Exit From Newly Liberated Areas], 1975 May 14, accessed 2022 Jul 19, <https://thuvienphapluat.vn/van-ban/Bo-may-hanh-chinh/Chi-thi-181-TTg-tang-cuong-kiem-soat-ra-vaovung-moi-giai-phong-22084.aspx>.

¹² Bộ Nội Vụ, *Thông Tư Liên Bộ 30-Tc/Vp Về Việc Hướng Dẫn Việc Kiểm Soát Hàng Hóa, Hành Lý Từ Miền Nam Ra Miền Bắc (Và Ngược Lại)* [Joint Circular 30-Tc/Vp On Instructing The Monitoring Of Goods And Luggage From The South To The North (And Vice Versa)], 1975 Oct 10, accessed 2022 Jul 19, <https://thuvienphapluat.vn/van-ban/Thuong-mai/Thong-tu-lien-bo-30-TC-VP-huong-dan-kiem-soat-hang-hoa-hanh-ly-tu-mien-Nam-ra-Bac-23350.aspx>.

American/Southern culture and products as “bastardized”, “decadent”, and “lowly.”¹³ Such rhetoric, however, rapidly became void to Hà Nội residents. This was because simultaneously, the government was banking on an optimism about postwar material abundance and consumption, as exemplified by the popular slogan of “Everything for a strong and wealthy motherland, for the happiness of the people,”¹⁴ or in General Secretary Lê Duẩn’s 1976 promise of that in ten years, each family would have a stereo set, a TV set, and a refrigerator.¹⁵ Such a language ironically signaled an official approval of the end of wartime austerity and self-sacrifice, and instead reinforced among the Northern public a consumerist, individual-centered perception of postwar future, hence a contradiction to the government’s own efforts in quelling consumerism. Furthermore, enforcers of the condemnation campaign themselves were not fully committed to their task. From low level local cadres to the elites, they became increasingly reluctant to enforce public compliance. They were themselves embracing, or felt pressured to tolerate the general sentiment, since their family, relatives, superiors at work, subordinates, and friends were enthusiastic participants of “the South receives relatives, the North receives goods” movement.

As consumerism manifested itself in Hà Nội, curiosity about and a taste for American/Southern (*Mỹ-Ngụy*)¹⁶ culture and lifestyle were also rebolstered. Such a sentiment had certainly existed among Hà Nội residents before 1975, nurtured by letters, pictures, and

¹³ Lê Duẩn, “Báo Cáo Chính Trị Tại Kỳ Họp Thứ Nhất Quốc Hội Chung Cả Nước, Do Đồng Chí Lê Duẩn Trình Bày” [First Report On Politics At The First Meeting Of The National Assembly, Presented By Comrade Lê Duẩn], 1976 Jun 25, in *Văn Kiện Đảng*, vol.37, 153.

¹⁴ “Khẩu Hiệu Dùng Trong dịp Kỷ Niệm Các Ngày 30-4, 1-5, 19-5” [Slogans Used In Commemorations Of April 30, May 1, May 19], in *Văn Kiện Đảng Toàn Tập*, vol.37-1976 (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Chính Trị Quốc Gia, 2004), 96.

¹⁵ Lê Duẩn, *Nhân Dân* (1976 Feb 2), quoted in David Marr and Christine P. White, *Postwar Vietnam: Dilemmas in Socialist Development* (Ithaca: Cornell Southeast Asia Program, 1988), 1.

¹⁶ The direct translation for *Mỹ-Ngụy* is “US-Puppet”.

postcards from their family members in Sài Gòn. Around the time of the signing of the Geneva Accords in 1954, many households in Hà Nội had been torn apart as some family members moved to the South, while other members stayed in Hà Nội.¹⁷ Separated family members maintained contact for a few years after 1954, but most ended up stopping in the 1960s for fear of being accused of espionage and divulging information to the other side. Nonetheless, the infrequent exchanges prior to the military escalation in the mid-1960s – often underlaid by the Sài Gòn family’s wish to reassure the Hà Nội family of their current stable life in the new city – had left an impression of life in Sài Gòn as abundant and fulfilling.¹⁸ For those who did not have such exchanges, curiosity about Sài Gòn was nurtured by the very anti-Sài Gòn propaganda materials produced by state institutions and by the prohibition of Southern cultural products. Films that featured the National Liberation Front’s guerilla warfare in Sài Gòn such as *Rising Storm (Nổi Gió)*,¹⁹ or *Miss Nhung (Chị Nhung)*,²⁰ were supposed to invoke hatred against Sài Gòn, a city now perceived as corrupted by American influence. Yet these films ended up mesmerizing Northern audiences with their depiction of Sài Gòn’s luxurious streetscapes and

¹⁷ There were multiple motivations for the decision to leave or stay. Other than political beliefs, some people refused to leave Hà Nội because they could not bear the thought of leaving their ancestors’ graves unattended. Some older people insisted on dying in Hà Nội, which caused some, or all, of their descendants to stay due to their commitment to filial piety. Some stayed because they feared the uncertainty of a new life in the South. There were also cases where some family members traveled to the South first to prepare for the family’s resettlement, but the rest of the family could not make it before the border was closed. This could be because of miscalculations or obstructions from the Việt Minh members and their sympathizers.

¹⁸ Duong Ta, “Radio – Đài Ta, Đài Địch” [Radio – Our Channel, Enemy’s Channel], *Facebook* (2020 Nov 25), accessed 2022 Apr 2, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/373876840199844/permalink/707194250201433/>.

Personal exchanges between the North and the South were still possible in the 60s and 70s, but were much more costly and time-consuming. Mail had to be sent to an intermediary address in Paris first before they could be sent to either side of Việt Nam. Personal exchanges between Hà Nội and France during the American war were not rare nor discouraged, as North Việt Nam was on friendly terms with the French government and received strong support from the Franco-Vietnamese community. For a study on the Vietnamese diaspora in France and their involvement in the American war, see: Gisèle L. Bousquet, *Behind the Bamboo Hedge: The Impact of Homeland Politics in the Parisian Vietnamese Community* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1991).

¹⁹ *Nổi Gió* [Rising Storm], directed by Nguyễn Huy Thành (Hà Nội: Xưởng phim truyện Hà Nội, 1966).

²⁰ *Chị Nhung* [Miss Nhung], directed by Nguyễn Đức Hình and Đặng Nhật Minh (Hà Nội: Xưởng phim Hà Nội, 1970).

beautiful women in fashionable clothes.²¹ Similarly, the prohibition of Radio Sài Gòn, the BBC, and VOA during the war had the unintended effect of piquing the interest of radio owners in Hà Nội. Many listened out of curiosity about the Southern viewpoint and international reports on the battles' developments.²² Others listened for the sake of learning English, or for Southern songs and jazz.²³ Southern romantic songs in particular were so extremely popular in Hà Nội that in the late 1960s, the authorities had organized a large-scale raid – known as the *Corrupted Art Affair* – on the city's community of “romantic music admirers.”²⁴ Prominent figures in the community were tried and imprisoned with the charge of conspiracy by means of propagating “corrupted” music that endorsed sentimentalism and thus weakened the fighting spirit.²⁵ This type of music was popularly referred to as “yellow” music (*nhạc vàng*), and was often understood as the polar opposite of the orthodox “red” music (*nhạc đỏ*) – music that inspired a fighting spirit or praised the party and the revolution. In a society where most households had a family member who was risking their life on the battlefield, or had lost their loved ones to American bombing, the act of

²¹ Ái, *Để Gió Cuốn*, 125.

²² During peaks of the war such as the 1968 Battle of Khe Sanh, or the 1972 Spring-Summer Offensive, it is said that many households in Hà Nội listened to forbidden radio channels to keep track of the most recent updates on the development of the war (BBC held the reputation for being the earliest). The program “Born in the North, dead in the South” (*sinh Bắc tử Nam*) on the *Sacred Sword of the Patriots League* station (*Guom thiêng ái quốc*) was particularly popular, as it broadcasted lists of Northern POW after every battles. Some claimed that the local police knew about their activities but chose not to interfere.

²³ Kim, *Cung Đàn Số*, 52; Quyền and Stan, *Playing Jazz in*, 68-71; Huỳnh Phan “Chuyện Về Người Thầy Từng Bị Gợi Lên Vì Cho Sinh Viên Nghe ‘Đài Địch’” [Story About A Teacher Who Was Detained For Letting Students Listen To The “Enemy’s Broadcasting”], *Vietnamnet* (2016 Oct 2), accessed 2022 Mar 31, <https://Vietnamnet.vn/vn/tuanVietNam/suyngam/giao-duc-chuyen-ve-nguoi-thay-tung-bi-goi-len-vi-cho-sinh-vien-nghe-dai-dich-331730.html>.

²⁴ According to musician and witness Tô Hải, the Corrupted Art Affair was an extension of the Revisionist/Anti-Party Affair. The arrest of ordinary civilians was used as a warning from the group of hardliners to so-called “revisionist clique” (*bọn xét lại*). See: Tô Hải, “Vụ Án Văn Nghệ ...Oan Úc Và...Tức Cười...” [The Art Affair of...Injustice and...Ridiculousness], *Nhat Si Bao Thu (Tô Hải's Blog)* (2010 Nov 18), accessed 2022 Apr 2, <http://to-hai.blogspot.com/2010/11/vu-van-nghe-oan-uc-vatuc-cuoi.html>; See also: Vũ Thư Hiên, “Kim Lân” [Kim Lân (author)], *Facebook* (2022 Apr 10), accessed 2022 Apr 11, https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=163499209435268&id=100073255688019.

²⁵ For a personal account about the Affair and a picture of Hà Nội youth's enjoyment of Southern music in the 1960s, see the memoirs of one of the arrestees: Kim, *Cung Đàn Số Phận*.

sabotaging the war effort was considered abhorrent and could easily be taken as a personal insult by veterans, soldiers, and victims' families. Therefore, by equating the community's activities with the obstruction of war efforts, the *Affair* sought to convince people that the consumption of Southern culture and unorthodox culture in general was a moral failure. Indeed, the *Affair* had effectively dissuaded the city's residents from gathering in large groups to enjoy Southern music. Nevertheless, it was not able to inculcate in Hà Nội residents the belief that Southern sentimental culture was inherently corrupted and immoral, and many continued to listen to Southern music in secrecy. Châu – a university student at the time – recalled that the *Affair* caused significant confusion at his university, as many students could not comprehend why listening to Southern romantic music was so condemned. To clarify or explain this confusion, the university invited an officer at the Ministry of Culture to speak to the students. This officer explained that the issue at hand was not strictly about consuming Southern romantic music per se, but that the overall decadent, immoral lifestyle of those arrested was becoming a bad influence on Hà Nội youths and that it was detrimental to the war effort, hence their imprisonment.²⁶ Interestingly, there was a significant number of soldiers who performed or enjoyed Southern music, albeit often in small private groups or individually. The song *The Feelings of The One Who Left (Nỗi Lòng Người Đi)*²⁷ was especially popular among Hà Nội youths. While the song was originally about a young man who left his beloved hometown of Hà Nội for Sài Gòn in 1954, the protagonist's yearning for the peaceful old days and his lover in Hà Nội resonated with many Hà Nội soldiers. At the battlefield, the taste for, and the ability to perform “yellow” music came to be considered a special trait of Hà Nội soldiers by soldiers from

²⁶ Lưu Trọng Văn, “Những Bông Hồng Không Gai...” [Roses Without Thorns...], *Facebook* (2018 Mar 27), accessed 2022 Apr 2, https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=2033057643686129&id=100009457401127.

²⁷ Anh Bằng, *Nỗi Lòng Người Đi* [The Feelings Of The One Who Left] (Sài Gòn, 1965).

other provinces.²⁸ This perception had made Hà Nội soldiers the subject of admiration for some and of detestation for others. In the eyes of admirers, Hà Nội soldiers' knowledge of "yellow" music marked them as culturally sophisticated hence superior to soldiers of other provinces, who knew only of common and clichéd "red" music.²⁹ In the eyes of critics, however, Hà Nội soldiers' indulgence in unorthodox music marked them as ideologically corrupted (*sa ngã tư tưởng*) and unreliable.³⁰

The focus on the individual, romantic feelings, melancholy, existential anguish, and appreciation for vanity or the mundane in Southern songs and other cultural products appealed to curious youths born after 1954, who grew up almost entirely in an environment dominated by a culture that spoke only of the collective, of optimism, and heroism for building socialism and for fighting the war. Moreover, as these products bore resemblances, if not directly based on products from the so-called pre-1954 petit bourgeois culture of the North, they also tapped into the sensibility and the nostalgia of older generations.³¹ An example was the Hà Nội-born composer Phạm Duy who migrated to Sài Gòn in 1956 and made a successful career in the South by lyricizing numerous poems from the 1930s-1940s *Thơ Mới* (New Poetry) movement.³² These

²⁸ Vũ, *Kim Liên Một*, 182.

²⁹ Minh Nguyen, "Lính Hà Nội" [Hà Nội Soldiers], *Facebook* (2020 Nov 23), accessed 2022 Apr 1, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/373876840199844/permalink/705472563706935/>.

³⁰ Minh Nguyen, "Lính Hà Nội".

The taste for music and other leisure activities was often cited by military veterans of other provinces as an explanation for Hà Nội soldiers' tendency to take unauthorized absence from duty and desertion. This tendency was captured in a popular saying in the military: "Hà Nội deserts, Nam Định hides, Thái Bình flees; but Hà Nội does it in broad daylight" (*Hà chuồn, Nam lủi, Thái Bình bay/ Hà Nội hiện ngang giữa ban ngày*).

³¹ It should be noted that the generational gap between younger and older generations concerning the appreciation for sentimentalism was not very distinct. Youths growing up in, or near households that appreciated pre-1950s popular culture could become familiarized with and inherit their elders' cultural sensibilities.

³² The New Poetry Movement (*Phong trào Thơ Mới*) was a literary movement that began in the 1930s in colonial Việt Nam. The movement introduced new changes to Vietnamese poetry at the time, including the use of the Latin alphabet *Quốc ngữ* instead of the logographic *chữ Nôm*, the abandonment of a strict adherence to Chinese poetry-influenced stylized forms, and the influence of Western/French ideas.

poems were highly popular in colonial Hà Nội, but were banned after the Rehabilitation due to their romanticism and individualism hence their “petit bourgeois” nature. However, the poems survived the ban and continued to be distributed in secret through handwritten notes and oral recitations. For that reason, Phạm Duy’s *Thơ Mới*-inspired songs, which were broadcast on Southern radio channels, easily captivated Hà Nội radio listeners who were *Thơ Mới* admirers. Moreover, Phạm Duy’s songs attracted a large audience in Hà Nội also because many of his songs were sung by Thái Thanh (1934-2020), who was already an established singer in colonial Hà Nội before she migrated to Sài Gòn in 1954. In fact, the top three pop singers that dominated Sài Gòn’s music industry before 1975 were all migrants from the North. They included Thái Thanh, Lê Thu (1943-2021) and Khánh Ly (1945-). These pop singers sang in a distinctively Northern/Hà Nội accent, and as such gave Southern songs a nostalgic aura of colonial Hà Nội and its people. The distinction between North and South was further blurred by state denouncement campaigns which often grouped together cultural products from the South with those of pre-1950s under the categories of “maudlin” (*ủy mị*), and “petit-bourgeois” (*tiểu tư sản, tách tách sè*), or for music, under the same category of “yellow” music.³³

The similarities between cultural products of colonial Hà Nội and those of post-1954 Sài Gòn were not the only explanation for the difficulty in establishing a clear North – South cultural divide. The fluid cultural border between the supposedly socialist North and capitalist South must be attributed to the circulation of cultural products and practices between the Eastern and

³³ See this generalizing tendency in a newspaper article about the *Corrupted Art Affair*: “Tin Tòa Án: Phan Thắng Toán Và Đồng Bọn Đã Bị Xét Xử” [Court News: Phan Thắng Toán And Accomplices Have Been Tried], *Hà Nội Mới* (1971 Jan 12).

Western blocs,³⁴ and due to Việt Nam’s positive relationship with particular groups and countries in the Western bloc. For example, long hair (for men) and bell-bottom pants (*tóc dài quần loe*) – the supposed trademark look of American Hippies – began to gain popularity in Hà Nội in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Followers of this fashion trend, which included those arrested during the *Corrupted Art Affair*, were often denounced in state media as undisciplined and self-indulgent youths. Schools and state institutions could penalize or refuse services to these youths,³⁵ and groups known as Red Flag Units (*đội thanh niên cờ đỏ*) were established by the Youth Union to assist the police force in disciplining nonconforming youths. The Red Flags were feared and despised for their extreme means of punishment, such as intentionally cutting offenders’ pants in ways that made the pants unfixable afterwards, and shaving offenders’ hair on the street in front of bystanders.³⁶ Despite these public shaming measures and the style’s American origin, many Hà Nội youths did not find the style to be morally or ideologically problematic, because fellow youths in the Eastern bloc were wearing it. Hà Nội youths saw bell-bottom pants and long hair as signifiers of a modern, sophisticated, youthful, and internationalist identity; they found the pursuit of the style a justifiable effort to become equal to youths from the more developed Eastern European countries.³⁷ Nhân – a soldier on short leave – had borrowed his friend’s bell-bottom pants to look fashionable for a musical event at the Hà Nội Opera House. However, Nhân was refused entrance due to his pants. Nhân replied to this by emphasizing the

³⁴ For the influence of Western bloc’s culture on the Eastern bloc, see for example: Gilburd, *To See Paris*; Applebaum, *Empire of Friends*; Gerd Horten, *Don't Need No Thought Control: Western Culture in East Germany and the Fall of the Berlin Wall* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2020); Juliane Fürst, *Flowers Through Concrete: Explorations in Soviet Hippieland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).

³⁵ A popular saying that captured this reality was: “No matter how handsome you are / State institutions refuse to serve those wearing long hair and bell-bottom pants” (*Đẹp trai thì mặc đẹp trai / Cơ quan không tiếp tóc dài quần loe*).

³⁶ Kim Dung Pham, “Quần Loe Hà Nội” [Bell-Bottom Jeans In Hà Nội], *Facebook* (2020 Dec 3), accessed 2022 Apr 8, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/373876840199844/permalink/712716006315924/>.

³⁷ “Một Thời Sinh”.

Soviet origin of the pants, and by questioning the guards: why can the Soviets wear bell-bottom pants and the Vietnamese cannot?³⁸ Even in Red Flag Units, there were members who did not truly believe in the rhetorical denouncement, such as Tuấn, who punished bell-bottom pants wearers on weekdays, and yet he himself possessed two pairs of bell-bottom pants for “chasing girls on weekends.”³⁹

This ambivalent attitude stemmed from the reality that many Hà Nội residents were introduced to Hippie fashion through legal and orthodox channels. Specifically, the taste for Hippie culture arrived in North Việt Nam mostly through a small number of influential youths who had studied abroad in Eastern European countries and had absorbed the popular culture of the local population. Individuals who were chosen for studying abroad were primarily overachievers in school, highly skilled and disciplined workers, or those with connections to the elites, and as such were considered the cream of society.⁴⁰ The image of supposedly respectable future leaders or pioneers in Hippie clothes seriously undermined official rhetoric of condemnation, and further vindicated or encouraged youths who looked up to them – originally for their ability or career – to imitate their practices. Other channels through which the Hippie style reached North Việt Nam included donated clothes and other products from anti-war groups and countries; Eastern European films such as the box-office hit *The Son of Great Bear* (1966), whose protagonist wore bell-bottom pants,⁴¹ or through the covers of vinyl records by ABBA, the Beatles, and the Bee Gees that were imported from the Eastern bloc and sold at the state-run

³⁸ Kim Dung Pham, “Quần Loe Hà Nội”.

³⁹ Vũ Xuân Trường, “Quần Loe...Tóc Dài” [Bell-Bottom Pants...Long Hair], *Facebook* (2018 Apr 5), accessed 2022 Apr 12, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/721926094625837/posts/992786814206429/>.

⁴⁰ Schwenkel, “Socialist Mobilities: Crossing”.

⁴¹ *Die Söhne der großen Bärin* [The Sons of Great Bear], directed by Josef Mach (Saxony-Anhalt, Germany: DEFA, 1966).

Xunhasaba bookstore.⁴² In other words, while condemning this fashion style as improper and decadent, the government was also exposing youths to so-called capitalist influences (*văn hóa tư bản*) in positive and appropriately socialist settings. Hà Nội youths frequently poked fun at this contradiction in state condemnation of the style, resulting in the creation and circulation of jokes or popular sayings such as

If Karl Marx were to visit Việt Nam,

The police would arrest him asap for his long beard and hair.⁴³

State media further undermined the anti-long hair bell-bottom jeans campaign with their coverage of anti-war movements worldwide, which were sometimes accompanied by pictures of “peace and justice-loving” (*yêu chuộng hòa bình và công lý*), “progressive” (*tiến bộ*) protesters wearing the condemned clothes and hairstyle.⁴⁴ Hà Nội residents were directly introduced to the style through the frequent visits of anti-war political leaders, journalists, film crews, and activists. For example, singer Joan Baez and actress Jane Fonda had left an impression on Hà Nội residents for their casual wear of bell-bottom jeans. These anti-war figures had empowered

⁴² Đỗ Phần, “‘Quần Loe Tóc Dài’” [“Bell-Bottom Jeans Long Hair”], *Sài Gòn Giải Phóng Online* (2014 Aug 30), accessed 2022 Apr 7, <https://www.sggp.org.vn/quan-loe-toc-dai-136310.html>; Sưu Tầm Ảnh Xưa, “Mình Muốn Hỏi.”

Xunhasaba was a company that specialized in importing and exporting printed materials under the management of the Ministry of Culture (1957-1970; 1978-1988), and the Ministry of Propaganda (1970-1978).

⁴³ Original Vietnamese text: “*Các-Mác mà đến Việt Nam/Râu dài tóc rậm công an bắt liền.*” It was said that the saying was invented by the poet Nguyễn Duy.

See an anecdote of a person who in 1974 witnessed his friend being stopped by the police for his Hippie style, to which he replied: “Mine is still shorter than Marx and Engels”: Kim Dung Pham, “Quần Loe Hà Nội”.

⁴⁴ The coverage of anti-war demonstrations in the US was often paired with the coverage of civil rights movement in order to highlight the resemblances between US domestic oppression against peoples of color and US aggression in Việt Nam. These positive coverage of protesters in the US and elsewhere reinforced the acceptance of bell-bottom pants, long hair, and Hippie-related music.

For a detailed discussion on North Việt Nam’s media during the war, see: Harish C. Mehta, *People’s Diplomacy of Vietnam: Soft Power in the Resistance War, 1965-1972* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholar Publishing, 2019).

Hà Nội youths' consumption of the Western bloc's cultures, reaffirming the belief that the consumption was not politically deviant, but progressive, compatible to official agenda, and as such deserved acceptance. This budding normalization of consumption of unorthodox cultures prior to 1975 had served as the foundation for a swift embrace of Southern/Western bloc's cultures and consumerism in the years after the unification.

Moreover, the inconsistent implementation of denouncement campaigns further damaged the legitimacy of these campaigns. This was because not all who were in a position of authority and were responsible for overseeing the denouncement campaigns agreed with these campaigns. Some of them were sympathetic with the offenders or were themselves active consumers of unorthodox cultures. This rendered getting caught consuming unorthodox culture a matter of lack of mindfulness, or sheer lack of luck. Such was the case of Thành, an avid admirer of “maudlin” poems. In 1970, Thành's hobby was reported to the head of her workplace, and she was forced to attend a re-education session conducted by a senior worker at her workplace. To her surprise, the senior worker did not give any admonishment. He instead said that Thành was not wrong for reading the poems, but she made the mistake of letting others know of her hobby. He then asked Thành about the authors that she liked and the confiscated poems that she was not able to read, and offered to recite the poems for her, turning the re-education session into a poetry reading session.⁴⁵

After the fall of Sài Gòn, when the accusation of “obstruction of war efforts” became obsolete, and the social pressure to abstain from consumerism and unorthodox cultures diminished significantly, there were hardly any social constraints that could effectively prevent

⁴⁵ Hồ, *Từ Kế*, 26-8.

Hà Nội residents from embracing the widely available cultural products from Sài Gòn and from other capitalist countries. Minh – a jazz lover who coincidentally came across the genre while radio channel surfing in the 1960s – was determined to look for jazz records by Black musicians during his first trip to Sài Gòn in 1976.⁴⁶ And in the same year, when one of the arrestees in the *Corrupted Art Affair* was released from prison, cafés all around the North were already playing “yellow” music with cassette or vinyl players of Western bloc brands. Such a scene left the ex-convict in utter disbelief.⁴⁷ Now in postwar Hà Nội, having luxurious goods at home, wearing fashionable personalized clothes, listening to “yellow” music or rock n’ roll, reading romantic poems and existentialist novels were no longer exclusively seen as a sign of backward, self-indulgent lifestyle, or of succumbing to imperialist America’s temptation. Instead, they had become increasingly regarded as a natural development toward a higher living standard and a more modern, internationalist lifestyle after a just and victorious war. The turn to the sentimentalist, the “maudlin”, the desire to indulge oneself in and provide one’s family with extravagances and novelties was considered socially appropriate – a fair compensation and healing method for the fatigue accumulated after years of hardships and contributions to the war at the expense of one’s own happiness. To put it simply, the presence of Sài Gòn’s goods and their consumption in Hà Nội after the war became normalized because these goods were considered war prizes.

Furthermore, given that throughout the war, Sài Gòn’s products being grouped together with colonial Hà Nội’s petit bourgeois culture, the penetration of Sài Gòn’s goods also contributed to the de-marginalization of colonial Hà Nội’s cultural products. Among the cultural

⁴⁶ Quyên and Stan, *Playing Jazz in*, 92-4.

⁴⁷ Kim, *Cung Đàn Số*, 15-7.

products coming from the South, there were literature and music of Northern origin that were destroyed or hidden from sight in the home of many Hà Nội residents since the city's Rehabilitation. They included literary works by authors of the 1933-1946 *Tự lực Văn đoàn* (Self-Reliant Literary Union), pre-1954 works of authors who were persecuted during the *Nhân Văn-Giai Phẩm* Affair, poem collections by authors of the 1930s-1940s *Thơ Mới* (New Poetry) movement, records of pre-1954 songs, and so on.⁴⁸ The return of these products as war prizes in Hà Nội and the subsequent normalization of their consumption had gradually neutralized the negative connotation of “*Tiểu tư sản/Tạch tạch sè*” (petit bourgeois), or “sympathizer of the *Nhân Văn-Giai Phẩm* Clique” – terms that invoked the memories of oppressions in the early years of Socialist Hà Nội, and were once lethal labels that could easily destroy the reputation and career of those who were accused as such.

Nevertheless, there were serious pushbacks against the infiltration of “corrupted culture” (*văn hóa đồi trụy*), as exemplified by the spike in the number of raids on Hippie-looking youths and Western dance (*nhảy đầm*) groups organized by Red Flag Units in Hà Nội between 1976 and 1977. However, unlike during the war when the demand for abstinence and discipline gave the Red Flags legitimacy, in the postwar period, their crude public persecution no longer received the same amount of support as before. The increasing number of elite students returning from the Eastern bloc after the war, whose life abroad laid entirely within the era of Eastern bloc's robust

⁴⁸ The migration of Northerners to the South under the Geneva Accords was also the migration of established journalists and authors from the North, mostly those who were born or had received education, or had worked in Hà Nội. Author Song Thao, a Hà Nội migrant to Sài Gòn claimed that the development of Southern literature after 1954 must be attributed to Northern migrants. See: Song Thao, “Tháng Tư Nghĩ Về Sách Sài Gòn Cũ” [Thinking of Old Sài Gòn's Books in April], *Phiếm* (2021 Apr), accessed 2022 Apr 11, <http://www.songthao.com/phiem-chu/thang-tu-nghi-ve-sach.htm>.

See a summary of notable journals and literary groups of Northern origin in pre-1975 Sài Gòn in: Nguyễn Ngọc Chính, “Góp Nhặt Buồn Vui Thời Điêu Linh: Đốt Sách” [Retrieving Happy And Devastating Memories In A Withering Age: Book Burning], *Hồi Ức Một Đời Người* (2012 Sep 29), accessed 2022 Apr 11, <https://chinhhoiuc.blogspot.com/2012/09/gop-nhat-buon-vui-thoi-ieu-linh-ot-sach.html>.

consumerism under Détente (1968-1975), and who were bolder/more carefree in expressing their preferences since they lacked the wartime memories of the *Corrupted Art Affair* and of being threatened by the Red Flags, further made ubiquitous the presence of unorthodox cultural practices in Hà Nội. Similar to previous generations of international students, their reputation as future leaders tasked with the postwar mission of rebuilding the country, who held advanced knowledge and were culturally progressive, gave legitimacy to their non-conformist practices. The rise to senior ranks of previous generations of international students at different state institutions also contributed to the relatively safer environment for young returnees to maintain their style. These seniors tended to be more understanding of “rule breakers”, leading to a relaxation of workplace’s surveillance on employees’ lifestyle, and made the Red Flags’ harsh penalties appear obsolete under the leadership of a new and more open-minded generation. Âu, who was a returnee in the late 1970s was unaware of the Western dance prohibition in Hà Nội at the time and got arrested while attending a friend’s house party. After his release, Âu had to go through a public denouncement session (*kiểm điểm*) at his workplace. However, the session was pure formality since his superiors – also former international students – were sympathetic toward Âu’s cultural preferences and bemoaned his unfortunate arrest. The seniors even asked Âu about his experience during the 10-day jail time, to which Âu told them about how he taught prostitute cellmates Western dance, and both parties ended up having a good laugh after the session.⁴⁹ In 1977, after two years of complaints from the general public and pressure from the elites, the

⁴⁹ Hải Âu, “Chuyện ‘Thuần Phong Mỹ Tục’ Ở Việt Nam” [About “Fine Customs” In Việt Nam], *Nhịp Cầu Thế Giới Online* (2007 Ma 7), accessed 2022 Apr 12, <http://nhipcauthegioi.hu/goc-nhin/CHUYEN-THUAN-PHONG-MY-TUC-VIET-NAM-362.html>.

government finally issued the *143-CP Decree on Penalties for Petty Offences*, which put an end to the “Red Flag scare” and delegitimized their public executions in Hà Nội.⁵⁰



Figure 2-4: Left: trendy university student Át wearing a fitted patterned shirt, bell-bottom pants, platform shoes, and Deen Reed hairstyle (Yalta Port, Crimea, 1975). Right: Át maintained his long hair and wore jeans while working as a translator for general Nguyễn Thị Định during her meeting with Soviet experts

⁵⁰ Lê Thị Diệu Muội, daughter of Lê Duẩn recalled her brother Lê Kiên Trung confronting their father about the reason behind the ban of bell-bottom jeans after the war. Lê Duẩn later contacted Minister of Public Security Trần Quốc Hoàn to discuss the ban. See: Văn Chinh, “Gốc Của Hiếu Trung” [The Roots Of Gratitude And Loyalty], *Nông Nghiệp Việt Nam* (2013 Feb 17), accessed 2022 Apr 12, <https://nongnghiep.vn/goc-cua-hieu-trung-d105414.html>.

Another possible explanation for the pushback against the suppression of unorthodox cultural practices was the government’s policy of inviting French Việt Kiều experts to help rebuild the country, as well as to deepen diplomatic relationship between Việt Nam and France to overcome the US-imposed embargo. These Việt Kiều were refused service at various institutions and were subjected to the Red Flags’ harassment because of their appearance. See an anecdote in: Trần Đình, *Đèn Cù 2* [The Rolling Lantern 2] (Orange County: Người Việt Books, 2014), chapter 3.

Hội Đồng Chính Phủ, *Nghị Định 143-Cp Ban Hành Điều Lệ Về Phạt Vi Cảnh* [143-CP Decree On Penalties For Petty Offences], 1977 Ma 27, accessed 2022 Jul 20, <https://thuvienphapluat.vn/van-ban/Vi-pham-hanh-chinh/Nghi-dinh-143-CP-Dieu-le-ve-phat-vi-can-17678.aspx>.

from the Thăng Long Bridge construction project (Hà Nội, 1985). Reproduced by permission of Nguyễn Văn Át.

Át studied abroad in the USSR for six years (1973-1979) and worked as a Russian language translator for Vietnamese leaders after graduation. When asked whether he had ever been in trouble at work for his appearance, Át answered no.

The penetration of consumerism and the Western bloc's cultural influence reached another level as Việt Nam began to receive aid from Nordic countries, and particularly Sweden.⁵¹ Despite the late appearance as compared to the Eastern bloc, Nordic countries quickly elicited positive reactions from the general public. Their aid projects were mostly civil works rather than construction in heavy industries.⁵² These projects had a direct impact on the everyday life of the local population, which contributed to the rapid development of appreciation and affinity for Nordic countries in Hà Nội. Furthermore, Nordic popularity was maintained by the long-term stay of Nordic staffs and their families in Việt Nam at exclusive residential areas known as Westerners' Village (*làng tây*), or Westerners' Camps (*trại tây*).⁵³ Although often placed in isolated areas, these villages were built according to the average living standard in Nordic

⁵¹ On Swedish aids in Việt Nam, see: Julie Thaarup and Søren Villadsen, *Long Term Development Cooperation between Vietnam and Sweden – Part One: Documentation* (Stockholm: Edita, 2010), 12-18; Mark McGillivray, David Carpenter, and Stewart Norup, *Evaluation Study of Long-Term Development Co-operation between Vietnam and Sweden* (Stockholm: SIDA, 2012), 57-68.

⁵² Some notable Swedish aid projects included: the Việt Nam – Sweden Children's Hospital (1969); the Việt Nam – Sweden Hospital (1981), The Bãi Bằng paper mill (1969 – 1996), and various smaller projects related to education, environmental management, medical care, and specialized trainings.

Other notable Nordic aids that followed this pattern were the Hà Nội – Amsterdam Highschool (1985) – funded by the citizens of Amsterdam; The Water Supply Program for Hà Nội (1985-2001) – funded by the Finnish government.

⁵³ Swedish aids provided monetary funds, technologies, and overseas experts during and beyond the construction phase of aid projects. In the case of Bãi Bằng paper mill, the Swedish government continued to employ and send overseas staff to supervise the mill's operation for 14 years on top of the 13 years of construction, with the aim of transferring knowledge to Vietnamese staffs.

countries, hence much higher than the Vietnamese standards.⁵⁴ The most well-known “Swedish Village” (*làng Thụy Điển*) in Bãi Bằng thoroughly impressed Vietnamese visitors with its medical center, various entertainment spots (e.g., swimming pool, soccer field, tennis court, playground, bar, restaurant), cultural activities, and its abundant supplies of imported foodstuffs and consumer goods. The Vietnamese government initially attempted to limit the influence of the Nordic staff’s lifestyle by setting up rules to discourage non-work-related interactions between Vietnamese workers and overseas staff, by restricting access to the Swedish Village (hereafter, the Village), and by controlling the movement of overseas staff through the system of travel permits.⁵⁵ Nevertheless, these measures failed to prevent the Nordic/Swedish influence – seen by the Vietnamese population as part of the Capitalist Western culture (*văn hóa Tây tư bản*) – from spreading beyond the work site and the Village. In reality, the restriction of access to the Village was not uniformly and strictly enforced.⁵⁶ Vietnamese children often snuck into the Village to play and pick up disposed goods, and overseas staff members also found ways to sneak their Vietnamese friends into the Village, such as by hiding them in the trunk of their company’s car.⁵⁷ These short visits and “flings” exposed Vietnamese visitors to the much higher living standards

⁵⁴ Chr. Michelsen Institute, *A Leap Of Faith: A Story Of Swedish Aid And Paper Production In Vietnam – The Bai Bang Project, 1969 – 1996* (Gothenburg: SIDA, 1999), 198.

Some exceptions of guest house for foreign experts and diplomats were the Vạn Phúc residential area and the Trung Tự communal apartment, which were designated areas for Western bloc countries’ embassy staffs, journalists and their families. The Thống Nhất/Metropole Hotel was also another designated area for hosting short-term guests from the Western bloc.

⁵⁵ Before temporarily leaving the Village, Swedes had to announce their reason for leaving and obtain travel permits from the Vietnamese authorities: Chr. Michelsen Institute, *A Leap of Faith*, 111.

⁵⁶ It appeared that from the 1980s, children of Vietnamese experts were permitted to enter the Village.

⁵⁷ fadco, “Bãi Bằng Hotel - 1 Khu Nghỉ Dưỡng Ấn Tượng” [Bãi Bằng Hotel – An Impressive Resort], *Otofun* (2011 Ma 10), accessed 2022 Apr 14, <https://www.otofun.net/threads/bai-bang-hotel-1-khu-nghi-duong-an-tuong.242239/post-5588756>; Jack Bauer, “[Funland] Câu Chuyện Buồn Của Giấy Bãi Bằng” [(Funland) A Sad Story About Bãi Bằng Paper], *Otofun* (2019 Ma 30), accessed 2022 Apr 14, <https://www.otofun.net/threads/cau-chuyen-buon-cua-giay-bai-bang.1534402/post-49005686>; Thinkvantage239, “[Funland] Câu Chuyện” (2019 Ma 31), accessed 2022 Apr 14, <https://www.otofun.net/threads/cau-chuyen-buon-cua-giay-bai-bang.1534402/post-49096810>.

of the Nordic team, leading to an admiration for Nordic/Western bloc's wealth, and a taste for whatever the more affluent, more modern Capitalist Westerners (*Tây tư bản*) were consuming.⁵⁸ Goods that were available at the Village often coincided with cultural products from Sài Gòn or from Eastern Europe, such as bell-bottom jeans, platform shoes, tight T-shirt and blouses with patterns, ABBA records, Disney characters, and Coke. Even without stepping inside the Village, Vietnamese bystanders could observe and be enticed by Nordic consumerism through various channels. For example, music by ABBA and Boney M. played after work could be heard from outside the Village. The lively music combined with the area's bright lights at night – much brighter than the flickering light from lack of electricity in the center of Hà Nội – made the Village appear like a paradise (*thiên đường*), the epitome of a modern city.⁵⁹ On weekends, overseas staff often rode large displacement motorcycles to Hà Nội or to other tourist spots such as Hải Phòng and Hạ Long. These motorcycles left many Vietnamese youths – in the words of a young boy at the time – “so envy to the point of drooling.”⁶⁰

Simultaneously, the Swedes' affluent appearance and consumerist manners also attracted animosity from locals. In Hà Nội, Swedes were notorious for their overconsumption of alcohol

⁵⁸ Swedish workers' consumerism was identified mainly as a problem in reports by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA), since it exposed the wealth gap between Swedes and Vietnamese. See: Centre for International Economics, *Paper, prices, and politics: An evaluation of the Swedish support to the Bai Bang project in Việt Nam* (Gothenburg: SIDA, 1998), 105; Chr. Michelsen Institute, *A Leap of Faith*, 268-9.

⁵⁹ TRANG-TRANG, “Bãi Bằng Hotel” (2011 Ma 14), accessed 2022 Apr 15, <https://www.otofun.net/threads/bai-bang-hotel-1-khu-nghi-duong-an-tuong.242239/post-5619660>; tomtomchát, “[Funland] Câu Chuyện” (2019 Ma 30), accessed 2022 Apr 16, <https://www.otofun.net/threads/cau-chuyen-buon-cua-giay-bai-bang.1534402/post-49000366>.

⁶⁰ Tiger Hunter, “[Funland] Câu Chuyện” (2019 Ma 29), accessed 2022 Apr 14, <https://www.otofun.net/threads/cau-chuyen-buon-cua-giay-bai-bang.1534402/post-48963798>; See other similar anecdotes in: matizvan2009, “[Funland] Câu Chuyện” (2019 Ma 30), accessed 2022 Apr 14, <https://www.otofun.net/threads/cau-chuyen-buon-cua-giay-bai-bang.1534402/post-48978818>; MussoTD, “Bãi Bằng Hotel” (2011 Ma 12), accessed 2022 Apr 15, <https://www.otofun.net/threads/bai-bang-hotel-1-khu-nghi-duong-an-tuong.242239/post-5598834>.

and riding showy motorcycles with Vietnamese girls on the back seat.⁶¹ An alumnus of Hà Nội Polytechnic University recalled an incident in 1983 when a group of Vietnamese students started a fight with Swedish bikers. Explaining why they provoked the Swedish bikers, the alumnus explained that it was because he and his friends felt annoyed (*ngứa mắt*) at the contrast between their dirt-poor appearance (*đói khổ*) and the foreign bikers' sturdy bodies (*bê vệt*), expensive bikes, and frivolous manners with local pretty girls.⁶² In Hà Nội, one of the popular spots for Swedes was the Núi Trúc Coffee House (*Nhà Café Núi Trúc*) near the Swedish Embassy, where one could enjoy Western music and Western dancing.⁶³ The café soon attracted curious Vietnamese youths and became a space for the development or enhancement of a taste for Swedish/Western pop culture.⁶⁴ Nordic goods also found their way to Hà Nội through Vietnamese workers at the Bãi Bằng paper mill or through Vietnamese staff at the Village. These workers were provided imported food and given valuable material gifts as a form of bonus from the Swedish government, and many opted to sell these Western goods in Hà Nội or Hải Phòng.⁶⁵ In the early 1980s, the “Swedish blue bicycle” – originally a gift for Bãi Bằng workers who achieved first place in productivity – could be found in the “outside” market in Hà Nội and was a

⁶¹ A SIDA report recorded one instance when the Vietnamese authorities banned Swedes from travelling after they caused trouble at a hotel in Hà Nội while being drunk: Chr. Michelsen Institute, *A Leap of Faith*, 111.

⁶² Studer, “[Funland] Em Quý Trọng Đất Nước Thụy Điển!” [(Funland) I Admire Sweden!], Otofun (2021 Jul 27), accessed 2022 Apr 16, <https://www.otofun.net/threads/em-quy-trong-dat-nuoc-thuy-dien.1777793/post-60854829>.

⁶³ Some also recalled the discontent with the authorities' special treatment toward Swedes. Swedes were able to engage in activities like Western dancing, and especially patronizing prostitutes, something over which ordinary Vietnamese could receive harsh penalties and even be sent to prison. See: Hooks, “[Funland] Em Quý” (2021 Jul 29), accessed 2022 Apr 16, <https://www.otofun.net/threads/em-quy-trong-dat-nuoc-thuy-dien.1777793/post-60870279>.

⁶⁴ The local polices initially tried to prevent Vietnamese youths from entering the café but to no avail, and later abandoned the attempt. See: Hiệu Minh, “Khu Tập Thể...Liệt Truyện” [Biography Of...Communal Apartments], *Hiệu Minh Blog* (2011 Oct 29), accessed 2022 Apr 16, <https://hieuminh.wordpress.com/2011/10/29/khu-tap-the-liet-truyen/>.

⁶⁵ Chr. Michelsen Institute, *A Leap of Faith*, 173, 176.

highly desired, highly expensive item.⁶⁶ In the late Bao Cấp years, possessing a “Swedish thing”, from Swedish imported bicycles, cassette players, to notebooks produced by the Swedish-funded Bãi Bằng paper mill, ABBA records (whether authentic or fake copies imported from Eastern Europe), straw bags like the ones fashionable Swedes in Hà Nội often carried, even supposedly junk like empty Coke cans and Carlsberg bottles from the Village, became a symbol of status among Hà Nội residents. Their popularity certainly must be attributed to their rarity as compared to similar goods from Sài Gòn or the Eastern bloc, and to the reputation of Sweden as extremely wealthy, advanced, and generous to Việt Nam.⁶⁷ Similar to American anti-war activists, the Nordic presence as “friendly capitalists,” who continued to provide aid to Việt Nam despite the US-imposed embargo, the international condemnation of Việt Nam’s intervention in Kampuchea, and the “boat-people” crisis, made impossible the wholesale rejection of “Capitalist Western culture” as backward and evil. By 1984, as Australian visitor to Việt Nam Paula Simcocks recalled, ABBA songs were performed on state television.⁶⁸ The high status that Nordic countries enjoyed in Việt Nam, and state tolerance of Nordic influence had blurred and pushed even further the boundary between what was acceptable and what was not, which opened more space for Hà Nội residents to explore “Capitalist Western culture” without feeling any ideological or moral conflict.

⁶⁶ Phung Ngoc Khoa, “Thụy Điển Trong Trái Tim Hà Nội” [Sweden In Hà Nội’s Heart], *Facebook* (2019 Oct 21), accessed 2022 Apr 16, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/373876840199844/permalink/406173133636881/>.

⁶⁷ An individual recalled their short visit in 1980 to Cầu Rào residential area for foreign experts, which had two separated blocs, one for Swedes and Finns, the other for Eastern Europeans. During a power outage, the Nordic bloc was unaffected thanks to their electrical generators, whereas the Eastern European bloc remained without electricity throughout the outage. This experience at Cầu Rào made the witness shift their ideal of “paradise” from the Eastern bloc to the Scandinavia. See: TRANG-TRANG, “Bãi Bằng Hotel”.

⁶⁸ Isabelle Taft, “When Cold War-Era Vietnam Felt The Beat Of The Abba Tambourine”, *Ozy* (2018 Oct 25), accessed 2022 Apr 27, <https://www.ozy.com/true-and-stories/when-cold-war-era-Việt-Nam-felt-the-beat-of-the-abba-tambourine/89360/>.

The sudden increase of goods, the tolerance of consumerism, and the relaxed restrictions in the postwar years had, in the eyes of the teenager Sỹ, “brightened and put more color to the streetscapes of Hà Nội.”⁶⁹ Nevertheless, Sỹ and his family, consisting of solely ordinary public employees, soon realized that the flow of Southern goods or of goods outside of state planning in general would not necessarily put an end to his family’s wartime experience of struggling with shortages, especially the lack of food. In Northern agricultural areas, the end of the war was also the end of Northern peasants’ reliance on the *bao cấp* system to provide for their loved ones on the battlefield, which was the main motivation for peasants’ wartime contributions to the system. After the war, there was less reason to endure the ineffective collective cooperatives nor to comply to the imposed public food procurement – known as the “buying as if robbing, selling as if giving for free” (*mua như cướp, bán như cho*) system. Concretely, it was a price stabilization system that worked against rural populations’ interests, in which the government purchased agricultural produce from the countryside at an extremely low price in order to distribute them to urban populations at an equally low price.⁷⁰ Northern peasants’ abandonment of their designated role within the *bao cấp* system, combined with a series of natural disasters, aid reduction, accumulating bottlenecks, and the government’s inability to effectively manage and incorporate the South’s economy with the North’s, had led to an extreme shortage of food supplies within the system.⁷¹ Those who were hit the hardest by the system’s failure to secure supplies were ordinary public employee families in Hà Nội like Sỹ’s, who relied on the system for income and ration

⁶⁹ Trung, *Hà Nội, Mũ*, 176.

⁷⁰ Peasants often lacked substantial bargaining power, leading them to either abandon farming altogether, or hiding the harvest from the authorities. For a reportage on a household’s attempt at underreporting their harvest in 1983, see: Phùng, “Cái Đêm Hôm.”

For a detailed study about peasants’ resistance to collective cooperatives and public procurement, see: Kerkvliet, *The Power of*.

⁷¹ Đăng, “*Phá Rào*” Trong, 27-8; Melanie Beresford, “Issues in Economic Unification: Overcoming the Legacy of Separation”, in *Postwar Vietnam* 95-110.

goods.⁷² From 1978 onwards, when the conflicts with Kampuchea and subsequently with China had escalated into long-term war and occupation, the already strained *bao cấp* system was further burdened with providing for soldiers on the battlefield, and as such worsened the shortage of ration goods for Hà Nội residents. The *bao cấp* system was therefore no longer a reliable source of livelihood, which made the “outside” market an even more indispensable, unavoidable presence in the city’s everyday life. The significantly higher price of “outside” market food forced ordinary employees to cut non-essential expenditures and reduced the food portions of each meal.⁷³ Furthermore, food quality also sunk below the standard of an average meal during Hà Nội’s evacuation period. If before 1975, one could have rice mixed with corn, potatoes, noodles, or wheat flour in the proportion of at most 1:1; after the unification, a “rice pot” had hardly any rice, and the more edible substitutes of noodles or corn were replaced with *bo bo*⁷⁴ – a foreign grain that was hard to chew and difficult to digest.⁷⁵ Moreover, if wartime ration rice’s poor quality mostly stopped at being old and having lost its natural fragrance, ration rice after unification was remembered for its obvious green-and-red moldy appearance, grains that were hollowed out by rice weevils, mixed with grits, rat feces, or cockroach feces.⁷⁶

⁷² “Thông Báo Số 10-TB/TW, Ngày 18 Tháng 5 Năm 1979, Kết Luận Của Hội Nghị Bộ Chính Trị (Ngày 4-5-1979) Về Nhiệm Vụ Kinh Tế Hai Năm 1979-1980” [Announcement No.10-TB/TW 1979 Ma 18, The Political Bureau Conference (1979 Ma 4)’S Conclusion About Economic Goals In The Two Years 1979-1980], 1979 Ma 18, in *Văn Kiện Đảng Toàn Tập* [The Complete Party Documents], vol.40-1979 (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Chính Trị Quốc Gia, 2005), 156.

⁷³ According to one source, the market price of rice in 1975 was almost ten times the subsidized price. See: Đặng Phong, “Lịch Sử Sô Gạo” [The History Of Ration Rice Booklet], *Tạp Chí Xưa & Nay* (2006 Jul), accessed 2022 Apr 18, <https://xuanay.vn/lich-su-so-gao/>.

⁷⁴ “*Bo bo* grain” (*hạt bo bo*) was in fact a mix of different unprocessed grains such as barley, wheat, and sorghum. *Bo bo* was mostly imported from the USSR or India.

⁷⁵ Trần Minh Hải, “Hành Trình Độn” [A Journey Of Mixed Rice], *Facebook* (2021 Sep 30), accessed 2022 Apr 17, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/721926094625837/permalink/2088898657928567>.

⁷⁶ Lê Minh Hà, “Phố Vẫn Gió (Kỳ 6)” [Wind Still Blows Through The City (Part 6)], *Văn Việt* (2020 Jun 10), accessed 2022 Apr 18, <http://vanviet.info/van/pho-van-gi-ky-6/>.

This harsh reality of the immediate postwar years was a total contrast to the vision of the future that Sĩ had held throughout the war. In his idealized vision of the future after unification, alongside with consumer goods from Sài Gòn, Hà Nội residents would be able to taste the famous Mekong delta's delicious white rice.⁷⁷ This expectation was nurtured through movies, literature, and postcards about the South, or through family stories of the old days when merchants traveled frequently between Hà Nội and Sài Gòn under the colonial system. Sĩ was not alone with his broken dream, and the shared sense of disappointment could be observed in jokes and parodies that were circulated in Hà Nội at the time. An example was the parody version of the popular song named *The Song of Construction (Bài Ca Xây Dựng)*⁷⁸ – a song filled with positivity that captured the public sentiment in North Việt Nam after the signing of the Paris Peace Accords.⁷⁹ The song's iconic chorus that expressed optimism about building socialism – “For today, for tomorrow, forever” – had turned into “For today, for tomorrow, for the next two days”, which described the severe lack of ration goods in the late *Bao Cấp* era.⁸⁰

Nonetheless, postwar scarcity was not experienced uniformly by every member of society. Elite families who were entitled to shop at the top-quality Tông Đản store, and families of ration store salesladies were exempted from bad quality food. As the young girl Hà recalled with unconcealed envy a friend from an elite family nicknamed Béo (chubby): Béo was different from the majority because of her healthy figure, and because she never had to experience food

⁷⁷ Trung, *Hà Nội, Mũ*, 180.

⁷⁸ Hoàng Vân, *Bài Ca Xây Dựng* [The Song Of Construction] (1973), accessed 2022 Ma 2, <https://hoangvan.org/bai-ca-xay-dung-bai-mot-2>.

⁷⁹ The song's long-standing popularity must also be attributed to Hà Nội top singer Ái Vân, who performed the song at Dresden Music Festival (East Germany) in 1981. Ái Vân achieved the grand prize for her performance, which was also Việt Nam's first grand prize at an international music festival.

⁸⁰ Thành Phong and Hữu Khoa, *Thương Nhớ Thời Bao Cấp* [Reminiscing The Bao Cấp Era] (Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Hội Nhà Văn, 2017).

craving in her life. She was served white bread and fresh milk every morning by a servant (*cần vụ*), and could always have delicious rice, meat, and all sorts of high-quality food without having to line up from before sunrise like others.⁸¹ Meanwhile, for the city's majority of ordinary public employee households, parents skipping breakfast to save food for their children, and children so hungry that they felt dizzy and could not maintain their focus in class were the shared memory of the late *Bao Cấp* era.⁸² Yet, material deprivation and hunger were not always perceived as an entirely negative experience either. Many people like Diễm fondly remembered their grandmother, mother, sister, and wife as “home generals” (*nội tướng*), whose meticulous meal planning, fair distribution of food during mealtime, rotation of dishes, culinary talent, and selfless spirit was the main reason the family could overcome the ration food shortage.⁸³ Along with such female family member figures, the neighbor was another consistently dependable “lifesaver” throughout the *Bao Cấp* era. In collective living quarters with good neighbors, due to the shared understanding that ordinary employees' salary could not fully cover monthly living expenses, neighbors were expected to support families that ran out of food or money before payday, and as such could expect others to do the same when they themselves needed help. Lending and borrowing a few *đồng*, or small quantities of food such as a cup of rice, some pickles, or a bit of peanuts took place daily.⁸⁴ This collective support served as a safety net against starvation, as well as reduced the sense of hopelessness and abandonment engendered by the *bao cấp* system. Nevertheless, not a small number of Hà Nội residents held bitter memories

⁸¹ Lê, “Phố Vãn Gió (Kỳ 6).”

Elite households were provided servants (*cần vụ*) by the government, which made *cần vụ* also a public employee.

⁸² Nhi Nguyễn Huyền, “Một Thời Đã”.

⁸³ Đoàn, *Chuyện Thời Bao Cấp*, 4, 21-24.

⁸⁴ Van Anh Nguyen, “Hàng Xóm Xưa Và Nay!” [Neighbors Then And Now], *Facebook* (2021 Apr 17), accessed 2022 Apr 21, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/721926094625837/permalink/1955435417941559>.

in which food shortages did not engender compassion nor loving moments between family members, but instead made people become petty, unkind, if not cruel to one another. Nhi recalled with a sense of regret when she begrudged her neighboring friend and lost the friendship, only because she lent him a spoonful of solid lard, and he tactlessly returned her a spoonful of liquid lard.⁸⁵ For Giang, his constant help with all kinds of housework since the age of five never seemed to be enough in the eyes of his busy and overly stressed parents. One time, Giang had to line up from four in the morning until one in the afternoon to redeem 5kg of rice and 5kg of noodles. Yet upon arriving home, Giang had burst out in tears when his mother not only could not proffer praise, but instead angrily accused him of delaying his task to go play around with “bad” children.⁸⁶

Much like the takeover from the French in 1954, the end of the American war marked a shift in the material and social conditions of Hà Nội. After almost a decade of hardships and sacrifice for the greater cause of reunification, Hà Nội residents felt justified in focusing on building their personal happiness and rewarding themselves with consumption activities. With the affordable price of high-quality goods in the fallen city of Sài Gòn, and a curiosity for Southern/Capitalist bloc’s culture, Hà Nội residents immediately fell into an unstoppable shopping spree across the North and South. They readily embraced the cultural products of Sài Gòn due to the cultural similarities with those of old colonial Hà Nội, and because of their positive encounters with Sài Gòn’s and the Capitalist bloc’s culture that took place during the war. The authorities’ attitude toward this change was self-contradictory and inconsistent. On one hand, they feared that the easily obtainable goods of Sài Gòn would undermine the *bao cấp*

⁸⁵ Nhi Nguyễn Huyền, “Một Thời Đã”.

⁸⁶ Nhi Nguyễn Huyền, “Một Thời Đã”.

system's monopoly and they therefore waged campaigns to quell consumerism. On the other, they were banking on an optimism about postwar material abundance, and members of the authorities themselves also could not resist consumerism. Consumerism and the Capitalist bloc's culture further penetrated Hà Nội with the returning of elite students who studied abroad in the Eastern bloc during its golden age of consumerism under Détente, the rise to leadership rank of former international students, and the arrival of Swedish experts. While flows of Southern goods indeed improved Hà Nội's chronic lack of consumer goods, food scarcity remained a problem in the city and rapidly worsened after the war. Food expenses skyrocketed, lining up for ration foodstuffs became more stressful than ever, and feeling hungry all the time was the norm for most ordinary public employees. Hà Nội residents found their dream of consumption cut short. That is, at least until they found a way to gain additional income.

2.2. Coping With Unaffordable Prices: The Rise Of Urban Husbandry And Side Jobs

Borrowing in small amounts between neighbors was not a sustainable method for coping with the perpetual and worsening lack of affordable foodstuffs. In the face of an unreliable Bao Cấp system, and moreover, under the pressure of the "outside" market whose circulation of goods engendered new standards of good living and consumer desires, ordinary public employees were compelled to find new ways of reducing food expenses and gaining additional income to pay for consumer goods in the "outside" market. One of such ways was by increasing food self-sufficiency through "additional husbandry" (*tăng gia sản xuất*). Additional husbandry was amateur husbandry that ranged from growing vegetables to raising poultry and pigs. While

additional husbandry, either for consumption or for profit, had been widely practiced in the countryside since the 1960s, some Hà Nội residents claimed that it was not until the late 1970s that husbandry became common in Hà Nội.⁸⁷ Indeed, the ubiquity of additional husbandry in Hà Nội coincided with the time around the issuance of the *Directive 372-CP On Urgent Measures To Promote Production And Ensure Food Security On A National Level* (1979), which acknowledged a national food crisis and called for urban residents to participate in subsistence husbandry.⁸⁸ *Directive 306-Ttg On The Implementation Of The Policy Of Tasking Public Employees, Students, And Other Nonagricultural Populations With Practicing Husbandry To Gain Partial Self-Sufficiency* issued in the following year took a step further by requiring state institutions with a labor surplus and/or had land advantages to organize additional husbandry schedule for the staff.⁸⁹ Unlike farmers, state institutions and individuals who practiced additional husbandry were not required to give a portion of their harvest to the government. Official directives did not require the participation of the entire urban population on an individual level; moreover, they specified the exemption of public employees at demanding institutions. However, in reality, most public employees in the capital city, including teachers,

⁸⁷ One official document in 1975 reported the practice of raising pigs in urban areas, although it did not specify how widespread the practice was or if it was common in Hà Nội: Hội Đồng Chính Phủ, *Nghị Quyết Của Hội Đồng Bộ Trưởng Số 86/Cp Ngày 6 Tháng 5 Năm 1975 Về Nghĩa Vụ Bán Thịt Lợn Cho Nhà Nước Và Giá Thu Mua Thịt Lợn* [Resolution No.86/Cp 1975 Ma 6 By The Council Of Ministers On The Obligation To Sell Pork To The Government And Purchase Price For Pork], 1975 Ma 6, accessed 2022 Jul 20, <https://thuvienphapluat.vn/van-ban/Thuong-mai/Nghi-quyet-86-CP-nghia-vu-ban-thit-lon-cho-Nha-nuoc-va-gia-thu-mua-thit-lon-44659.aspx>.

⁸⁸ Hội Đồng Chính Phủ, *Chỉ Thị 372-Cp Về Những Biện Pháp Cấp Bách Nhằm Đẩy Mạnh Sản Xuất Và Tiết Kiệm Lương Thực Trong Cả Nước* [Directive 372-CP On Urgent Measures To Promote Production And Ensure Food Security On A National Level], 1979 Oct 10, accessed 2022 Jul 20, <https://thuvienphapluat.vn/van-ban/Linh-vuc-khac/Chi-thi-372-CP-bien-phap-cap-bach-day-manh-san-xuat-tiet-kiem-luong-thuc-ca-nuoc-17280.aspx>.

⁸⁹ Thủ Tướng Chính Phủ, *Chỉ Thị 306-Ttg Về Việc Thực Hiện Chủ Trương Giao Nhiệm Vụ Cho Công Nhân, Viên Chức, Học Sinh Và Nhân Dân Phi Nông Nghiệp Khác Sản Xuất Tự Túc Một Phần Lương Thực* [Directive 306-Ttg On The Implementation Of The Policy Of Tasking Public Employees, Students, And Other Nonagricultural Populations With Practicing Husbandry To Gain Partial Self-Sufficiency], 1980 Nov 18, accessed 2022 Jul 20, <https://thuvienphapluat.vn/van-ban/Lao-dong-Tien-luong/Chi-thi-306-TTg-thuc-hien-chu-truong-giao-nhiem-vu-cong-nhan-vien-chuc-hoc-sinh-nhan-dan-phi-nong-nghiep-khac-san-xuat-tu-tuc-mot-phan-luong-thuc-44204.aspx>.

doctors, and police officers – whose workloads were considered higher than other occupations – practiced husbandry at their workplace and/or at home. Most of them were motivated by the hope that they could harvest fresh food, gain some independence from the expensive “outside” market, and sell the surplus for extra income. Others, like the case of Hùng, were pressured into practicing husbandry for fear of being labeled as “backward” (*chậm tiến*), “undiligent” (*không chăm chỉ*), or “lacking love for labor” (*không yêu lao động*), and at worst being subjected to public denouncement sessions at the workplace.⁹⁰ Willing participants, put great efforts into their husbandry works, including renovating and repurposing their living space or the shared common space of their neighborhood. In the Kim Liên communal apartment, due to its location which bordered the suburban area, residents even went as far as organizing a land leveling project and dividing land into small plots for each household to grow vegetables.⁹¹ For collective living quarters and apartments in central Hà Nội, chickens were raised on flat rooftops. The spaces under the apartment staircase, balconies, kitchens, or bathrooms were renovated into pigpens. Regardless of the possibility for renovations and the attractive promise of food security, given the unfavorable conditions of urban areas, and that most Hà Nội residents were public employees who lacked experience in agriculture, additional husbandry was not always a profitable or viable business for every household. The experience of raising pigs perhaps best illustrated the difficulties and mixed effects of additional husbandry onto the life of Hà Nội residents.

Pigs were the largest, most valuable livestock that could be raised in Hà Nội, whose rearing required a significant amount of resources and commitment. The urban pig at the time was commonly referred to as “chief” (*thủ trưởng*), which reflected its status as the workplace or

⁹⁰ Văn Công Hùng, “Lợn Nuôi Nhà Văn” [Pigs Raised The Author], *Văn Công Hùng* (2019 Jun 6), accessed 2022 Apr 27, <https://www.vanconghung.com/2019/06/lon-nuoi-nha-van.html#more>.

⁹¹ Vũ, *Kim Liên Một*, 235.

the households' important investment. Hà Nội residents spent a portion of their food ration coupons on pigs, and even paid for low-quality food on the "outside" market to add nutrition to the pig's diet.⁹² Daily routines were organized around taking care of pigs: children after class were mobilized to go pick duckweeds at nearby lakes and collect food scraps in the neighborhood to feed the pigs; and adults after work continued to work on tending pigs, sometimes they even took breaks in the middle of their work to go home to take care of sick pigs, or to go buy food for pigs.⁹³ Since pigpens were improvised and built inside the living space, people were doing daily chores in the same space as pigs, and in some cases had led to pigs being raised and adored like pets.⁹⁴ Nevertheless, the proximity also caused unfortunate incidents, such as Vân Linh's story of when the family's pig jumped over the fences and ate their entire food stock for the Lunar New Year, food that they had kept in the pantry.⁹⁵ Linh disliked raising pigs for another reason, that was the irony of pigs enjoying baths and having their pigpen rinsed with water frequently, whereas her family did not have enough water for cooking, showering, and washing clothes.⁹⁶ The pig's top priority was most revealing when it became sick, which sent Linh's whole family into a panic and made her parents burn incense sticks to

⁹² Duy Khoát, "Một Lần Nuôi Lợn Tết" [One Time Raising Pig For Tết], *Tạp Chí Công Nghiệp & Tiêu Dùng* (2018 Dec 19), accessed 2022 Apr 24, <http://www.congnghieptieudung.vn/mot-lan-nuoi-lon-tet-dt13373>; Phạm Dũng, "Nuôi Heo Trên Nhà Cao Tầng" [Raising Pig On A Story Building], *Facebook* (2019 Mar 28), accessed 2022 Apr 24, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/721926094625837/permalink/1269432993208475>.

⁹³ Ngô Mai Phong, "Thời Bao Cấp Yêu Mến" [The Endearing Bao Cấp Era], *Tấm Lòng Vàng – Báo Lao Động Điện Tử* (2016 Feb 20), accessed 2022 Apr 26, <http://tamlongvang.laodong.com.vn/van-hoa/thoi-bao-cap-men-yeu-519412.bld>; Duy Ngọc, "Những Ký Ức Hạnh Phúc Đơn Sơ Thời Bao Cấp" [Homely And Happy Memories Of The Bao Cấp Era], *An Ninh Thủ Đô* (2022 Jan 9), accessed 2022 Apr 24, <https://www.anninhthudo.vn/nhung-ky-uc-hanh-phuc-don-so-thoi-bao-cap-post492306.antd>.

⁹⁴ Nguyễn Thanh Hải, "Tăng Gia" [Additional Husbandry], *Facebook* (2017 Jul 8), accessed 2022 Apr 23, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/721926094625837/permalink/836748936476885>.

In this personal account, the supposedly positive experience turned into a trauma for the children when the pig had to be sold to the butcher.

⁹⁵ Hiệu Minh, "Nuôi Lợn Thời Bao Cấp" [Raising Pigs During The Bao Cấp Era], in *Chuyện Thời Bao Cấp*, 3, 149.

⁹⁶ Hiệu, *Chuyện Thời Bao Cấp*, 3, 148.

pray to gods and their ancestors for the pig's recovery.⁹⁷ In another similar account, Khoát lied to his medical officer friend that his mother-in-law was sick so that he could obtain medicine to treat his pig.⁹⁸ A sick pig could not be sold for meat, or sold at an extremely low price, meaning that the rearer would not be able to gain returns, or worse, lose the entire investment.⁹⁹ There were Hà Nội residents who had failed more than once at pig rearing in this way, and yet, despite repeated financial losses, some like Thuc did not give up this endeavor until the fourth failure.¹⁰⁰ Pertaining to the popularity of pig rearing despite the inconveniences and financial risks, Cuong – a university professor who was well-known for the anecdote in which he was penalized by the local law enforcement for his unhygienic pigpen – explained:

It would be weird not to raise one when the whole country was doing so. Most of the time, it [pig rearing] was a loss, but it was useful in the sense that it was like a saving. When you sold it [the pig], you gained a huge chunk of money. It was all thanks to the pig that my family could have the money to spend on important things.¹⁰¹

Indeed, rearers who successfully raised their pigs to reach a heavy weight could gain a large sum of money at once by selling the pig to a meat ration food store, or even more if sold to merchants.¹⁰² The money was substantial enough to afford expensive consumer goods on the “outside” market, such as tailored clothes made from imported fabrics, bicycles, sewing

⁹⁷ Hiệu, *Chuyện Thời Bao Cấp*, 3, 149.

⁹⁸ Duy, “Một Lần Nuôi”.

⁹⁹ The fear of pigs losing weights or getting sick was captured in a popular, and perhaps slightly hyperbolic saying: “pigs getting sick is more worrisome than husband or children getting sick” (*lo lợn ốm còn hơn lo chồng con ốm*).

¹⁰⁰ Trần Quang Dũng, “Chuyên Mục Cuối Tuần” [Special Program For The Weekend], *Facebook* (2021 Apr 10), accessed 2022 Apr 26, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/721926094625837/permalink/1949555311862903>.

¹⁰¹ Văn Công Hùng, “Chuyện Heo... Và Lợn” [About Pigs... And Pigs], *Reatimes* (2021 Mar 22), accessed 2022 Apr 27, <https://reatimes.vn/chuyen-heo-va-lon-20201224000002025.html>.

¹⁰² In addition, rearers would be entitled to a portion of fresh meat or intestines from the butcher as a token of gratitude.

machines, or stereo sets – goods that the meager salary of an ordinary employee could hardly afford.¹⁰³ To give an example, a family was able to purchase a Soviet imported Rigonda vinyl record player with stereo that cost around 750-1000 *đồng*¹⁰⁴ – a symbol of wealth at the time – from selling their 70kg pig.¹⁰⁵ Success was not easy, as it required not only the investment and talent of the individual rearer, but also the cooperation of the neighbors, especially if pigs were raised in communal apartments. A common problem when cleaning pigpens placed on the upper floors was the leaking and trickling of wastewater mixed with pig feces down to lower floors. Having a neighbor above who renovated their balcony into a pigpen, Khải had had pig feces fall onto him while relaxing on his balcony more than once. His family and others in the same apartment paid several visits to the pig rearing household to complain about their unhygienic practice. However, they did not go as far as to force this household to abolish their pigpen. This was because, as Khải explained, neighbors understood that the situation was unavoidable, and

¹⁰³ In 1975, pigs raised by urban households, which belonged to the category of “subjects not obligated to sell pork meat to the government,” were priced by the government at the rate of 2 *đồng*/kg. After 1980, the fixed purchase price for this category was abolished. See: *Nghị Quyết 86-CP*; Hội Đồng Chính Phủ, *Quyết Định Của Hội Đồng Chính Phủ Số 311-Cp Ngày 1 Tháng 10 Năm 1980 Về Chính Sách Ổn Định Nghĩa Vụ Bán Lợn Thịt Hoặc Trâu Bò Thịt Cho Nhà Nước* [Decision No.311-Cp 1980 Oct 1 By The Council Of Government On Policy To Regularize The Obligation To Sell Pork Or Buffalo Meat And Beef To The Government], 1980 Oct 1, accessed 2022 Jul 20, <https://thuvienphapluat.vn/van-ban/Thuong-mai/Quyết-dinh-311-CP-chinh-sach-on-dinh-nghia-vu-ban-lon-thit-hoac-trau-bo-thit-cho-Nha-nuoc-44198.aspx>.

¹⁰⁴ Phạm Quốc Dũng, “Đài Đĩa Than Rigonda Cuối Thập Kỳ 70” [Rigonda Vinyl Record Player With Stereo In The Late 1970s], *Facebook* (2020 Nov 14), accessed 2022 Apr 23, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/373876840199844/permalink/699050197682505/>.

For comparison, the highest salary for an engineer before 1981 was 65 *đồng*/month. See: Bộ Lao Động, *Thông Tư Của Bộ Lao Động Số 2-LĐ/Tt Ngày 25 Tháng 3 Năm 1981 Hướng Dẫn Việc Nâng Bậc Lương Trong Năm 1981 Đối Với Công Nhân, Cán Bộ, Nhân Viên Nhà Nước* [Circular Guide No.2-LĐ/Tt 1981 Mar 25 By The Ministry Of Labor On Pay-Rank Promotion For Public Employees], 1981 Mar 25, accessed 2022 Jul 20, <https://thuvienphapluat.vn/van-ban/Lao-dong-Tien-luong/Thong-tu-02-LD-TT-nang-bac-luong-nam-1981-cong-nhan-can-bo-nhan-vien-Nha-nuoc-43066.aspx>.

¹⁰⁵ Nguyễn Thanh Hải, “Tăng Gia”. See a similar account in: Trần Quang Dũng, “Lợn Nuôi Nhà Văn” [Pigs Raised The Author], *Facebook* (2019 Jun 3), accessed 2022 Apr 26, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/721926094625837/permalink/1319474454870995/>.

they shared and sympathized with the rearer's needs to gain extra income.¹⁰⁶ Thắng's friend, however, was not as lucky, as the neighbors were less tolerant and quarreled aloud with the family about the leaking wastewater. The result was an extremely tense atmosphere in the apartment, which successfully pressured the family to cease their pig rearing business.¹⁰⁷ Thuy shared a similar story. Her collective living quarters established their local ban on pig rearing. While the prohibition was not followed by substantial consequences,¹⁰⁸ the quarter's speaker that repeatedly reminded the residents of the prohibition, and furthermore was intentionally posited near Thuy's unit, had successfully dissuaded her family from keeping their pigs.¹⁰⁹ Establishing a consensus on pig rearing between residents of a neighborhood and maintaining a good relationship with neighbors were therefore vital to having a smooth experience of additional husbandry. In order to appease neighbors who were inconvenienced and to gain general support, some households put great effort into building a reputation as friendly and helpful, such as by initiating cleaning public spaces or sharing the best of their harvests with neighbors.¹¹⁰ Moreover, having good relations with neighbors sometimes helped to reduce husbandry expenses. Households who raised pigs could ask those who did not for kitchen waste to feed

¹⁰⁶ Phạm Khải, “Vui Buồn Chuyện... Nuôi Lợn Thời Bao Cấp” [Bittersweet Memories About...Pig Rearing In The Bao Cấp Era], *Công An Nhân Dân Online* (2019 Feb 5), accessed 2022 Apr 26, <https://cand.com.vn/Phong-su-Tieu-diem/CSTCtuan-Tet-Vui-buon-chuyen-nuoi-lon-thoi-bao-cap-i508999/>.

¹⁰⁷ Đào Quốc Thắng, “Chuyện Nuôi Lợn Thời Bao Cấp” [Pig Rearing During The Bao Cấp Era], *Thế Thao & Văn Hóa* (2019 Feb 6), accessed 2022 Apr 26, <https://thethaovanhoa.vn/tin-tuc-24h/chuyen-nuoi-lon-thoi-bao-cap-n20190128162934078.htm>.

¹⁰⁸ Unless the rearing was unhygienic, or the pigs frequently made noise which affected neighbors negatively. In these cases, the rearer could be fined under the category of petty offences.

¹⁰⁹ Trần Quang Dũng, “Chuyện Mực Cuối”.

¹¹⁰ Unidentified informant no.1, Facebook private post (2022 Apr 27).

their pigs. In exchange, receivers would sweep the corridor and occasionally leave a new broomstick for the givers to express gratitude.¹¹¹

Aside from additional husbandry, Hà Nội residents took on various side jobs to earn extra income. Most of them were in various crafts (*làm gia công*) that could be done at home, such as making handmade items and packing products. Others required travelling outside of Hà Nội such as seasonal labor-intensive jobs and photography, and as such were mostly limited to weekends, or summer vacation for university students.¹¹² It should be noted that taking side work had existed since the beginning of the *Bao Cấp* era.¹¹³ However, the number of opportunities for such work and the types of jobs grew significantly after 1975. Such an increase was the result of a combination of post-American war resumption of production and stability, the subsequent boost in consumer demands, Việt Nam's changing position in the international community, as well as adjustments within the *Bao Cấp* system. First, Việt Nam's acquisition of official membership to the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECON)¹¹⁴ in June 1978 had resulted in

¹¹¹ Trần Quang Dũng, “Chuyên Mục Cuối”.

¹¹² These jobs were also taken by people who had difficulties in finding employment in Hà Nội due to the lack of household registration, or due to having an “extremely bad background” (e.g., former convicts, those who were involved in politicized scandals).

¹¹³ See a list of legal craft assembly jobs in 1957 in: Thủ Tướng Chính Phủ, *Nghị Định 056-Ttg Quy Định Tam Thời Chế Độ Thuế Doanh Nghiệp Đánh Vào Các Nghề Làm Gia Công Cho Mậu Dịch Quốc Doanh Và Cho Các Cơ Quan Chính Phủ* [Decree 056-Ttg On Temporary Corporation Tax Regulations On Craft Production For The Domestic Planning Economy And For State Agencies], 1957 Feb 21, accessed 2022 Jul 20, <https://thuvienphapluat.vn/van-ban/doanh-nghiep/Nghi-dinh-056-TTg-quy-dinh-tam-thoi-che-do-thue-doanh-nghiep-danh-vao-cac-nghe-lam-gia-cong-cho-Mau-dich-quoc-doanh-va-cho-cac-co-quan-Chinh-phu-21811.aspx>.

¹¹⁴ The Council for Mutual Economic Assistance, or COMECON (1949-1991) was an economic organization led by the USSR, and comprised of the Eastern bloc, as well as socialist countries in other parts of the world. The COMECON was established in reaction to the US Marshall Plan in the Western bloc. From 1960 to 1978, Việt Nam maintained an observer status in the COMECON. Prior to the end of the American war, the evasion from attaining official membership primarily stemmed from the postcolonial fear of returning to being a dependent primary producer for commanding industrialized foreign powers. After the war, hesitation to join persisted due to the leadership's intention of reestablishing diplomatic relationships and negotiating aids with non-socialist countries. However, the Kampuchea crises, the end of Chinese aid, and the US embargo put this plan to a halt and Việt Nam became compelled to join COMECON.

heightened exports to the Eastern bloc, which consisted of mainly agricultural products and handicrafts. Prior to joining COMECON, Việt Nam was already obligated to increase exports under the multiple commodity and payment agreements it had signed with the Eastern bloc between 1976 and 1977 for paying off accumulated debts.¹¹⁵ Joining COMECON enabled Việt Nam to import at subsidized prices, but also reinforced Việt Nam's export obligation for improving the trade balance. The halting of this subsidized price in 1981 deepened trade deficits and Việt Nam's needs to increase exports.¹¹⁶ As for Việt Nam's Eastern European creditors, there was a shortage of consumer goods, and as such a demand for them. This shortage stemmed from the Eastern bloc having to increase exports to pay off debts to Western creditors and to cope with the global recession since the mid-1970s.¹¹⁷ Vietnamese low-priced handmade consumer goods were thus imported to fill the current shortage of consumer goods in the Eastern bloc.

What this meant for Vân Anh and many others with skillful hands in Hà Nội was the multiplied opportunities for craft jobs. They included braiding rugs, making paper flowers, painting pictures, making postcards, sewing clothes, and especially knitting and crocheting woolen products. There were several knitting groups (*tổ đan len*) scattered in Hà Nội that were often spontaneously formed by women with connections to handicraft workshops. Due to the lack of official affiliation with any state institution, knitting groups had no formal recruitment process nor requirement pertaining to one's political background (*lý lịch*). New members were

See: Beresford and Đặng, *Economic Transition in*, 6; Paul Kelemen, "Soviet Strategy in Southeast Asia: The Vietnam Factor", *Asian Survey* 24, no.3 (1984 Mar), 344, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2644070>.

¹¹⁵ Ronald J. Cima, *Vietnam: A Country Study* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1989), 224.

¹¹⁶ Beresford and Đặng, *Economic Transition in*, 44.

¹¹⁷ Paulina Bren and Mary Neuburger, "Introduction", in *Communism Unwrapped: Consumption in Cold War Eastern Europe*, eds. Paulina Bren and Mary Neuburger (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 13.

admitted based solely on personal connections with existing members. Experience in knitting was not strictly required either, as the introducer would be responsible for training the introduced, or new members could receive training from others during self-organized collective knitting sessions. Such an open and accommodating recruiting method made knitting attractive not only to ordinary employees, but also to those with a “bad background” who struggled to get a job in state institutions and still desired a legal hence “clean” job (*nghề trong sạch*). Knitting groups bought wool yarns from state workshops/collective cooperatives, or from Tocontap and Artexport – the two exporting companies at the time. Then the group leader would assign yarns and knitting instructions to members, set a deadline, and collected the finished products to sell them to the original distributor. Members were paid a few *đồng* for their products, and the monthly income earned from knitting in most cases was only enough to cover a small portion of the household’s food expenses.¹¹⁸ Furthermore, the pay could be deducted if the quality was not up to standards; or if the weight of the products and leftover yarns combined did not match the yarns’ weight at the point of distributing. Unfortunately, unmatched weight was a common occurrence due to changing humidity or the destruction of mice. Nevertheless, knitting was extremely popular among ordinary employees because of its flexibility, that is, it could be incorporated with other daily activities to make the most out of everyday time. For example, Vân Anh often knitted while watching TV or at the movie theater, thus transforming her leisure time into labor time.¹¹⁹ Ngọc and Minh completed simultaneously the two tasks of earning extra income and contributing to the community by knitting while reading books to visually impaired

¹¹⁸ For example, in the 1980s, one was paid 1.5 *đồng* for a pair of knitted adult pants, and 0.3 *đồng* for a kid’s shirt. See: Nguyễn Thị Mùi, “‘Kỷ Vật’ Thời Bao Cấp” [“Keepsakes” From The Bao Cấp Era], *Bảo Tàng Hà Nội* (2021 Oct 25), accessed 2022 Apr 30, <https://www.baotanghanoi.com.vn/hien-tang-hien-vat/ky-vat-thoi-bao-cap-17>.

¹¹⁹ Trần Quang Dũng, “Nhớ Thời Đan Len!” [Reminiscing A Time Of Knitting], *Facebook* (2021 Apr 20), accessed 2022 Apr 29, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/721926094625837/permalink/1958181021000332>.

individuals at the School for Military Vets with Eye Damage.¹²⁰ Moreover, knitting even became a measure to reduce idle time and unproductivity at one's official workplace. Chè and Oanh knitted during meetings which they considered unnecessary, or during uneventful shifts.¹²¹ Children, both boys and girls, and from as young as ten also partially participated in this side job by assisting their family members in finishing their assigned quotas. Some even initiated joining knitting groups on their own and were paid for small tasks such as knitting the collar of a sweater or crocheting small flowers for decoration. Thanks to knitting, Phuong could buy her own textbooks and stationary supplies during her junior high years, and older teens like Thuy and Hoa were able to help their parents pay for cram school to prepare for their university entrance exam.¹²² Certainly, the financial aspect and the flexibility of knitting was the main reason many took on this work, but the job experience and knowledge of knitting or crocheting techniques were also equally important. By working for knitting groups that specialized in clothes for exports, members were exposed to new clothing styles and designs that were popular in the USSR and Eastern Europe, and they also learned how to make them. Chè and Van Anh archived the instructions on knitting children overalls, on color blending techniques, and flowery or striped sweater motifs, which were very popular worldwide in the 1970s.¹²³ These instructions were later used as reference to make clothes for their family members and were shared with acquaintances who were not knitting group members as a way to deepen friendships and to foster better relationships with neighbors. Knitting skills were not only an income-generating asset but

¹²⁰ Hoa Sĩa, “Thời Xa Vắng” [A Long Time Ago], *Facebook* (2020 Mar 2), accessed 2022 Apr 29, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/721926094625837/permalink/1635873506564420>.

¹²¹ Hoa Sĩa, “Thời Xa Vắng”; Van Anh Nguyen, “Nhớ Thời Đan Len!” [Reminiscing A Time Of Knitting], *Facebook* (2020 Apr 30), accessed 2022 Apr 29, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/721926094625837/permalink/1633766340108470>.

¹²² Van Anh Nguyen, “Nhớ Thời Đan”.

¹²³ Van Anh Nguyen, “Nhớ Thời Đan”.

represented also the only viable means for those who could not afford imported clothes, or pre-made clothes at ration stores, to update their wardrobe and catch up to international trends. Throughout the *Bao Cấp* era, it was common for women to deconstruct no longer fitted or unfashionable sweaters, sometimes even blankets, and re-knit them into new clothes for themselves and family members. As such, knitting skills and taste in colors became regarded as a symbol of femininity and a desirable trait for a future spouse.¹²⁴ Hùng's girlfriend had touched Hùng deeply with her determination to remake his treasured but no longer fitted Soviet-imported sweater. It took half a year to unravel and remake the sweater. The final product thoroughly impressed Hùng's mother, who previously had been rather cold to his girlfriend. To Hùng and his mother, the harmonious blending of colors, and the intricate yarn join knots on the inside of the sweater demonstrated both the girlfriend's skills, sophisticated taste, and her tender feelings for Hùng. The couple married four months after the first time Hùng put on his remade sweater.¹²⁵

The second important event that led to an unprecedented proliferation of side jobs was the issuance of *Decision 25-Cp On Some Policies And Measures For Encouraging State Enterprises To Take The Initiative In Production And Utilize The Rights To Financial Autonomy* in 1981.¹²⁶

¹²⁴ Although knitting, crocheting, and sewing skills were regarded as necessary skills for a woman (*nữ công gia chánh*), it was common and considered normal for men to have these skills and participate in knitting groups or other similar organizations. See the comment section in this post, in which a few people remembered having male classmates who learnt how to knit from their mothers and became exceptionally skilled at knitting: Van Anh Nguyen, "Nhớ Thời Đan".

¹²⁵ Hùng Lý, "Món Quà Quý Giá Và Những Đêm Mẹ Cặm Cui Đạp Máy May" [A Precious Gift And Mother's Nights Of Pedaling The Sewing Machine], *Vietnamnet* (2022 Jan 1), accessed 2022 Apr 30, <https://Vietnamnet.vn/mon-qua-quy-gia-va-nhung-dem-me-cam-cui-dap-may-may-801230.html>.

¹²⁶ Hội Đồng Chính Phủ, *Quyết Định Của Hội Đồng Chính Phủ Số 25-Cp Ngày 21-1-1981 Về Một Số Chủ Trương Và Biện Pháp Nhằm Phát Huy Quyền Chủ Động Sản Xuất Kinh Doanh Và Quyền Tự Chủ Về Tài Chính Của Các Xí Nghiệp Quốc Doanh* [Decision No.25-Cp 21-2-1981 By The Council Of Government On Some Policies And Measures For Encouraging State Enterprises To Take The Initiative In Production And Utilize The Rights To Financial Autonomy], 1981 Jan 21, accessed 2022 Jul 20, <https://thuvienphapluat.vn/van-ban/Doanh-nghiep/Quyết-dinh-25-CP-chu-truong-phat-huy-quyen-chu-dong-san-xuat-kinh-doanh-tu-chu-tai-chinh-cua-xi-nghiep-quoc-doanh-43040.aspx>.

The *Decision* promoted a “three-plan” system for production: Plan 1 included materials provided by the government to produce according to state plans; Plan 2 included cooperating activities between state institutions for resolving bottlenecks to meet state quotas; and Plan 3 was optional production for the outside market. Not one week after the promulgation of the Decree, Minister of Finance Trần Phương sent a proposal to the Politburo which suggested the abolishment of the entire rationing system. Although the proposal was not accepted entirely, it resulted in the termination of 33 out of 44 types of ration goods.¹²⁷ In simple terms, the issuance of *Decision 25-Cp* in 1981 was a watershed in the loosening of state monopoly over production and distribution, and the acknowledgement of the outside market. Under the *Decision*, state enterprises could sell surplus output above state-designated targets for profit in the outside market. This incentivized enterprises to become efficient in their operation and active in establishing trading relationships.¹²⁸ An increase in productivity and production fueled the need for more workers, and as such a surge in opportunities for assembly work for Hà Nội residents. Some of the most common side jobs at the time were cracking peanut shells, rolling cigarettes, making labels and packaging boxes. Initially, state enterprises prioritized hiring family members and acquaintances of current workers, or retired workers for these side jobs. Public employees of other state institutions could gain access to these jobs individually through personal connection with workers of said enterprises. However, during festive seasons which required significant spending, the labor union or financial department of non-manufacturing institutions would go negotiate with state enterprises to find side jobs for their employees. Vân, a member of the Hà Nội Opera House in 1984 was grateful to her workplace’s labor union team, who had paid

¹²⁷ Đăng, *Tư Duy Kinh*, 277-8.

¹²⁸ Trading relationships under Plan 2 were not limited to domestic partners, but also foreign partners from the socialist bloc, and even non-socialist countries such as Japan, Singapore, and Hong Kong. For a detailed study of state companies that conducted business with non-socialist countries, see: Đăng, “*Phá Rào*” Trong.

countless visits to factories and workshops to find a side job for fellow employees, so that everyone could earn extra money to go shopping for the Lunar New Year. The Opera House staff was finally given the job of making bakery boxes for a confectionary workshop in the center of Hà Nội. The pay was meager, and Vân disliked the job, but thanks to it she could afford a fuller pot of *bánh chưng* for the special occasion.¹²⁹ Now that state enterprises were officially permitted to participate in the outside market, and the perception that official income was insufficient hence taking side jobs was inevitable and had become normalized, an atmosphere of increasing tolerance and even affirmation of self-employed businesses began to emerge in Hà Nội. Public employees were making branded goods for state enterprises, as well as no-brand goods or even counterfeits for merchants in the market.¹³⁰ The father of Sỹ’s friend – a retired police officer with a sense for arts and crafts – was producing simple paintings for merchants at the Đồng Xuân market to sell as Hà Nội souvenirs at other provinces.¹³¹ Chiến, then a member of the Việt Nam Academy of Science and Technology even initiated his own business of repairing electrical appliances. By the early 1980s, TV sets and stereo sets from Sài Gòn were ubiquitous in Hà Nội, which meant a steady demand for electricians to install and repair these items. At first, Chiến did this side work in secret to avoid being criticized of neglecting his state job by his father – a party cadre since before 1954 who was very loyal to the party-state. However, as time passed and almost every person around Chiến’s family was doing side work, his father softened

¹²⁹ Lê, *Yêu Và Sống*, chapter 6.

¹³⁰ Tobacco was among the most counterfeited products at the time. See: N.N.T, “Hồi ức...” [Memories...], *Người Đưa Tin* (2019 Oct 2), accessed 2022 Ma 1, <https://www.nguoiduatin.vn/hoi-uc-a451075.html>.

¹³¹ Trung, *Hà Nội, Mũ*, 184-6.

his view, and Chiến could now confidently practice and take pride in his very profitable business.¹³²

The decade after the American war witnessed a transformation in the working culture of Hà Nội. The government admitted its failure to manage a highly centralized economy by acknowledging the outside market and granting state institutions more autonomy. It also admitted its failure to provide for its citizens by allowing, if not compelling, the people to practice husbandry and take on side jobs so that they not become less dependent on the increasingly unreliable *bao cấp* system. Starting from the late 1970s, after Việt Nam had signed new trade agreements with Eastern bloc countries to pay off the accumulated debts, opportunities for jobs that produced handicrafts for export became widely available. As practicing husbandry and doing side jobs became more common, Hà Nội residents, from children to adults, found that they dedicated much of their free time and energy engaged in these labor-intensive activities, if not not going to the lengths of stealing time from their formal state jobs in order to spend on these additional jobs. This was because these activities were flexible and generated tangible income – real money and not unredeemable coupons – and in the case of husbandry, fresh food on the table without the stress of interacting with salesladies. Moreover, for many people, craft jobs served as an opportunity for acquiring valuable skills, and simultaneously provided also a window to the outside world’s cultural trends and tastes. By the end of the *Bao Cấp* era, taking multiple side jobs had become the norm, and some Hà Nội residents even considered their side job of more importance than their main state job.

¹³² Vũ, *Kim Liên Một*, 241-3.

Conclusion

As of the year 2022, the *Bao Cấp* era (1954-1986) remains one of the most controversial topics of discussion in Hà Nội. Many chose to remember the era as a time when community commitment, compassion, and nonmaterialistic ways of enjoying life reached its peak in the city. Others held a complete opposite view of the era, criticizing it as a time of authoritarian terror, abject misery, and widespread anomie. Supporters of each narrative occasionally engage in heated debate on online forums about the “true nature/essence” (*bản chất*) of the *Bao Cấp* era, making it one of the most popular and controversial historical periods to be discussed at the current moment. None of the positions above was disingenuous. As I have tried to show, the everyday experiences in Hà Nội under the *bao cấp* system encompassed multiple positions that were fluid and mutually constitutive. The preceding chapters placed the multidimensional, paradoxical, and spontaneous dynamics in the interactions between fellow Hà Nội residents, as well as between residents and the larger socio-political structures, at the heart of this history of the *Bao Cấp* era’s inhabitants.

With the end of French colonial rule in Hà Nội in 1954, Hà Nội embarked on a transition from a colonial city to a socialist city. This process entailed the reconstruction of Hà Nội’s material environment and social relations, together with the adoption of the central planning system – the *bao cấp* system. Section One of Chapter One frames the transition first as a process of decolonizing the city – of removing the *mission civilisatrice*’s omnipresence, and from which to establish socialism as the new dominant ideology. The socialist transition to a large extent succeeded in redistributing wealth and prestige from the previously privileged population of the colonial city to the less privileged. As such, it generated both grievance in the

previous group and confidence in the latter, as well as tension between these groups. Nevertheless, the newly established social order could not completely erase the norms and values of the colonial era. In redressing the unfavorable postcolonial conditions of Hà Nội, the new government was forced to make pragmatic decisions, whose byproduct was the reproduction of the power and prestige of the colonial era's privileged population. Nor had the socialist transition led to a thorough segregation and perpetual class-based hostility in Hà Nội. Preexisting norms and ethics about social relationships, as well as the ideology of socialism itself – which encouraged community commitment – made possible the formation of peaceful, respectful, and friendly connections between supposed class enemies in the city.

Section Two of Chapter One continues the examination of the realities of the socialist transition, particularly on the *bao cấp* system and its reception among Hà Nội residents. Its goals were the equal distribution of resources, and the reorganizing of society to increase productivity for building socialism and for fighting the war. The *bao cấp* system's function as the dominant distributor of goods and welfare benefits was an important source of psychological reassurance for Hà Nội residents, especially during the American war. Nevertheless, the system was simultaneously a source of frustration, as it was overambitious, inconvenient, and unable to fulfill the promise of adequate distribution. The system's unequal distribution of resources generated new social hierarchies and systemic inequalities. These disparities shaped social interactions and daily routines, as well as informed the formation of social identities and personal aspirations. Hà Nội residents, however, were not passive subjects of the social stratification imposed by the *bao cấp* system. They were active agents who constantly found ways to maneuver the system for achieving social mobility and other personal goals. In the act of navigating their everyday realities, Hà Nội residents asserted their subjectivity and established their position within

complex networks of social relations in Hà Nội. Each resident's unique way of exercising their agency dynamized Hà Nội's social landscape in ways that no social engineering project, no matter how powerful, could fully fathom and contain into a predetermined mold.

Chapter Two of the thesis examines the transformations in everyday experiences of Hà Nội residents between 1975 and 1986. Section One of Chapter Two focused on the growing normalization of consumerism and the shift in Hà Nội's general atmosphere toward a prioritization of the personal over the collective. Việt Nam's changing domestic conditions and international relations after the American war had heightened and diversified the flows of material goods and cultural practices to Hà Nội. Moreover, the once condemned cultural practices that were associated with Hà Nội's colonial era, and that shared similarities with new cultural flows, also resurfaced and became re-normalized. The authorities' attitude toward this new condition was ambiguous and inconsistent. Suppression based on ideological grounds was not strictly enforced due to the ambivalent moral and ideological meanings that consumerist behaviors represented. Constant negotiation between ordinary residents and persons of authority over the meanings of these behaviors, and the increasing participation of authoritative figures in consumerism had led to a shift in cultural norms and values. The social environment of Hà Nội after the American war was characterized less by static ideological constraint, but more by ideological indeterminacy, and increasing tolerance of new ways of life.

Section Two of Chapter Two continues the theme of post-1975 transformations, with a focus on the rapid embrace of small-scaled non-planned economic activities by Hà Nội residents. Economic crises after the end of the American war had greatly reduced the *bao cấp* system's ability to adequately provide goods and services to the population. Hà Nội residents were forced to supplement for the lack of state provisions and earn extra incomes with self-sustaining

husbandry and side jobs. The government encouraged these activities since they helped lessened the burden of distribution for the *bao cấp* system, and even contributed to an increase in productivity in some segments of the economy. Hà Nội residents practiced husbandry and found side jobs for survival needs as well as to satisfy their growing consumerist desires. The normalization of these activities left an enormous impact on the daily routines and the sociability of Hà Nội residents, and as such altered social norms regarding livelihood and dependency on the *bao cấp* system.

This thesis takes the viewpoint of ordinary residents of the city so as to understand the everyday social and cultural life in *Bao Cấp* era's Hà Nội – not as ideological theories or state policies, but as lived experiences. The central planning system - the *bao cấp* system – with its ubiquitous presence in Hà Nội had certainly established a common culture among residents. Nevertheless, the system affected people of different social groups differently. Likewise, each person, under particular circumstances and informed by their unique personal experiences, had their own personalized way of navigating their reality. Life in Hà Nội, the city's sociality, norms and values, and daily routines, were not shaped and standardized by a powerful party-state and a dominant ideology. They emerged out of the ordinary residents' everyday negotiations with the authorities, and their subjective, spontaneous ways of maneuvering the larger socio-political structures. Hà Nội and its residents under the *Bao Cấp* era presented in a variety of shades and colors, which cannot be reduced to a single narrative of the authoritarian dystopia nor the virtuous “good old days.” The *Bao Cấp* era gives a different impression as one shifts between different social groups' perspectives and gazes at specific areas, at specific points of time in the era.

While I have tried to look at the era from a variety of viewpoints, admittedly, my work largely features the viewpoint of public employees (*cán bộ viên chức*), especially white-collar employees, whose social privileges were acknowledged by the *bao cấp* system, and whose lives heavily depended on the system. Much less attention was paid to the social group of commoners (*nhân dân*), particularly merchants – those who were often not entitled to privileges provided by the *bao cấp* system. A perspective from merchants, or of those from families with a merchant background in the colonial era, can illuminate better the transition to socialism and development of the *bao cấp* system from angles that this thesis does not contemplate. They include the transformations in business ethics and production management in everyday life, the development of the “outside” market and how it affected Hà Nội’s sociality. Moreover, within the category of public employees, there were specific occupations which had an enormous advantage in economic opportunities and access to the outside world, such as sailors in merchant navy, and workers who were sent to socialist bloc countries. An inclusion of these groups’ perspective is needed to give a more complete picture of the flows of material goods, cultural practices, and new norms in Hà Nội after 1975. The *Bao Cấp* era is a relatively new topic in the field of Vietnamese history, and there remains many more versions of the everyday reality during the era that needs to be explored.

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