

# News from Southeast Asia



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SOJOURN is an interdisciplinary journal devoted to the study of social and cultural issues in Southeast Asia. It publishes empirical and theoretical research articles with a view to promoting and disseminating scholarship in and on the region. Areas of special concern include ethnicity, religion, tourism, urbanization, migration, popular culture, social and cultural change, and development. Fields most often represented in the journal are anthropology, sociology and history.

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## The return of the hải ngoại artist and new art spaces in Vietnam

Huong LE THU



THE ART SCENE IN VIETNAM is undergoing a revival. Fast changing socioeconomic trends brought about by the 1986 *Đổi Mới* have resulted in profound changes in every sphere of Vietnamese life, including the arts and entertainment sector. Economic growth followed by international cooperation, the advancement of technology, including new media, have seen a proliferation of new cultural activities, innovative forms of artistic expression and creative cultural exchange with other countries. Art has once more become attractive to a wider national audience.

Nevertheless, this optimism was not always there. Indeed, the *Đổi Mới* may have even been detrimental in some ways to the traditional arts. For example, pre-*Đổi Mới*, the arts and performing organizations were subsidized by the communist

Artist Ngoc Nau is working in her studio to produce artwork 'Light portrait', 2013  
Source: San-Art

regime, but later, economic reforms saw a reduction in public funds available to the cultural sector. On one hand, the cultural sector saw a reduction of subsidies while, on the other, it failed to generate sufficient income because of the small portion of income an average Vietnamese spent on art and entertainment. Many art and cultural organizations were severely affected, including the film industry. Those who managed to commercialize and survive, however, also complained about the difficulties of preserving artistic standards. Meanwhile, state control over the content of artistic and cultural expressions hampered innovation and creativity. Mainstream art was harnessed by the state to inspire patriotism and represent 'Vietnam-ness' through the themes of idyllic villages, peace, life and heroic people. Art served the purpose of promoting

national identity, particularly important for a country that suffered years of wars and continuous foreign aggressions. The communist regime decided what artistic expressions to promote and what to prohibit.

The political turmoil and wars resulted in a mass exodus of artists in the 1960s and 1970s, the majority of which originated from south Vietnam. This artistic diaspora formed a vibrant community of *hải ngoại* (literally 'overseas'), who sought freedom for their artistic, and often political, expression. *Hải ngoại* became a genre of its own, manifesting mainly in music, but also in literature and cinematography, and is popular among the overseas Vietnamese in France, USA, Canada, Australia and other western countries. These artists in exile were able to express what could not be expressed in their country and produced works of art that were full of nostalgia and idealization of a beloved, estranged motherland. Quite naturally, these overseas Vietnamese were influenced by western styles and artistic idioms whilst they continued working with traditional art. With the relaxing of state censorship and the return of the *hải ngoại* artists to Vietnam, a new art form is being introduced to a domestic audience of 90 million.

Many post-war artists have embraced forms of expression that transcend local traditional styles and themes, and have begun experimenting with contemporary art. Contemporary art, still marginal, is consumed only by a small and select community of art lovers. The Academy of Fine Art continues to focus on preserving traditional forms of artistic expression and hence is resistant to artistic innovation. However, new spaces for contemporary art are emerging. While only a small circle of cosmopolitan Saigoners, many of them *Việt Kiều* (overseas Vietnamese), was initially supportive of contemporary art, Hồ Chí Minh City is now offering prominent art spaces like Galerie Quỳnh, Cactus Gallery or Zero Station. Not to be outdone, Hanoi also boasts Manzi, Hanoi Grapevine and Nhà Sàn Studio to cater to its contemporary art lovers. Foreign partners, like the Goethe Institute and the British Council in Hanoi, have been instrumental in promoting contemporary artistic expressions.<sup>2</sup>

The changes wrought by *hải ngoại* artists became more evident by the late 2000s. A new generation of *hải ngoại* contemporary artists began to make their mark. One such initiative was *Sàn-Art*, based in Hồ Chí Minh City, established in October 2007 by four Vietnamese-born and educated artists who are now working abroad, namely Dinh Q. Le, Tuan Andrew Nguyen, Phu Nam Thuc Ha and Tiffany Chung. Noticing a lack of artistic exchange in Vietnam, they started *Sàn-Art* as a platform where local and international artists could engage and showcase their work, serve as a forum for contemporary art discussion, and to nurture new talent. *Sàn-Art* was for a long time the only such experimental art organization in Vietnam that worked with local and regional artists while offering education opportunities. It has been recognized as a good example of the UNESCO Convention on Promoting and Protection of Diversity of Cultural Expressions.



Above:  
Light Portrait' 2013;  
Photography light  
box 70 x 50 x 7 cm  
Source: San-Art

In 2013 Tran Vu Hai turned a Soviet-era pharmaceutical factory in Hanoi into an arts complex called Zone 9. Soon, it became the hottest spot in the city. "Here in the factory, we can make things from zero and do whatever we want to do," said Hai in an interview with the Diplomat Magazine.<sup>3</sup> This space, symbolic in the way it provides a sense of freedom and expression, is a unique atmosphere that attracts both Vietnamese and foreigners. The Zone 9 spirit spread beyond the artistic community to amass an impressive 60,000 'likes' on Facebook.

Another new space is 'Initiative - Contemporary Arts Museum' (I-CAMP), which helps to exhibit and preserve contemporary artworks. Tran Luong, the artist and curator behind the idea envisions an exhibition space for contemporary artworks, including installation, video art, photography, conceptual art, land art and site-specific art. More than 10 artists in Hanoi have been involved in this project, including famous names like Trinh Thi, Luong Hue Trinh, Huy An, The Son and more. They launched I-CAMP's first exhibition in December 2013 at Muong Museum. A bold project of implanting modern technologies and consumer goods in under-developed settings underlined the gap between urban middle class and poverty-stricken areas in rural Vietnam.

The return of *hỏi ngoại* artists and the creation of new art spaces is slowly changing the production and consumption of art in Vietnam and responsible for contributing to the on-going revival of the artistic landscape. As young artists, intellectuals and educators, these contemporary Vietnamese artists are leading the wave of experiments in cultural expressions.

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- Hỏi ngoại music is of particular impact, promoting Vietnamese overseas art as well as bridging new generations of Vietnamese born abroad to the heritage of their ancestors. There are a number of studios, distributors and production centers, like Thuy Nga Paris, Asia, Làng Văn or Văn S n Studio. They have served as homes for 'refugee' artists and composers, centers of cultural and artistic community and providers of comfort to the Vietnamese political and economic emigrants. Some of Vietnamese most prominent modern artists, composers and writers have been creating 'in exile' and distributing their work 'back home' through these centers.
- Le Thu, Huong. 2010. 'The Independent Voice of Contemporary Vietnamese Artists', *Mapping Cultural Diversity: Good Practices from Around the Globe*, UNESCO and ASEF Publication, Germany.
- 'Vietnam Comes of Age. A new arts complex in Hanoi reveals a generational shift'. Article published by *The Diplomat* on 12 November 2013: <http://thediplomat.com/2013/11/vietnam-comes-of-age/>

## Culture and politics of the newly announced Vietnamese Independent Writers' Association

Jason Morris-Jung

IN VIETNAM'S HIGH POLITICS of Politburo and Party Congresses, the recent 'Declaration to Establish a Vietnamese Independent Writers' Association' by 62 prominent Vietnamese writers from inside and outside the country might appear as a trivial event.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, one is immediately confronted with the question of why such an Association would even be necessary when the official Vietnam Writers' Association (*Hội Nhà Văn Việt Nam*) has already been operating for more than a half century. Yet in the context of growing oppositional voices within the single party-state, the Declaration is another important event. It is a direct challenge to state censorship and control over the arts and literature, while also calling on all Vietnamese writers to take up the struggle of revitalizing the nation's political consciousness and envisioning new alternatives.

While the *đổi mới* reforms of the late 1980s brought Vietnam onto the path of a market economy, its political system has remained stubbornly communist. Jonathan London refers to this model as Market-Leninism, whereby "communist parties pursue their political imperatives through market institutions and market-based strategies of accumulation while maintaining Leninist principles and strategies of political organization."<sup>2</sup> One of these key strategies has been 'state corporatism'. Under a corporatist approach, state authorities officially recognize certain organizations as the sole representative of their group or class in exchange for political obedience.<sup>3</sup>

When the Vietnam Writers' Association was established in 1957, it was designed as part of an elaborate institutional skeleton being rolled out at the time by the fledgling party-state – as newly recognized by the Geneva Accords of 1954 – to establish the basic structure of this corporatist approach.<sup>4</sup> Organizations like the Writers' Association were important not only for promoting a certain type of thinking that reinforced the party-state's own political platform, but also as a convenient instrument for disciplining and punishing regime critics by divesting them of professional status and sully personal reputations. Hence, when members of this new Association called themselves 'independent', it should have been very clear from what they were declaring their independence.

One has only to look at the author of the Declaration to understand well the political context and history of this initiative. At the age of 82, Nguyễn Ngọc is one of Vietnam's most renowned nationalist writers for his glorifying accounts of the contributions of the highland ethnic minorities to the war efforts of the North Vietnamese. However, Nguyễn Ngọc was also at the center of controversy in the late 1980s, when he was dismissed as Editor-in-Chief of the Vietnamese Communist Party's *Arts and Literature Magazine* for his role in publishing the satirical and irreverent writings of Nguyễn Huy Thiệp and other "đổi mới" writers. Since then, he has earned a reputation as an outspoken critic of state politics and ardent supporter of many privately funded cultural and educational projects.

Other signatories to the Declaration include southern writers Bùi Minh Quốc and Tiêu Dao Bảo Cự, who, at the time of Nguyễn Ngọc's dismissal, organized a protest march through the Writers' Associations across the country to demand his reinstatement. There are also literary scholar Nguyễn Huệ Chí and writer Phạm Toàn (aka Châu Diên), who are famous for the online petition they drafted in 2009 that brought together 135 of some of the most well-known and accomplished Vietnamese intellectuals from inside and outside the country in common protests of a government policy for bauxite mining. Among them are well-known regime critics, such as poet Hoàng Hưng and writer Hà Sĩ Phú, who have both been jailed for their writings and outspokenness. Yet there are others too, like writer Phạm Đình Trọng, a lifetime Party loyalist until recently when he renounced his party membership and became a vocal critic of the party-state.

That this group of writers came together to protest state censorship and control over the arts and literature is significant. The last time they did so, in the late 1950s, they were brutally repressed by the party-state in what was known as the Nhân Văn – Giải Phẫu Affair, named after the two arts and literature journals around which they were organized. However, in the past few years, Vietnamese artists and intellectuals have re-emerged on the domestic political landscape. Through traditional and especially online media, they have been raising awareness and leading public discussions on many of the nation's most sensitive and important political issues. Their historically rich discourses and their own public

prestige have played a vital role in bringing together diverse Vietnamese groups from across the country and even around the world in a common opposition to major policies of the party-state.

The Declaration for the new Association reminds its readers of "the most important functions of literature, which is to stir the moral conscience and build up the ethical values of society." Its purpose is to help forge a 'fundamental renewal' in the nation's political consciousness, one that has not been possible up until now because of the type of state controls and political culture that has pervaded Vietnamese arts and literature since the Nhân Văn – Giải Phẫu Affair. For this reason, the Declaration argues:

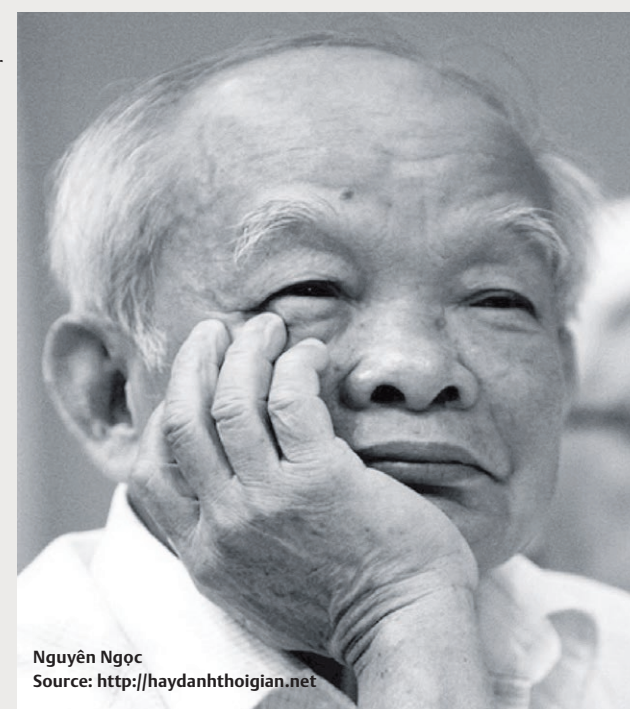
*Facing this prolonged situation that has now become urgent, we, the writers that have signed our names below, have decided to establish an independent organization for Vietnamese writers from inside and outside the country called the Vietnam Independent Writers' Association, with the hopes of contributing actively to building and developing an authentic, humane, democratic, modern, and globally integrated Vietnamese literary profession that can play a necessary vanguard role in the cultural renewal and renewal of the nation that our history demands.*

The Declaration is less clear, however, on how the Association will be established and what exactly it will do. However, this is also indicative of the new politics that the Vietnamese intellectuals are leading. It is more performative than instrumental. It is more about raising awareness and exposing the limits of the current political system than a belief in gently influencing the system to transform itself. In this regard, the Declaration for the Vietnamese Independent Writers' Association cannot lose. Either it finds a way to establish itself and flourish and thereby demonstrates the possibility of a more independent existence; or state authorities suppress it in the usual way, but in the process expose themselves to an increasingly vigilant public eye.

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Nguyễn Ngọc  
Source: <http://haydanthoigian.net>