

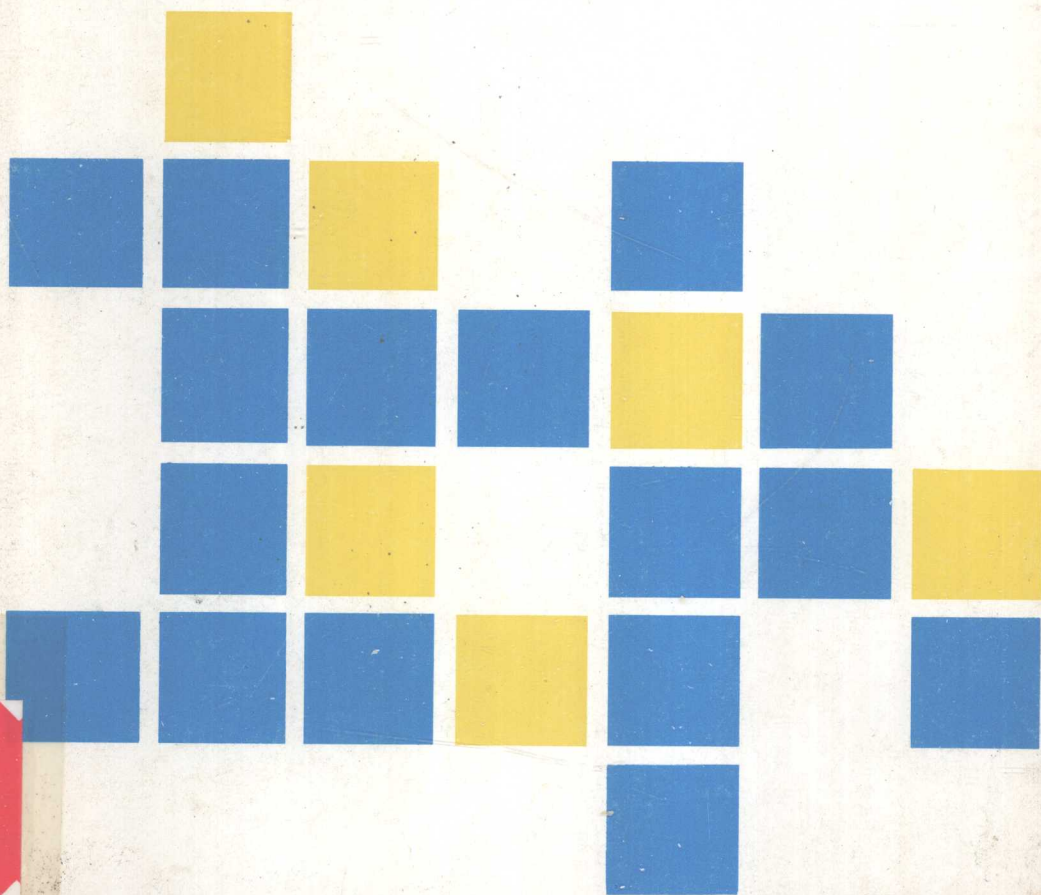


INSTITUTE OF EAST ASIAN STUDIES  
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA • BERKELEY

# After Saigon Fell

Daily Life Under the  
Vietnamese Communists

Nguyen Long  
with Harry H. Kendall



RESEARCH PAPERS AND POLICY STUDIES

4



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In memory of the boat people who died at sea  
in search of freedom.

## Foreword

Nguyen Long is a Vietnamese intellectual who believed that he could make the adjustment necessary to live satisfactorily in the new Vietnam. He did not come from an affluent family. Nor had he been a supporter of either Ngo Dinh Diem or Nguyen Van Thieu. As a Buddhist activist, he had opposed both men, and he still considers himself an opponent of these leaders. More than this, Long aligned himself with the "antiwar" movement, and he knew, even respected, some Viet Cong adherents, although he was not one of them.

Yet as Long now admits, he was wrong. There was no place in the Communist order for a person like himself. It was only a matter of weeks before he began to realize the magnitude of his error. By that time, he had ample company. There were thousands—later, hundreds of thousands—like him. Long and his family were only a small part of a large picture. Along with others, they were ultimately prepared to risk death rather than remain under intolerable conditions. Fortunately, unlike many of their compatriots, they survived their ordeal as boat people, but the memories of the past will always be with them.

Although Long received an American higher education, he remains Vietnamese to his very essence. It was his deep love for his country, his hope that he could contribute something to the rebuilding of a shattered society, that induced him to stay after April 1975. Yet his story illustrates how simplistic and how wrong it is to equate Vietnamese communism with Vietnamese nationalism. For non-Communist nationalists like Long, life after the fall of South Vietnam became a nightmare.

In reading his highly personal account, one gets a close-up, graphic picture of life under the new Communist elite. One will not find extensive materials on the *doctrines* of the Communists in this essay, only on the *practices*. Thus, the idealism expressed in the collected works of Ho Chi Minh seems to have come from another world, another time. Here, scarcity, suspicion, and hatred flourish—all the very opposites of idealism.

It is difficult to know what was the most onerous to bear. The physical privations were substantial, and Long paints a story of poor and inadequate food, clothing, and other necessities. Yet in these respects, his fate, and that of his family, was not nearly so bad as that of others. Moreover, in South Vietnam—more richly endowed with food than the North—the problem was less survival and more adjustment to much lower living standards and the endless time consumed in scrounging for daily necessities. Long suggests that in causing the average citizen to spend an inordinate amount of time in

seeking merely the requirements for survival, the regime was limiting the hours available for possible mischief. One of the hallmarks of the new Vietnamese order was that everyone was extremely busy doing very little.

Some may be surprised at the massive corruption that characterized post-1975 Vietnam. There was the legacy of the past, to be sure, but Long believes—and he cites evidence to prove his point—that in many respects, communism brought a deeper, more pervasive corruption than had existed previously. It soon affected Northern cadres as well as the cadres and citizens of the South. How else did one surmount the endless, senseless regulations and the entrenched layer upon layer of bureaucracy?

The real corruption, however, was of the soul. One had to learn how to lie, not occasionally but routinely, and as a part of the system. One had to be able to say things which one did not believe, and say them *ardently*, not just in a casual fashion. One had to be able to camouflage one's actions and one's thoughts, concealing the inner self from all but the most intimate, trusted friends. In effect, therefore, one had to live dual or triple lives simultaneously. One life was displayed publicly, to neighbors and security personnel. Another life was lived in the back alleys and closed offices where one dealt in black market goods and made arrangements for boat motors—all part of the struggle for survival. And yet another life was the life of one's private thoughts and dreams, when the individual tried to blot out reality and conjure up hope.

Yet as one reads Long's straightforward, painfully honest account of his experiences, one senses that the greatest hardship lay in the complete absence of privacy, combined with the constant fear that somehow one's inner thoughts would be revealed, that security agents would suddenly find a way in which to strip one bare, exposing the contempt and hatred which one was accumulating for a government and a system that were failing on every count.

To me, the part of Long's story that is at once the most dramatic and the most revealing is the "battle" of Bien Hoa. For a brief time, the residents of Ho Chi Minh City and vicinity thought that a new liberation had come as the sound of massive explosions continued through the night. And what happened? People smiled, celebrated in cafes, for the first time since Communist "liberation," and *opened* their doors. The important cadres, on the other hand, disappeared, and their doors were firmly closed. Could there be a more revealing commentary on the true meaning of liberation in South Vietnam today?

Robert A. Scalapino, *Director*  
Institute of East Asian Studies  
Berkeley, California  
July, 1981

# Introduction

This series of essays on life under the Vietnamese Communists is based on my experiences as a Saigon citizen from the time of the Communist takeover on April 30, 1975, until my escape, curiously on the anniversary of that day four years later, on April 30, 1979, to the United States.

To understand the following accounts, some chronology should be helpful:

I first came to the United States as a graduate student in 1969 and stayed until 1972, when I completed the academic work for my Ph.D.

Then I returned to Vietnam from 1972 to 1973 to write my thesis.

I arrived in the United States for the second time in 1973 to receive my doctoral degree.

I returned to Vietnam a second time in late 1973 and stayed until my escape in 1979.

When my family and I escaped, we brought with us only the barest essentials for survival, so I have of necessity drawn almost entirely on my memory for the accounts related here. It is a memory etched with painful experiences. The episodes are of no "historic" importance, but I hope that they will illustrate the conditions imposed by the Communist regime on 50 million Vietnamese. I do not hesitate to call these conditions near-slavery.

When the Communists took over Saigon on April 30, 1975, I decided to stay in Vietnam—a decision for which I had to pay a high price in the following four years. My wife, in tearful pleas, had urged that we leave, contending that the Communists would never employ me because they had their own candidates, the "cadres," and our children would live in poverty and hardship, the children of a "bourgeois intellectual." In the months and years that followed, the exodus of thousands of Vietnamese into exile for political or economic reasons vindicated my wife's judgment.

But my initial decision was different. In the early months of 1975 when a Communist victory was imminent, after many sleepless nights I decided to remain in my country and make a living under whatever political system was to come.



I was born in Dalat—a beautiful, mountainous town situated on a high plateau. My parents had come to Dalat from Hué in Central Vietnam, to which they returned in the years of famine after World War II. In those years in Hué we subsisted on small pieces of sweet potato and cassava (a similar root plant), and as long as I shall live the smell and flavor of those two vegetables will be with me. Hué is also the center of a deeply implanted Vietnamese culture stretching back into ancient history, and is noted for its resistance to external influence. I considered myself intensely Vietnamese, proud of my heritage, and committed to the independence of my nation.

Before my second return to Vietnam in late 1973, I had spent more than three years at the University of California in Berkeley. I came to understand the richness of America, spiritual as well as material. Like many young Asians committed to liberty and justice, I was inspired by America's great documents, the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights. Even Ho Chi Minh borrowed from the American Declaration of Independence when he issued his own proclamation in 1945:

All men are created equal. The Creator has given us certain inviolable Rights; the right to Life, the right to be Free, and the right to achieve Happiness.<sup>1</sup>

It was for this ideal that I later left Vietnam in 1979, but it was also for this ideal that I had returned to my country in 1973 and decided to remain there rather than become an expatriate. I was also proud of the small home which I had purchased with funds saved over many years. During my studies in the United States my wife and children had remained in Vietnam, and I looked forward to returning to them and my aged mother. Thus I saw no reason to stay in the United States in 1973, nor was I prepared to flee back to that country in 1975.

Vietnamese are proud that from ancient times they have maintained their national identity in the face of foreign aggression; three times in the thirteenth century the Vietnamese defeated Mongolian-Chinese forces. Vietnam had no cultural, scientific, or social revolution in its long history, but it was engaged in many struggles to protect its independence. All other tribes in south China ultimately became Sinicized and incorporated politically into the greater Chinese empire, but the Vietnamese resisted Chinese domination.

When I expatiated on this principle of independence in the so-called political-study courses organized by the Communists for South Vietnamese

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1. A. L. A. Patti, *Why Vietnam?* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1980).

intellectuals, it was clear that the new rulers did not appreciate my remarks. By setting forth the “law of independence” that had governed Vietnam throughout its history, I was implying that what the Communists considered their unique contributions—namely the Dien Bien Phu victory over the French in 1954 and the “liberation” of South Vietnam from the American-backed Thieu regime in 1975—were only a continuation of the struggles of Vietnamese patriots over centuries, by no means events initiated by the Communists. The Communists wanted to hear that “thanks to communism, Vietnam won over French colonialism and American imperialism,” and that “thanks to the Party and to Uncle [Ho Chi Minh], we are able to enjoy today”—phrases that all citizens, from small children to the elderly, are supposed to repeat at all public meetings.

Yes, earlier I had reservations about American policies in Vietnam. In 1972 an American friend came to say goodbye as I was leaving for Saigon. He asked my opinion about the war and how the United States could end the conflict. I said that I believed the United States should withdraw its forces and then assist the country by various economic and social measures. My friend did not accept this doctrine, and today I realize that my approach was too simplistic.

It is true that the end of the war in April 1975 brought peace to Vietnam after nearly one hundred years of intermittent struggle against foreign forces. At the time of the collapse of the Republic of Vietnam, I regarded President Nguyen Van Thieu as a coward. In his last speech on television Thieu announced that he was resigning but promised to stay on the anti-Communist battlefield “as a fervent fighter.” Immediately after that tearful speech he took flight, taking with him his family and relatives, close subordinates, and many tons of “merchandise,” which were the property of his poor country. President Thieu in his last speech deceived the Vietnamese people and then left them to their fate; but, then, I was never a supporter of Thieu.

As I contemplated my future in early 1975, I could not accept the idea of leaving my homeland, shedding my cultural heritage, and becoming an American or French citizen. I realized, of course, that the material standards of the advanced industrial nations were higher than those of Vietnam, but I did not regard the civilization of these nations superior to that of my native land. The thought of becoming a refugee was frightening.

My decision to remain in Vietnam after April 30, 1975, was influenced by another consideration—my inaccurate assessment of the real nature of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam (NLF), the Viet Cong. A month after the fall of Saigon, I still thought that the NLF was a powerful political organization composed of Southern patriots even though many had joined under Northern Communist pressure. I realized that its policies and activities had been coordinated with and influenced by the Communist Party of North Vietnam, but I saw the cooperation between the Party and the NLF

as forged by a common interest. I believed that South Vietnam would continue to have a separate political organization which, after peace came, could balance the power and the role of the Communist Party of North Vietnam. It was also my belief that still other groups of the South Vietnamese people could organize into a third force or bloc, and that a coalition government of these three elements would eventually emerge. I foresaw the possibilities of a neutralist regime at least for some years during the opening phase of national reconstruction.

But the NLF was only a satellite, mobilized and dominated by the Communist party. As I look back on events, I do not understand how I could have come to believe that the NLF had any independence from the Communist movement. The truth, however, shortly became apparent to me and to others.

Only two or three months after the Communist victory it became painfully obvious that the patriotism and nationalism of the Vietnamese Communists upon which I had counted so heavily had been employed primarily to seize power. Patriotism was a means to gain political control. One might assume that a truly nationalist force in the aftermath of a long and destructive conflict would make an effort to unify the people, bind their wounds, and bring all citizenry together in an independent nation. But in fact, from the beginning, the Communists divided the people instead of integrating them. Communism had won out against noncommunism, and the struggle between the two camps continued. The Communists' operating principle was: "Who defeats whom? Who destroys whom?" Capitalism was the target for destruction, and "capitalists" (meaning all non-Communists) were the target, for conversion, at the least. Traditional nationalist parties, such as the Quoc-Dan-Dang and the Dai Viet, were condemned as reactionary and their members imprisoned or destroyed.

In 1976 the Ministry of Education of the Provisional Revolutionary Government of South Vietnam organized a three-month "political study seminar" for university professors of the Saigon-Giadinh region, held at the School of Medicine. In this seminar, the instructor from the Nguyen Ai Quoc Communist Party School said that the Vietnamese national hero Phan Chau Trinh would have been executed had he not died when he did. His death had been nationally mourned.

## **The Cadres**

A few weeks after April 30 I met some low- and middle-level cadres at their offices or entertained them at my home. I wanted to know how Communist cadres operated, for my own sake and for the sake of the university.

Most cadres I met were imbued in an almost religious sense with Communist ideology. They had been educated to have a deep pride in themselves and their movement, and a strong will when coping with enemies. They were steeled to sacrifice, and this was demonstrated in their mode of dress, their manner of speech, and their life-style. They were highly disciplined, prepared to carry out difficult orders without question, knew how to keep secrets, and were vigilant against outsiders or potential spies. They exhibited strong optimism, although one could not help thinking that in some cases this was artificial. They constantly used such words as "enthusiastic" (*phan khoi*) and "happy" (*ho hoi*) in describing their mood regarding conditions. Ho Chi Minh and his comrades had imbued their followers with the political qualities suited to a successful revolutionary struggle far more effectively than had the South Vietnamese leaders.

Besides, the Vietnamese Communists proved better in propaganda, in depth of commitment and, one must add, deception than the non-Communist South Vietnamese leaders or governments.

## Organizing Associations

After April 30 the Communists organized associations for various groups—the young, the old, men, women—in every urban ward and block, and in every village and hamlet throughout the country. Aged people were mobilized to join occupational or professional associations. Young men were required to take part in the Ho Chi Minh revolutionary society. Intellectuals were mustered into the so-called Association for Patriotic Intellectuals (*Hoi Tri Thuc Yeu Nuoc*), which, after 1975, we called "the Association for Water-Loving Intellectuals" (*Hoi Tri Thuc Yeu Nuoc La*) because we did not have enough food to eat and so we drank more water than usual. This group was also nicknamed "The Association for Foreign-Country-Loving Intellectuals" (*Hoi Tri Thuc Yeu Nuoc Ngoai*) because many intellectuals were escaping or seeking to escape the country. These included the association's president, Nguyen Van Thoi, whom the Communists had decorated for his work in atomic physics, and Nguyen Van Hai, the association's vice president, who was captured in his escape attempt. The latter was released but kept under surveillance.

Standing on the balcony of my home, I could watch Communist cadres assemble the children of our block, teaching them how to perform "patriotic dances," how to stand at attention like soldiers, and similar activities. I realized the usefulness of the operation: It caused the children to cease wandering about the streets aimlessly, and it began their political indoctrination.

From late 1975 these Communist people's associations showed their true nature. Their purpose was to detach every individual from his past so

that every person could be more easily controlled. The preoccupation with these associations consumed an enormous amount of time. People were not allowed to have enough rest or to take care of their families adequately; after working at least ten hours a day, many times including Sundays and holidays, they had to carry out the additional duties required by the newly formed associations; on many occasions they were compelled to donate money or contribute their services in connection with various meetings and assigned tasks.

Party members kept tight control of these associations. Cadres, particularly those who held leading positions in public institutions such as the offices of Industrial and Commercial Reconstruction and of Sea Products, competed with each other in occupying the most comfortable homes and offices, and used their authority to squeeze money or gold out of those who were currying their favor, especially the commercial and business community. At the same time cadres cultivated the appearance of sacrifice and zealous work habits. Even while taking bribes, they had, hanging on the walls of their offices, such pious Communist maxims as "Be diligent, parsimonious, honest, and upright" and "Completely fair and just."

## **Communism—Theory and Practice**

In graduate school at Berkeley I studied communism along with other subjects in political science, and when I returned home from the United States in 1972, I brought with me selected Communist literature, such as the works of Marx, Engels, Lenin, Stalin, and Mao Zedung. Indeed when I started teaching at Van Hanh University my subject was communism—a subject few professors wanted to touch under the Thieu government before 1975. During this period I confess that in some respects communism appeared to me a more complete, more realistic, and more humanist ideology than anything either Western or Oriental philosophy had to offer. I did not become a Marxist, partly because of my deep commitment to Buddhism, but I had strong sympathies with the theories and values expressed in Marxist works. Even today, South Vietnam, the United States, Japan, and Hong Kong—societies to which I traveled or in which I had lived—often seem to me unnecessarily competitive and conflictive, and operating under a multiplicity of pressures not conducive to cultivating the best in human nature. I was prepared to conceive of communism as a possible route for the realization of justice by removing some of the inequities that existed in free-enterprise capitalist society and striking down the profound differences between poor and rich.

In those earlier days I did not appreciate the meaning, in practice, of such Communist code words as "class struggle," "dictatorship of the

proletariat,” “organic relationship,” “collective ownership,” “democracy,” “liberation,” “cultural and thought revolution,” “scientific and technological revolution.” Indeed, even after April 30, 1975, I bought numerous Communist works—then being reprinted in great quantities thanks to the modern presses and imported paper still left in South Vietnam—and I read them earnestly, still finding beautiful sentiments expressed on nearly every page. But by living under the Vietnamese Communists, I came to understand that “class struggle” meant expunging by intimidation, and that “reeducation” meant brain-washing. I saw that heavy labor was imposed on individuals from every level of society except on the working class—and that the working class also was “reeducated” because none of the workers fit the conceptual mold. I saw that work was under the surveillance of police, security agents, secret informers, and the dictatorial leadership of Communist party members. I learned that my “organic relationships” with my parents, who had not sided with Ho Chi Minh, prevented my recognition as a “good element” in the new society. Even my children, for the four years we were to remain in Vietnam, were not permitted to visit the “Vanguard Children’s Palace”—an activities center reserved for talented Party children—or to study in schools specially reserved for children of Party members and cadres.

“Collective ownership,” I soon found out, meant that all properties were placed in the hands of the Party. My family and I were allowed to have access to less and less food, and food of an increasingly inferior kind. We found ourselves living under mounting hardships and in an almost furtive existence, never knowing from one moment to the next what fate held for us, but always expecting to see a further deterioration.

## Early Activities

I do not come from a privileged family. My father was a maker of wooden shoes, my mother a peasant. My education is the result of considerable sacrifice by my family. Even as a boy I was interested in political activism. As a seventh-grade student in the Dalat junior high school, I helped to organize student demonstrations. After one of these the whole school marched to the office of the government representative in the Central High Plateau in Dalat to protest against the principal who wanted to dismiss one of our teachers. In 1960 I was a founding member of the Buddhist Student Association in Saigon; and in 1963 I was the commissioner of the youth, high school, and university students in the Buddhist-protecting Intersect Committee, which resisted the repressive Ngo Dinh Diem government.

Throughout my student days I championed the causes I regarded as promoting freedom and progress. In 1965 I led many demonstrations—the largest of which forced the government of General Nguyen Khanh to resign;

and in 1967 as the organizing commissioner of Buddhist forces of Vietnam—under the auspices of the Democratic Construction Movement initiated by the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam—I led demonstrations against the Nguyen Van Thieu government. I was jailed twice by the government. The first time I was released from prison by the intervention of the Venerable Thich Huyen Quang, secretary-general of the Vien Hoa Dao Buddhist church who later, in 1977, was arrested by the Communists. The second time I was freed by the intervention of the Venerable Thich Man Giac, then vice president of Van Hanh University, now a professor at the University of Oriental Studies in Los Angeles.

I participated in antiwar demonstrations in Berkeley and San Francisco between 1969 and 1972. I still believe that Americans must share the responsibility for the disintegration of South Vietnam because they neglected to study the nature of traditional Vietnamese society and because they lacked discipline and commitment to the task in which they were engaged. Too many American “heroes” while in Vietnam became “heroins.” The disintegration of Vietnamese society, which neither South Vietnamese nor American leadership could prevent, made it more difficult to mobilize the South Vietnamese people for the energy required for a bloody struggle. Besides, the leaders of South Vietnam lacked the political qualities of revolutionaries, thereby operating under serious disadvantages in their life-and-death struggle against the Communists.

Thus my life before 1975 was one of political dissidence. I was acquainted with various persons in the NLF, and they know these statements to be true. Indeed, some participated in the same demonstrations mentioned above, and I met a number of them after the fall of Saigon. The Communists, however, were not interested in using such talents as I might have. On my part, I did not apply for a position, although I had no steady employment for four years. The Communists did not compel me to undertake any activities during the period, but two incidents are revealing. First I was asked, without explanation, to submit my Ph.D. thesis. The authorities kept it for three months in late 1975, then returned it without comment. I learned, however, that a number of students in Dalat University had been arrested because their theses were regarded as anti-Communist. I had served as visiting professor of the Graduate Division of Dalat University in Saigon before the Communist takeover. I was concerned that my thesis might be judged anti-Communist although it was a nonideological work on public administration. However, no questions were raised.

In a second incident the Communists sent one of my friends to visit me to inquire about my attitude toward the imprisonment of a number of the leading venerables of the An Quang Unified Buddhist Church in 1977—imprisonments which in one case had led to the death of my religious master, the Venerable Thich Thien Minh. To my regret, I did not raise my



voice in protest although I gave no indication of approval. Nothing happened to me, but it alerted me that local security agents were watching my activities. The Communists, of course, knew that I had been active in the Buddhist movement. Thus, as my escape plans gradually took shape, I had to be exceedingly careful. Being aware that I was under surveillance slowed down my effort.

In sum, my original attitude had been, "Since I have nothing to fear from the Communists, why should I leave Vietnam?" This was the attitude I expressed to my wife many times both before and for two months after April 30. I had a record of opposition to most of the South Vietnamese regimes and of having demonstrated against the war. I had been in jail twice and could not possibly be associated with the Thieu government. Thus I did not feel I was in the same category as many South Vietnamese whom the Communists were to label "false soldiers" (*nguy quan*) or "false authorities" (*nguy quyen*), that is, persons related directly or indirectly to the governments of the past or to American policies. Many Vietnamese holding social positions different from mine took a similar attitude. This was especially true of lawyers, doctors, engineers, journalists, or literati. Most of them felt that they had committed no crime and that they had had no relationship to the politics of the past, therefore had no reason to leave Vietnam.

But their perceptions of themselves and that of the Communists were far apart. A society under Communist control, we came to discover, was far more politicized than any one of us had appreciated. From the Communist point of view, there is no room for a non-political individual. All citizens must be mobilized and participate, and must directly relate themselves to the political scene. As I now write these lines I can only wish that some Americans would understand this point more clearly. I think it would have an effect on their attitude toward communism, and they might learn a lesson vicariously. I was forced to learn through bitter experience.

There was one final reason why leaving Vietnam had limited appeal to me at first. I did not have the means for a painless escape. I did not have enough gold to purchase a boat or even to participate in such a purchase. The life of a university professor in Vietnam was reasonably comfortable, but there was little left over and our savings were meagre.

By late 1975, however, I had come to see the true face of communism, and all my old illusions were being stripped away. On many a day I would stand sadly on the small flat roof of my home, watching the sun fade away on the western horizon. The sky was high, the earth large, yet where could I find a place to take refuge? I knew that the area security agents were often passing my home, collecting information about my frame of mind. I doubted, under these circumstances, that it would be possible for the entire family to leave as a unit. My wife and I discussed three alternatives: for the entire family to leave, for me to take one or two of the older children, and



for me to flee alone. We tried the first and last alternatives.

On two occasions we failed. In 1977 I tried to take a boat by myself but was caught. In 1978 I organized a trip for my entire family with the son of one of my former professors, but we were betrayed. In January 1979, for the third time, I planned a family escape. This time we succeeded.