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Of the State, For the State, Yet Against the State

— The Struggle Paradigm in Vietnam’s Media Politics

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Candidate’s Statement

Except where otherwise indicated this thesis is my own work

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ABSTRACT

The media in Vietnam is state-owned and regulated by state agencies with extensive power and prerogatives. The overall impression the media gives is that it is primarily a propaganda organ of the state. Therefore, the media is "of" and "for" the state. However, press activism, not always friendly to the state, has had opportunities to emerge from within the system, rendering the activism, in some sense, "against" the state. This amphibious characteristic is facilitated by a "struggle paradigm" whereby media practitioners make use of their connections with the state and appropriate its agendas to facilitate their criticism of official shortcomings. The empirical data is presented through five case studies from 1956 to 1990. Each of these involves controversies between newspapers and the state. The narrative details shed light on the censorship process but the thesis moves beyond the singular approach of charting the bureaucracy of censorship to depict state-media dynamics within the context of how the political system functions as a whole. Ideological climate, intra-elite contention and systemic connections of media practitioners are part of the total dynamics. The findings on state-media dynamics offer an alternative to the theoretical perspective that stresses civil society's autonomous relationship with the state.
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ABBREVIATIONS/SHORTENED TERMS

ALA: Association of Literature and the Arts
Hội Văn Nghệ; this is a generic title used by a mass organization at central or local levels that represents writers and other artists. At the central level, its current proper name is Vietnam Federation of Literature and the Arts or Hội Liên Hiệp Văn Học Nghệ Thuật Việt Nam. This umbrella body comprises the associations representing the different arts, one of which is the VWA. A provincial ALA, however, is usually too small to be divided into separate organizations for the individual arts. Whenever ALA is used in the thesis, the context will make it clear whether I am referring to a central or local level organization.

CC: Central Committee
This refers to the Central Committee of the Communist Party.

CFRF: Club of Former Resistance Fighters of HCM City
Câu Lạc Bộ Những Người Kháng Chiến Cụ Thành Phố Hồ Chí Minh; an organization of veterans from the two wars of resistance against the French and the Americans set up in 1986. It became too clamorous and its chairman and some activists were arrested in 1990. The club has since become moribund.

Culture Commission: Shortened name for Culture and Arts Commission
Ban Văn Hóa và Văn Nghệ; a party organ that oversees the arts and cultural issues.

DRV: Democratic Republic of Vietnam
This name refers to the northern half of the country governed by the Communist Party until 1976 when both halves were reunited as the present SRV.

GP: Giải Phẩm
A combination of NV and GP which has become a popular name for the protest of the two 1956 magazines.

NXB:
Nhà Xuất Bản
It means publishing house.

OCI:
Office of Culture and Information
Số Văn Hóa Thông Tin; name used by MCI branches at the city/provincial level.

QĐND:
Quân Đội Nhân Dân
The People’s Army; this is the national newspaper of the Vietnamese military.

ROV:
Republic of Vietnam
This refers to the non-Communist southern half of Vietnam that existed up till 1975 when its government collapsed under military pressure from the DRV.

SGGP:
Sứ Giả Giải Phóng
Liberated Saigon, a daily newspaper belonging to the HCM City Party Executive Committee.

SH:
Sông Hương
Perfume River, a literary magazine produced in Hue and named after the river that flows through the city.

SRV:
Socialist Republic of Vietnam
The current name of Vietnam adopted since formal reunification in 1976.

TP:
Tiền Phong
Vanguard; this is a central-level newspaper published by the Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth League.

TT:
Tuổi Trẻ
Youth; this is a HCM City newspaper published by the city’s chapter of the Ho Chi Minh Communist Youth League.

TTCN:
Tuổi Trẻ Châm Niên
Sunday edition of TT.
**TTDHNVN:**  
Tin Tức về Đại Hội Nhà Văn Việt Nam  
A newsletter giving details of the controversial Fourth VWA Congress published by the CFRF.

**TTKC:**  
Truyền Thông Kháng Chiến  
*Tradition of Resistance,* this was a magazine published by the CFRF, a veterans organization set up in HCM City in the 1980s. Due to their critical stance against the VCP, both the magazine and the club are now defunct.

**TTF:**  
T%C3%AAn Tin T%C3%A1c  
*Weekly News*; this is a newspaper published by VNA.

**VCP:**  
Việt Nam Cộng Sản  
Đảng Cộng Sản Việt Nam; the present name of the Communist Party since 1976. It has other names at various times in history. Please see VWP.

**VFF:**  
Việt Nam Fatherland Front  
Mặt Trận Tổ Quốc Việt Nam; an umbrella body that gathers all mass organizations such as those representing workers, women, youth or the various religions.

**VJA:**  
Việt Nam Journalists Association  
Hội Nhà Báo Việt Nam.

**VN:**  
Văn Nghệ  
*Literature and the Arts;* this is Vietnam’s largest literary and arts magazine. The current magazine is published by the VWA but prior to May 1957, it was published by the ALA of the DRV.

**VNA:**  
VIETNAM NEWS AGENCY  
Truyền Tần Xã Việt Nam.

**VNPHTCM:**  
Văn Nghệ Thành Phố Hồ Chí Minh  
*Literature and the Arts of HCM City;* a literary magazine published in HCM City.

**VWA:**  
VIETNAM WRITERS ASSOCIATION  
Hội Nhà Văn Việt Nam.

**VWP:**  
VIETNAM WORKERS PARTY  
Đảng Lao Dò Việt Nam; the present VCP used this name from 1951 to 1976. Please see VCP.

**WAEC:**  
WRITERS ASSOCIATION EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE  
Ban Chấp Hành Hội Nhà Văn; this is a body elected by VWA members at the association’s Congress.

**WAS:**  
WRITERS ASSOCIATION SECRETARIAT  
Ban Thư Ký Hội Nhà Văn; this is a body of office-bearers elected by the WAEC. Please see WAEC.

**XLCD:**  
XÉT LẠI CHỐNG ĐỘNG  
This means "Anti-Party Revisionist" and is the name of an incident in 1968 where a group of officials were accused of revisionism and deputed by the security apparatus.

**Youth League:**  
SHORT FOR HỘI CHI MINH COMMUNIST YOUTH LEAGUE  
Đoàn Thanh Niên Cộng Sản Hồ Chí Minh.
INTRODUCTION

This thesis is about a "struggle" paradigm in Vietnam's state-media relations. I use this paradigm to explore how a form of media activism, not always friendly to the state, can proceed despite the media being part of the state and has no choice but to be supportive of the official agenda. In Vietnam, the word "struggle" - "đấu tranh" or "tranh đấu" - contains the same ordinary conversational meaning as it does in English, referring to a great effort expended to contend over something or with somebody. However, "struggle" is also an important word within Vietnamese political vocabulary and media practitioners use it to legitimize their endeavours to run editorially-sensitive material. Most media content is not particularly critical but when it is, it can be, and usually is, part of an official policy to "struggle" for some party-endorsed objective such as combating official corruption and incompetence. Chapter One explains how a media struggle, in this sense, can have a double-edged effect. On the one hand, it moves in conjunction with state objectives and has to be suffered - or even encouraged up to a point - by the VCP (Vietnam Communist Party) leadership. On the other, state-promoted journalistic liberties can go too far in criticizing official shortcomings and end up undermining the legitimacy of party rule. This double-edged nature of "struggle" provides media practitioners with room to manoeuvre when they are testing the limits of censorship. "Struggle" can be a way of opposing from within the system but it has to be handled with care in this form and requires the political skills of media practitioners as insiders of the system. The journalistic space so generated is not always trouble-free. Contention over whether a media struggle is within or outside the bounds of official parameters is part of the politics of struggle. These politics may involve more than just media practitioners and the official censors. Media restiveness as expressed through such a struggle paradigm is usually an adjunct of the party's internal struggle and a function of the intra-elite contention that is meshed with the internal struggle. It is an intriguing phenomenon of ambiguity and confusion where "state" and "media" are not always easy to separate. This does not mean there are no state-media dynamics. It just requires an analytical framework that recognizes the "within the system" dimension of the politics. The struggle paradigm I posit provides a meaningful way of tapping into Vietnamese political vocabulary to discuss such politics in Vietnamese terms.
In this dissertation, the struggle paradigm is used to analyse a diverse range of media situations since 1954, covering phases when the media was highly circumscribed to when it was most free around the time of the VCP launching its 1986 reform policy of đổi mới. Vietnam’s media saw dramatic changes with đổi mới. Nowhere can this be more evident than in comparing the pages of today's newspapers with those of the same publications 20 years ago. The media nowadays enjoys a far broader expanse of professional freedom than it had in the earlier decades of VCP rule. Vietnam’s media practitioners fought some battles with powerful institutions and individuals to achieve this. Those dramatic images from the initial years of đổi mới might have given an impression that there was a new way of doing things in the media. The struggle paradigm reminds us that those dramatic developments were also symptomatic of an entrenched old way of doing things.

However, this dissertation is not arguing that the media changes are therefore not meaningful or substantive. Far from it; the empirical cases being presented point out how the struggle paradigm has played its part in brokering extensive changes in the print media. Viewed in a historical perspective, the state’s encouragement for struggle had been used to produce the most intimidating of media climates and also the most relaxed. Foreign observers and Vietnamese themselves surveying the social-economic-political reality of Vietnam too get the feeling that đổi mới may have run into a kind of limbo, unable or unwilling to bring about another wave of much needed changes. The most radical scenario that envisages these changes coming is a kind of total regime replacement and a banishment of its old ways of doing things. The likelihood or merit of this happening is not within the purview of this thesis. What I hope to do is to remind others of the versatility in the old ways of doing things. Embedded in the political system is a potential for change (or even subversion) coming from inside and using the familiarity of insiders with old ways. The struggle paradigm in this thesis makes the point that citizens who are locked into a system pervaded by official control, patronage and linkages, spawn their own kind of system-subverting politics, using skills that exploit the insider's connections or familiarity with the system in order to challenge the system. They have very few other choices.

To explore the subject of struggle, this dissertation identifies the systemic obstacles media practitioners have to overcome when they want to get something sensitive into print. These obstacles are the political forces that set down the rules of media, implement them or have the discretionary power to interpret them. Chapter Two describes such systemic dynamics by explaining the media regulatory system and elite manipulation of media. The media regulatory system is examined in terms of its hierarchical structure of state institutions, its operational ideology and its regime of rules and regulations. Once we understand how the system works to regulate media, we have a common framework to analyse the media controversies that I explore in five case studies.

The existing literature (both academic and journalistic) on Vietnamese media politics has a tendency to discuss how stringent or how flexible censorship is, without paying sufficient attention to the systemic procedures that are set in motion when censorship is reinforced or relaxed. With my system-focused framework of analysis, I hope to take the discussion a step forward. Writings about media censorship rely heavily on studying what has found its way into the pages of the press and was subsequently proscribed. Media content, as an empirical top layer, does help to shed light on the political concerns of the regime. However, looking below the surface of the printed word to get at those deeper and not easily discernible structures and processes in the media system should yield a more reliable and integrated picture of the media and its connections with politics.

While my subject is the media, I hope readers may find in this study not only representation of state-media relations but also a broader statement about state-society relations in Vietnam. When mulling over media politics, I am guided by a major strand of literature dealing with socialist regimes in general and this places the issue of media activism against official censorship in a “civil society versus the state” rubric (see Chapter One’s literature review). Some scholars writing in this civil society tradition have focused our attention on the strength of civil society being conditional on its autonomy from the state. There is merit in this theoretical approach, but while not rejecting the concept of civil society and its autonomy of the state, this thesis emphasizes a different perspective. How can some activities that would normally be considered expressions of civil society proceed apace despite a lack of autonomy? This, after all, is the reality of the media in Vietnam. It is difficult to speak of media autonomy in Vietnam because the state owns all of the media and its information-
regulatory institutions and prerogatives are extensive. But that has not prevented the media from helping to propel some of the significant political changes that came with the country's reform policy in the 1980s, and being transformed in the process.

My stories of media struggles may invite an inclination to interpret them as contests of strength between state and media. Since I argue that an official decision can be imposed on the media, if the VCP so insists, that perception supports an interpretation of the Vietnamese state as a strong state at least where the media is concerned. The question of whether the Vietnamese state is strong or weak will find different opinions, but I do not see the need to debate along those lines. Instead, the thesis draws the reader's attention to the process (how the state does things) rather than product (how successful or "strong" the state is) of governance. My purpose is to make clear a methodology of governance that is a compendium of the following: the state machinery's anatomical structure, its operational ideology and the habits of power within the political elite that directs this machinery. By looking at the media regulatory regime I find formal, hierarchical organizations set up by the political authorities for this purpose. The VCP controls and manages (through party members) these organizations right down to the media itself. Besides the power to censor, the management extends to the setting of goals and the appointment of key personnel. Competition to influence decisions and their implementation within this system is mostly structured around the formal and informal organizations of the official hierarchies. This competition makes up the politics of the system and is kept from public scrutiny. A high degree of debate is allowed in selected areas of economic and social policy. Internal party deliberations define the larger ideological climate that influences the public discourse, which the media is allowed to convey. Marxist-Leninist state-building ideology, no matter how out of touch with the reality of Vietnamese society today, continues to provide the system and its demands with a formal legitimacy. Such party-centred dynamics approximate T.H. Rigby's theoretical model of "mono-organizational socialism" (see details in Conclusion). I am not seeking to validate Rigby's model. It just happens to make the most sense of the state-media dynamics under scrutiny here.

Some Historical Background

A historical sketch of politics and the media over the last 50 years will help readers to understand the references to names and dates that follow in the rest of this dissertation. In August 1945, at the end of World War Two, the Viet Minh, a united front of pro-independence forces led by the Communist movement, issued a call for insurrection against the Japanese occupying forces in Vietnam. This was the August Revolution and its success enabled Ho Chi Minh to declare independence on 2 September 1945 and call his new government the DRV (Democratic Republic of Vietnam). The following year, when independence negotiations with the returning French colonial government broke down, the DRV took to the countryside to wage armed resistance. My work addresses the media political that began in 1954 when the Communist Party, then known as the VWP (Vietnam Workers Party) won back the northern half of today's Vietnam from the French colonial regime. With that, the VWP ended its years in resistance and its media could then operate properly in formally-recognized territory free from harassment by French troops. The post-1954 situation began the era when the media could be developed and run as it is today, rather than being operated in stealth on a much smaller scale and with a different message anchored entirely on an anti-French nationalism. Meanwhile, the southern half of Vietnam under a non-communist government became the ROV (Republic of Vietnam).

The VWP imposed social segmentation and tight ideological control reminiscent of the experience of other socialist countries. The early years of socialist autocracy sparked a reaction from among the intelligentsia, some of whom initiated the first significant media challenge to the regime by publishing a string of controversial magazines over the years 1956 and 1957. That early attempt at dissent was known popularly as the NVGP (Nhân Văn Giai Phẩm, Nhân Văn meaning Humanism; and Giai Phẩm, Belle Lettres) affair, NVGP being the combined names of two well-known magazines published during that period. The small group of writers who produced these magazines dared to declare that it was unnecessary and wrong for the state to exercise dictatorial control over intellectual discussions, especially in the print media. They also

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1. This dissertation follows the popular practice of referring to countries where a Communist party is in power as "socialist". Occasionally, "socialist" and "communist" are used interchangeably. I have not bothered with the technical differentiation between what is "communist" and what is "socialist".
criticized the economic shortages produced by introducing socialism. The VWP
farmed down on this intellectual restiveness in 1958 by sending a few hundred
intellectuals to prison or labour reform camps. Many denounced themselves and others
in exchange for leniency. The publishing sector was progressively nationalized,
political education was stepped up and tighter censorship rules enforced. The $NVGP$
affair is the first of my five case studies.

Nevertheless, intellectual discontent festered, particularly among those who
worried that some of the country's leaders might be inclined to organize Vietnamese
society in emulation of Mao Zedong's radical brand of socialism in neighbouring China.
In the early 1960s, intellectual debate on this issue raged but tight censorship kept most
of it out of the press. Nevertheless, the critics of Marxism in Vietnam did try to promote
their ideological perspective in the press whenever opportunities permitted. For this,
they risked being branded as "revisionist". By the end of 1962, party policy came down
clearly against revisionism and an even more oppressive doctrinaire intellectual climate
started its reign, exacerbated by the atmospheres of mobilization as the DRV launched
a military campaign in the DRV to reunify the two halves of the country. In 1967, the
security apparatus detained a large group of intellectuals, comprising both senior and
middle-ranking cadres, in an incident now popularly known as the XLCD (Xét Lại
Chương Dang meaning Anti-Party Revisionist) affair. Viewed from outside, it was then
impossible to know much about intellectual dissidence within the DRV. My second
case study is an attempt to look through the opacity of DRV politics in the 1960s and
focus on state-media dynamics.

In 1975, the ROV government collapsed under military pressure from the DRV;
and the following year a reunified Vietnam was formally named the SRV (Socialist
Republic of Vietnam). The VWP, now renamed as the VCP, began to extend socialism
to the erstwhile capitalist southern half of the country. Part of this exercise included
recasting the southern media in the image of the socialist media system of the north.
Peace did not immediately bring a relaxation of censorship. Nevertheless the media
became gradually more outspoken, reflecting a growing public disgruntlement with the
economic failings of the state's socialist experiment. As the 1970s progressed, dire
socio-economic conditions weakened the legitimacy of the VCP and created a climate
for economic and political reforms. By the late 1970s, intellectual discourse grew

resitive again and this trend continued through the first half of the 1980s, albeit
cautiously.

The big impetus for media liberalization came with the adoption by the Sixth
VCP Congress of an official reform policy, known popularly as doi moi, in December
1986. In the economic sphere, doi moi paved the way for a radical switch from central
planning to market economies. In the political sphere, the policy permitted more
freedom of expression to defuse public discontent with the party. Thus began the most
clamorous years of the media since the $NVGP$ affair. During this period, media struggle
had several causes célèbres. Three of them make up the rest of my five case studies.
The first, the Hà Trọng Hảo affair, involved the press in a campaign to remove a
corrupt Provincial Party Secretary and CC (Central Committee) member. The second,
the Văn Nghệ affair, was the sacking of the controversial Chief Editor of Vietnam's
leading literary magazine VN (Văn Nghệ, meaning Literature and the Arts). The third,
the Truyền Thông Kháng Chiến affair, was the banning of a dissident publication,
TTKC (Truyền Thông Kháng Chiến, meaning Traditions of Resistance), run by army
veterans.

In the second half of 1989, the VCP leadership began to "in the
experimentation with political liberalization, frightened by the serious political
instability that political democratization in China and the Soviet bloc had precipitated.
This dampened the mood for waging forceful media struggles and brings us to the
intellectual climate of today. Currently, many foreign observers and Vietnamese believe
that the media is no longer capable of the sharpness with which some newspapers
reviewed social-economic-political problems during the 1987-1988 heyday of liberal
reforms. But neither did the party leadership find it possible or desirable to reinstate the
old regime of rigid control.

Research Methodology

The motivation to write a thesis on Vietnam's media comes from my pre-1990
journalistic experience in Singapore. Political authorities in both Singapore and
Vietnam have the means to persuade, cajole and order editors to reflect official lines.
The two media systems are far from identical — they do share this major feature of authoritarian press control. Having been a journalist in Singapore, I thought my experience in the belly of the beast would help me to understand another authoritarian press system better. So when I began my research career at Singapore’s Institute of Southeast Asian Studies in 1991, the politics of media in Vietnam seemed like a reflexive choice for PhD research.

The collection of data for this study began with my first long stay in Vietnam from August through December 1993. The primary objective of those five months was language immersion to improve my standard of spoken Vietnamese (which I had learnt in the late 1970s as an undergraduate), but I also took the opportunity to ascertain if it were feasible to research the politics of media, given that media is always a sensitive issue with authoritarian regimes. Professor Phạm Đức Dương, the then Director of Việt Nam Câu Đông Nam Á (Institute of Southeast Asian Studies which hosted my stay in Hanoi) assured me that it was a perfectly researchable topic and went on to arrange a series of interviews with media officials and practitioners. These meetings were useful to varying degrees. The media officials were prepared to discuss the issue of censorship and conveyed the official policy competently. Those who worked in or taught journalism gave an impression that media in Vietnam were making bold strides towards a new professionalism that emphasized information over ideological rectitude. These were not the only people I spoke to. As I moved in media circles, the opportunities to interact with other journalists increased. Since the shape of my thesis was still amorphous, I did not conduct intensive interviews or pursue specific lines of enquiry. The main purpose was to ascertain how far Vietnam’s journalists were prepared to go when talking about sensitive political issues or to their work. Nevertheless, from the unstructured interviews and free-ranging conversations, a picture of the media system emerged to reflect, more closely, the inhibitions of Vietnam’s political environment. At the end of that five months in Hanoi, my experience convinced me that there was a sufficient level of candour among journalists to make data gathering through personal communication meaningful.

During that first trip I also sized up what was available by way of printed sources. The newspaper collections of Hanoi’s three major libraries — the National Library (Thư Viện Quốc Gia), the People’s Army Library (Thư Viện Quân Đội Nhân Dan) and the Social Science Library (Thư Viện Khoa Học Xã Hội) — were adequate and accessible to foreign visitors. Hanoi’s second-hand bookshops were also good places to find material on the media. At one of them I acquired a photostated set of the banned GP, one of the two major controversial magazines that made up the NVGP controversy. Hanoi’s antiquarian book-sellers were also helpful in finding me entire sets of the magazines Cầu Việt (Vietnam Gateway) and SH (Săng Hương, or Perfume River) which were at the forefront of media struggle during đối mờ and suspended as a result. Another useful find was an entire set of the VJA (Vietnamese Journalists Association or Hội Nhà Báo Việt Nam) trade magazine known as Ngữ Linh Báo (The Journalist) and Nhà Báo và Cộng Luận (Journalists and Public Opinion) at various times — from 1985 onwards. The issues from 1987 to 1989 were notably the most forthright in airing the shortcomings of Vietnam’s media. Having done the feasibility study, I had to decide whether the media was researchable. My answer was a cautious yes.

At this juncture, I decided to focus on the print media for two reasons. My interaction with Vietnamese journalists left me with a clear impression that newspapers were the medium that was traditionally most politically engaged, being embroiled in more public controversies than the broadcast media (television and radio). It was also too difficult to retrieve and retain the contents of broadcast media for research. However, I believe the main observations in this thesis can apply to all these different forms of the media. That is why I have occasionally used the words “media” and “press” interchangeably without being inaccurate.

That said, I should note that the growth of television (and increasingly, the Internet too) is a major research topic in its own right. In the 1990s, television enjoys a prominent status among the various media as economic development makes television
sets common in the cities and available even in some remote villages. More so than print media or radio, television epitomizes a growing new consumerism which Vietnamese society covets and its socialist regime no longer cares to frown upon too explicitly. Television commercials or imported foreign programmes captivate Vietnamese viewers with images of the latest market products and lifestyle options from the advanced capitalist world. In a very powerful but unspoken sense, the media culture of television represents a break with the socialist-induced deprivation and backwardness of the past. This puts political authority in a bind. It wants the modernizing image that television brings but is equally aware of the implicit challenge that television poses to an old ideological mantle that the state is not yet ready to give up. How the state deals with this challenge did fascinate me, but I have to leave the topic either for other researchers to tackle or for another day.

From early 1994, I began to read what I had collected on the media as well as the research literature in the libraries of Singapore’s Institute of Southeast Asian Studies and The Australian National University. I also took the opportunity to talk to Vietnamese visitors at these places about the media. My purpose was to get a sense of how Vietnamese saw the connections between politics and media. Some of these interviews or conversations were also with Vietnamese who worked in the media.

I formally started as a PhD candidate at The Australian National University in February 1995. In April 1996 I headed out to Vietnam for my second field trip with two possible approaches for tackling the subject of media and politics. I had by then a clearer appreciation of what Vietnam’s media had been through, particularly, the major media battles lost and won during the early years of đổi mới. Already I had in mind a list of case studies that I found fascinating, such as the NVGP, Hà Trọng Hòa and Văn Nghệ affairs. The alternative was to be less case specific and opt for a more thematic approach. With the second approach I would be discussing the contemporary media according to a few general themes, e.g., the training of journalists, the changing work culture within newspapers, the role of ideology and the impact of market forces. The case studies approach captured my imagination more because they were such interesting tales of intrigue and drama, and told me more about state-media dynamics than the mass of dry statistics and general facts that would go into a thematic approach. My worry was that the case studies required talking to the specific people who knew enough about them of which were still politically sensitive. The probability of success was highly dependent on serendipity. A thematic approach was thus an option to fall back on should the data collection for the case studies come to naught. It was my two-pronged field work strategy.

From April to August 1996 I based myself in HCM City (Ho Chi Minh City) because it was one of the centres of media struggle during the early years of đổi mới. It still has some of the country’s most interesting and aggressive newspapers like TT (Tiếng Thiếu, meaning Youth). It is also where newspaper innovations in terms of design or new editorial ideas are tried out, ahead of the capital, Hanoi. I had two major objectives in HCM City. First, I wanted to read two of the city’s newspapers, SGGP (Sở Giao Lại Phố, meaning Liberated Saigon) and TT, that were very good in their coverage of media struggle from the years 1986 to 1989. I read them at the city’s Institute of Social Science library (Thư viện Khoa Học xã hội Thành Phố Hồ Chí Minh). Second, I had to talk to media practitioners who were involved in some of my listed case studies.

The first half of 1996 turned out to be the best and worst of times to research media politics. This was the period leading up to the Eighth VCP Congress from 28 June to 1 July 1996, a time of heightened political sensitivities, particularly for the media. There were many interesting questions to be asked about the media but journalists were also rather wary of discussing anything sensitive. I arrived in HCM City on 25 April 1996 to rumours that a Politburo member, Nguyễn Hà Phan, had been evicted from that elite body because he betrayed the party during the war against America. Evidently, the top leadership was locked in a fierce pre-Congress power struggle. As an indication of how sensitive the issue was for Vietnam’s media, Phan’s political eclipse was not reported until six months later (and then only in one terse sentence) when he was formally removed from his position as Deputy Chairman of the National Assembly on 24 October 1996. The political edginess might have been the reason why my host, the Institute of Social Science (Viện Khoa Học xã hội), was not able to arrange the interviews I sought with a few newspaper editors and the city’s Propaganda and Education Commission (Bàn Tuyên Giáo, an organ of the city’s Party
Executive Committee that is in charge of media). I relied, instead, on personal contacts to talk to journalists and writers.

The journalists of HCM City had interesting and insightful things to say about media issues in Vietnam and I benefited from many conversations with them. I very quickly abandoned any plan to conduct compact questionnaire-driven interviews. Queries about sensitive mìa entanglements with intra-elite politics should not be too pointed or too hasty. Thus I developed a more patient but discursive method of dialogue which involved dropping leading questions at appropriate moments. It produced some results. I also did away with the use of a tape recorder because I quickly noticed it was anathema to having a substantive interview or conversation. A better technique, although it was itself not perfect, was to jot down briefly, and in the most unobtrusive way possible, the important details, key points or even key words from particularly interesting observations, and then rush off to make detailed notes immediately after the meeting. Therefore, I never arranged back-to-back meetings.

Of my five case studies, the one concerning the banned dissident magazine, TTKC, took place in HCM City. Its Chief Editor, Nguyễn Hợp, was still under surveillance in 1996 and so I did not think it prudent to try and make contact. Vietnamese friends also cautioned me against talking to those who were too closely involved with Nguyễn Hợp in the publication of TTKC. I had to settle for talking to journalists who remembered that incident in the years 1998 to 1990. The chapter on the TTKC affair is thus based largely on the content of the magazine itself, the published memoirs of those who were involved in its production, the reports by the HCM City press, and the background information provided by some sources who knew something about the magazine but were not part of it.

In August 1996 I moved to Hanoi where I stayed till the end of December that year. The more discursive style of mixing interview with conversation sans tape recorder continued. While I noted earlier that the political climate of Hanoi in 1993 allowed for a measure of frankness on the subject of media censorship, it was still a sensitive subject and the constraints were always hovering about in personal communications. Covertiveness was a major worry for Vietnamese sources. Hence I regret that I cannot publicly acknowledge the help of many people. To ensure their anonymity I cite them as a numbered source and, following The Australian National University’s guidelines, the details are provided in a restricted list made available only to the head of my supervisory panel and the three external examiners. A copy is also lodged with the university’s administration. Full identity, place and date of personal communication are openly acknowledged only when it does not compromise the well-being of the source, or with his or her consent.

Most of my library work in Hanoi was done at the Social Science Library. I also sought access to the VCP archives and the National Archives III, the latter being a repository of government, as distinct from party, material. I could not get access to the first. From the second, I acquired some old pieces of legislation on the media. Ever since I started gathering material on the media in 1993, Vietnamese friends have loaned me their own collection of personal papers, documents and publications out of print. Some of these were useful.

By the time I was about to leave Vietnam in late December, combining the oral and written sources gathered since 1993, I had enough data on all my five case studies except the XLCD affair. Friends in Hanoi had cautioned me against making contact with high-profile dissidents like Hoàng Minh Châu who were involved in that 1960s controversy. Fortunately, after I left Vietnam, Vũ Thu Hiền (1997) published his 767-page memoir, Bên Giữa Ban Ngày, on the XLCD affair. I also found a few other memoirs or autobiographical essays written by Vietnamese who were affected by that incident, or witnessed it.

Vũ Thu Hiền’s book alerted me to the value of speaking to Vietnamese émigrés. Hiền lives in Paris and, on 9 April 1998, I interviewed him by telephone from Canberra. For more information on the XLCD affair I conducted two telephone interviews, on February 1998 and 13 June 1998 with Vũ Nhật Trí, who also lives in Paris.

1 Vũ Thu Hiền’s father, Vũ Đình Huỳnh, was Hồ Chí Minh’s personal secretary. Both father and son were arrested in 1967 as alleged revisionists. Hiền was then a writer who worked at the magazine Việt Nam’s Pictorial. With such a family and professional background, his book is rich with details on elite politics and media during the 1960s.

2 Vũ Nhật Trí worked at the Institute of Economics (Viện Kế Tế Học) as a researcher during the years when the XLCD affair took place. Tác head of that Institute, Bùi Cồ Trí, a CC member, was one of those implicated as a revisionist. Trí was a member of the French Communist Party before returning to
yet another Vietnamese resident of Paris, was interviewed by telephone on 25 February 1998. Bùi Tin provided critical information on the politics of media in general, and the Hà Trọng Hứa affair in particular.

The final selection of my five case studies was based on one key criterion. For all of them, I was able to draw on a mixture of documentary evidence and corroborative personal communications. The last of them, the TTVC affair, culminated in the year 1990. I would have liked to include more recent case studies such as the media exposés of the Tamexco scandal, the multi-million dollar corruption case in a huge state-owned enterprise that took place during my 1996 field trip. However, there were not enough reliable details about the rumoured involvement of a Politburo member to make for an adequate case study. There were other major media events about which I knew enough from personal communications but was not comfortable to write about because there was not sufficient published material. An example would be the tense power struggle in the paper TT that led to the removal of its Chief Editor, Kim Hạnh, in early 1992. The fact that Kim Hạnh lost her job because she tested censorship limits too boldly is well known. Few, however, know that a paper was rife with an acrimonious rivalry between Kim Hạnh and her deputy, Tam Đăng, with each connected to a powerful mentor in the Politburo. So my narrative ends with the TTVC affair of 1990, but that particular year is also a fitting cut-off point because thereafter the more cautious media climate began, continuing through to the present. Events like the TTVC affair help to explain what years of media struggle have left for today’s press.

The 1990 cut-off point also means I would have to leave out studying the impact of market forces on state-media dynamics because that phenomenon is significantly more dramatic in the 1990s. Large input of foreign capital, increased contact with the outside world and the rise of the consumer society are a post-1990 reality. In the world of the media, these forces translate into world-standard newspapers, better design, joint ventures with foreigners in newspaper production, advertisements as a major source of revenue and Internet versions of the country’s major papers. An increasingly market-conscious media challenges the old sense of order, which the party authority would like to expect. The increasing legitimacy of market economies is also at odds with some key ideological considerations: how much advertising to allow, the treatment of information as an economic commodity subject to market forces and the desirability of private ownership in the media. “Commodification” (thương tư hỗ) of the media is still a source of frequent official misapprehension but the VCP leadership could only terminate these developments at the cost of its desire to modernize the country. Its half-way response is to direct these market forces, alternating between limiting them and adapting them to produce a new kind of commercialized propaganda model for its media. Like the subject of television and Internet, this is a major area for research, which I will have to leave to others or for another occasion.

This does not mean market economics had no influence on the media of the 1980s. Chapter Two touches on that in very general terms. My three case studies on media struggles of the doi moi period did not relate at all to the market factor. However, during those early years of liberal reforms, media did feel the exhilaration of increased circulation as readers, for the first time in several decades, enthusiastically bought a newspaper to enjoy reading about a campaign against the powerful (e.g., the Hà Trọng Hứa affair) or a forceful debate with officialdom (e.g., in the VN and TTVC affairs). Nevertheless, the impact of the market then was nowhere as noticeable as that during the 1990s.

The five case studies have two fixed control variables. First, they involve media controversies at the central level or that of the two major metropolitan centres, Hanoi and HCM City. Second, these controversies were issues of major import, defined as matters deemed politically significant enough to merit intervention by Politburo leaders.

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1 Bùi Tin was Deputy Chief Editor of party daily, ND, who ran the paper’s Sunday edition until he defected to Paris in 1990. He is author of Following Ho Chi Minh: Memoirs of a North Vietnamese Colonel (1995; Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press). Bùi Tin also writes under the pen-name Thanh Tin whose two memoirs Hoa Xuyen Tay (Flowers Through The Snow) and Mắt Thế (The True Face) are cited extensively in this dissertation.

* The impact of commercialization on media and culture politics in China has already been the subject of a few book-length studies: Jianying Zha (1993), Yuezhai Zhao (1998) and Geremie Barme (1999). Unfortunately, none has been produced on that equally-fascinating topic in Vietnam.
The layout of chapters in this dissertation is as follows:

- **Introduction.**

- **Chapter One – Conceptual Issues and Literature Review.** This chapter explains the struggle paradigm and relates it to the broader literature on state-society relations in socialist countries. It also sets down a framework of analysis for media struggle. The framework comprises three major components: the hierarchy of media regulatory organizations, elite manipulations, and the response of media practitioners to the first two.

- **Chapter Two – The Structure of Media Management.** This chapter expands on the framework of analysis by describing two of its three components: the media regulatory system and elite manipulation of the media. In particular, it examines how đổi mới has modified media regulation and what remains unchanged. These systemic features provide a template to analyze the media practitioner's struggle in the five case studies.

- **Chapter Three – The Nửa Xuân Giai Phận Affair.** The intellectual protest symbolized by two famous literary magazines in 1956 was possible because its publishers knew how to exploit the VWP's need to be seen to be promoting criticism against the party. However, below the surface, senior political leaders and the Ideology Commission were directing an attack on the magazines. It is as much a look at the systemic features of media control as a description of the struggle paradigm in operation.

- **Chapter Four – Nén Xét Lại Chống Đảng (Anti-Party Revisionist) Affair.** This dramatizes the ideological contention in the 1960s between two camps each alleging the other to be revisionists and Maoists. As members of the political elite manipulated the ideological climate to suit their political objectives, intellectual discourse became progressively more constrained and the media regulatory system more draconian. With the opportunities for media struggle against the prevailing orthodoxy so limited, media practitioners resorted to more muted and encoded means of engaging the official agenda. Some, however, were outspoken and paid a price for it.

- **Chapter Five – The Hà Trọng Hòa Affair.** In 1986, just before the milestone Sixth Party Congress of đổi mới, a few major newspapers mounted an unprecedented press campaign to expose a corrupt CC member who was also a Provincial Party Secretary. They succeeded in having him sacked and this incident is remembered as a symbol of the đổi mới media. But beneath the boldness of the newspapers' struggle were old systemic features at work in the management of media. Politburo members backed different camps, and media regulatory bodies (the Ideology Commission and the mass organizations which own the newspapers) restrained or condoned the press according to which way the ideological wind was blowing.

- **Chapter Six – The Văn Nghệ Affair.** This very public controversy surrounding the 1988 sacking of the Chief Editor of a major literary magazine provides an opportunity to look at institutional prerogatives to hire and fire editors. The systemic politics were made more complex and telling when the mass organization that owned the paper found it hard to control the Chief Editor because he had the support of a higher authority within the party's Culture Commission. The Chief Editor and his mentor justified their editorial policy in the name of struggling for đổi mới. Behind the scenes were powerful forces contending within the VCP to determine the proper pace and scope for đổi mới.

- **Chapter Seven – The Truyện Thống Kháng Chiến Affair.** Like Chapter Six, this is about an aggressive Chief Editor in 1988 who defended his editorial policy in the name of struggling for đổi mới. This time, systemic control was short-circuited by the Chief Editor's ability to dominate the mass organization that owned the paper. This case study also provides an instance of an in-system struggle turning to defiance and taking a publication underground.

- **Conclusion.**

- **Epilogue.**
A gap of some two decades separates the case studies in Chapters Four and Five. Some readers may find this lack of a continuous historical perspective disconcerting. I am not, however, writing a history of the media and readers should not expect a full and continuous recounting of every major media-related development. The primary purpose of each study is to focus on the dynamics of media struggle, not serve as a link in a narrative chain to connect a previous incident with the next down the line. The five of them also cover two key periods in media development. The earliest two happening in the first 10 years after the VWP's formal take-over of power provide a perspective on the emergence of socialist state-media dynamics pointing us to the basic workings of the system. The other two cover the đổi mới period, the critical phase that challenged the socialist state-media dynamics in unprecedented ways to produce a media that is less explicit in its propaganda content. In each of the case studies in the 1980s, I describe background events from the 1970s or trace threads of continuity from the 1960s whenever necessary. So while my undertaking is not to write a comprehensive historical account of media politics, I make sure that each episode is not detached from its historical context.

Readers will run into a fair amount of Vietnam's political history from 1954 to 1990 because the narrative touches on quite a few major political developments over this long stretch of time. At certain points, the thesis discusses intra-elite politics within party leadership and, in some of these segments, it may even contribute new information or interpretation about rifts within the party. Certain prominent leaders are also mentioned in some detail. All of these may cause readers to expect a full account of apex politics through the years. Why did A join up with B over policy X and not policy Y? Why did C change his alignment after he had so strongly supported policy Z? These are fascinating and important questions, but I must state at the outset that it is not the project I have in hand. Furthermore, intra-elite politicking is one of the most sensitive areas of politics to penetrate. Nowadays, two factors make it possible to know more about discord at the top. First, dissidents' writings find their way more easily out of Vietnam. Second, the official attitude is generally more relaxed towards possible leakage of such sensitive information in official historiography or individual memoirs. Where they have been relevant to the subject of media and politics, I have used these precious morsels of information to enrich our understanding of the political backdrop against which the media politics were being played out. My case studies narrate in some detail how top leaders were intimately involved in commanding or preventing a story and, in doing so, draws the nexus linking elite politics and media content tighter. However, adding more to what we already know of elite politics frequently raises even more questions. Unfortunately, many of those additional answers are just not available at the moment; and if they were, they would beg more questions in search of answers. What I am stressing is the pioneering status of my study, since no major work has been written on media and politics in Vietnam. Travelling in virgin territory, I feel obliged to warn that my map-making effort leaves significant parts still uncharted.

Definitions, Terminology and Style

For reasons that I cite earlier, the media I am dealing with in this thesis is the print media. By that I mean both journalism and literature. Literature is included because, firstly, writers have always played a big role in testing censorship limits and the political guidelines for journalists and writers are largely similar. Secondly, at a certain level, the two professions of literature and journalism are so intertwined as to make it imperative to consider them together. Many writers earn an important part of their income by writing for newspapers. A genre of writing known as phóng sự (reportage) straddles both literature and journalism. These are usually long feature articles involving some form of investigative reporting, but written with literary flair. Besides being published as books, creative writing is circulated in literary magazines, which are regarded by the Vietnamese authority as part of the press and regulated by the same rules as for newspapers. Since literature is subsumed into the print media, I use the term "media practitioners" to refer not only to those working in journalism but also to anybody in the vocation of writing, e.g., political commentators as creative writers.

The term "state" in the title denotes the totality of political authority in Vietnam. Although the state in socialist countries is so party-dominated that it has spawned the term "party-state", I have opted for just simply the "state". However "party-state" occasionally appears in the ensuing chapters when I am citing scholars who prefer that choice of words. Using the term "state" rather than "party-state" makes it less unwieldy
when referring to state-society relations or state-media relations. The term “state” should not be confused, as it tends to be in ordinary language, with the term "government". Institutionally, the state is made up of the party and the government. The party is the VCP and the government comprises the legislative organ (National Assembly) and the administrative organs (the Prime Minister’s Office and the ministries or committees under its purview). Then there are the mass organizations that represent interest groups such as women, youth, religion and workers. They are controlled by the party but are not, strictly speaking, of the party or of the government. I call them state-related organizations.

There is a need to address the validity of talking about the state as an entity, given that its leadership and representative organs may not always agree on a course of action. These components of the state may pull in different directions, making it difficult to identify any coherent and consistent whole that may be called the state. Popular anecdotes and international press coverage abound with examples of how Vietnamese state action can be so discretionary and indeterminate because of division in the top leadership, rivalry between state organs, lack of co-ordination and agreement between central and local authorities, and corrupt officials abusing their power; the list of examples could go on. My response is we must deal with the Vietnamese reality as we find it. The divided, inefficient and corrupt state is still the state in one form or another. If each of these fractious components has not captured some imprimatur of the state as a basis of its authority, its divisiveness, inefficiency or corruption would be of no interest to us. Admittedly, these qualifications to the notion of a coherent state make it more difficult to discuss the state, but it is untenable to say that therefore we cannot speak meaningfully of the state. Where the media is concerned, I contend that there are policies issued clearly in the name of the state that had an impact on the media throughout the country. The doi moi policy of the Sixth Party Congress has liberalized the media generally, although the extent to which it has taken effect in a cosmopolitan centre like HCM City would be different from its impact in a remote provincial town. The point here is to select for any discussion concerning the state only those situations that can be broadly generalized as state policy. The five case studies in this thesis engage national-level policy and involve top-level national leaders. In all five cases the actions taken against the media were formally issued by representative state organs or endorsed by top leaders powerful enough to appropriate the imprimatur of the state and command the state apparatus into action. In all five cases the media involved were also fully aware that they were facing the power of the state, although at various points in these controversies the state did not speak with a unified voice. Indeed, the state can be contested territory among its various powerful components, yet this does not invalidate mention of the state as an entity. It only means that in describing the state we have to be careful to capture its internal fractious dynamics.

The term “elite” often appears in this thesis. Unless otherwise stated, it refers to the political elite. By that I mean individuals who enjoy political power or influence to a degree that they can shape state policies. This capacity derives from their party rank or connections, or their perceived contribution to the VCP-led revolution. In my case studies, they were mostly leaders who were in or had reached Politburo grade or, at the very least, headed an important organ at the Party CC level, e.g., the Ideology Commission or the Culture Commission. These positions gave them the capacity to influence media policies in a significant way. However, in the chapter on the TTCC affair, it is essential to localize the definition of political elite to refer to those leaders whose influence is confined to city-level politics because the incident concerns the press of HCM City.

This thesis uses the terms “liberal” and “conservative” frequently. Therefore, I would like to spend some time explaining their appropriateness, even if they were not perfect choices of word. I want to make the point that while some precision is sacrificed by using these terms to reflect complex ideological debates, they are meaningful in a general sense and adequate for my purpose.

Both journalistic and academic writings on Vietnamese politics have deployed such a “liberal versus conservative” framework to describe opposite poles in various policy debates. These words should be used cautiously for a series of reasons. They carry normative connotations with “liberal” taking on a favourable undertone and “conservative” being pejorative. They sometimes have country-specific and history-specific meanings, as in the Liberal Party of Australia or the British Conservative Party, which may be meaningless in the Vietnamese context. It is difficult to identify individuals as “liberal” or “conservative” with reliable accuracy because we do not
know them well enough. Furthermore, what a person says or does may be expedient rather than indicative of deeply-held beliefs.

One way to circumvent these problems would be to avoid talking about ideological debate, but that is impossible given the contents of this dissertation. Another solution is to find better substitutes for the two terms "liberal" and "conservative", but those that come to mind are not free of their own imperfections. Therefore I have chosen to stick with "liberal" and "conservative", settling for their popular dictionary meanings. To be "liberal" is to show a tendency to be tolerant of different kinds of behaviour or opinion, particularly new ones that challenge orthodoxy. To be "conservative" is to move in the opposite direction which means to be resistant to new ideas. Because the orthodoxy in Vietnam stresses tight political control, a "liberal" rejection of this orthodoxy would imply a support for greater social-economic-political freedom. By the same logic, a "conservative" position that errs on the side of orthodoxy would assume a desire to retain the old regime of tight control.

However, I use these words with some qualifications. Firstly, their disparity is relative rather than absolute. So, the "liberal" and "conservative" positions can agree on the need for Vietnam to introduce liberal economic and political reforms in the 1980s but differ on the requisite pace and the scope of these reforms. Liberal is, therefore, a "reform-driven" and conservative, a "reform-cautious" approach. These other terms are used whenever they are appropriate. Secondly, I acknowledge that there are inconsistencies and contradictory positions between these presumed poles of differences. A prominent advocate of liberal changes in the 1980s could be an ardent perpetrator of conservative policies in decades past; an individual may simultaneously support a liberal position in one policy and a conservative position in another. Deeds and thoughts may not match; a person may support a liberal position in debate for anything but liberal beliefs. Thus applying these terms to individuals risks inaccuracy. I have done this sparingly and, when I do, I would like to remind readers that the description refers to a person's observable identification with "liberal" or "conservative" positions and not his deeply held beliefs.

Generally, I have used these two terms to characterize a policy or an ideological climate. Occasionally, I have used them in an anonymous group-based rather than individual-specific sense. For example, the policy of Khrushchev — an important subtext in Chapters Three and Four — which provided a respite from the repressive Stalin regime would be described as "liberal". Vietnam's đổi mới policy is also considered a policy of "liberal" reforms. In Chapters Five, Six and Seven, I present the politics of đổi mới as being contested by "conservative" and "liberal" forces wanting to shape the ideological environment to their advantage.

The role of the Ideology Commission figures prominently in my five case studies. "Ideology Commission" is a generic term for the party organ that takes charge of ideological matters, including regulating the media. That organ has different names depending on when and at what administrative level it is being mentioned but the particulars of these name changes are not comprehensively known. In order not to confuse readers with a variety of names, I have opted for a generic term. I shall offer a more detailed explanation in Chapter Two when this organ is discussed more thoroughly.

Party and government institutions in Vietnam issue directives that carry an assortment of Vietnamese technical titles such as nghị quyết, chỉ thị or thông tư. These terms do not have definitive English translations. For this thesis I follow the English terms used by the Ministry of Justice's Institute of Law Research (Việt Ñhiên Cử Khoa Học Pháp Lý) in Hanoi that a researcher from the institute provided.

Vietnamese names and words are spelt with the necessary diacritics except for internationally familiar ones such as Ho Chi Minh, Hanoi, Saigon and a few others. In a handful of cases, diacritics are left out because the names were cited in non-Vietnamese language publications and the exact diacritic marks could not be ascertained. Where
repeated reference to an individual has to be made within a paragraph, my general approach is to cite the full name at its first mention and, thereafter, to shorten it to the last word of the name. Đạo Duy Tòng becomes Tòng. This is also how Vietnamese shorten their names for easy reference with one exception. They refer to Hồ Chí Minh as Uncle Hồ and never Uncle Minh. Similarly, I have shortened Hồ Chí Minh to Hồ and not Minh, which is also the international practice. For two-syllable names, the Vietnamese practice seems more variable. A Vietnamese friend explained that many bi-syllabic names are revolutionary names (e.g., Trường Chinh) and it is customary not to shorten them. As it is hard to ascertain when a name is authentic or revolutionary, I have decided to refer to all two-syllable names in full. One individual with a four-syllable **nom de plume**, Tiểu Đạo Bào Cự, is shortened to Bào Cự rather than Cự. My Vietnamese friend could give me no rational explanation for this except that it just sounds better that way.

Not all names of institutions and publications are abbreviated, e.g., VCP for Vietnam Communist Party and ND for **Nôm Đất**. Abbreviations are used only for those frequently cited and after their first mention in full. A list of the abbreviations is provided at the front of the dissertation for quick reference.


Where dates of publications are denoted entirely with numerals, they are written in this order: day, month and year.

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**CHAPTER ONE**

Conceptual Issues and Literature Review

Newspapers in Vietnam are owned and run by party-government institutions and state-related mass organizations. Media autonomy is, therefore, not a feature of state-media relations. This accentuates an image of a docile media serving as no more than a propaganda organ of the state. However, even as they operate from within the system, media practitioners have been able to pursue a form of activism that has led to tension and differences with the state or its figures of authority. The reality suggests a dynamic that allows for contention and opposition to emerge within a context where autonomy is lacking. This observation serves as an intellectual touchstone for my study.

State and Media, One or Two?

Like almost all sectors of Vietnamese society, the media has been transformed by the policy of đổi mới, making it significantly different from that which operated before the reform policy. Even though the political liberalization agenda of đổi mới has become more cautious since 1990, the scope for journalism is unlikely to revert entirely to the old restrictions of classical socialism.\(^1\) The đổi mới of the media was marked by battles fought over censorship limits. Editors and journalists tested these limits and were sometimes punished by political authority. Broadly speaking, state-media dynamics can be described as follows. Political authority in Vietnam has the power to decide what is beyond the bounds of constructive debate, and the line between what is permissible and what is not is more or less understood by politically-involved citizens. Media practitioners have to be highly sensitive to these censorship standards. While there are clear taboo issues which almost everybody would refrain from addressing,

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\(^1\) I borrow the term "classical socialism" from János Kornai (1992:19-20, 360-379). It refers to the political structure and economy of socialist states before significant reforms were introduced. This prototype was implemented with varying intensity by different socialist regimes but had the following common foundational elements: "the undivided power of the Communist party and the prevalence of an official ideology whose cardinal precepts include the establishment of hegemony, and then dominance for public ownership" (Kornai 1992:372). What emerged had been, without exception, a representative and regimented form of government.
there are also negotiable areas where the boundary shifts, depending on a variety of factors, e.g., the intellectual climate at any one time, the local authority in charge of a newspaper, the personalities involved and the details of each article seeking publication. I want to draw attention to a reality where the formal representatives of the state have the authority to set and enforce injunctions on public discourse, but what finally gets into print is not always determined by such a singular top-down process. Sometimes, media practitioners negotiate with the censoring authority and are able to publish what would normally have been proscribed. That negotiation process involves a variety of tactics on the part of editors, journalists and writers which, in popular everyday language, one can term a struggle by media practitioners to get into print. All of these would seem to suggest media and state are separate; with the media wanting to challenge state censorship policy.

But this is also not quite the exact picture in Vietnam because the state and the media in a socialist system are rather inter-related. As Thomas F. Remington (1988:136-37) points out in his book on the Soviet media, heads of media are integrated into state bureaucracy as "junior partners in the political elite". Judy Polumbaum (1990:34) says the same of China's media practitioners. They are referring to a systemic feature where editors not only have to be party members, but sometimes swap positions with officials from media-regulatory bodies. In this way, the party alternates the practitioners with the custodians, an interlocking of party and media careers which compromises autonomy and obscures the media's role as a watchdog on public issues. The situation in Vietnam is no different. But to say state and media are inseparable is dissonant with the many observable instances where editors did contend with the state represented by the official censoring authority. To address this amorphous situation in Vietnam's state-media dynamics, I find it apt to borrow from Vietnamese terminology a term that frequently emerges in discussing media restiveness against the state or state policy. That term is "struggle". This thesis posits a "struggle" paradigm in Vietnam's state-media dynamics, and the politics it describes may be termed the politics of struggle.

### The Struggle Paradigm

The recognition of a struggle paradigm in Vietnam's state-media relations is not a claim that this is a phenomenon unique to the country. The term "struggle" has broad usage in the socialist world evident in popular idioms such as "class struggle", "ideological struggle" and "anti-imperialist struggle". But the term "struggle" embraces more than just the dramatic events of mobilizing for a revolution. There is a more everyday personal aspect to it if one refers to a Vietnamese dictionary. "Struggle" means to "use material and spiritual strength to oppose or do away with something"; it is frequently used to mean a political act but it also has a highly personalized meaning as in "struggling with oneself". On hearing that a movie actor had committed suicide after a failed love affair, my landlady in Hanoi commented that the man should have "struggled" harder against his emotional problems. Vietnamese friends talking about the problems they encountered at work referred to the need to "struggle" for a better solution. In an official slogan "Struggle against negativism" (Dấu tranh chống tiêu cực), Vietnamese society is enjoined to struggle against corruption and all sorts of social evils. Debate within the Communist Party or any state institution to resolve a contentious issue is called "internal struggle" (dấu tranh nội bộ). "Media struggle" takes place when a newspaper takes upon a cause in support of a correct party line or some greater good for the country. Struggle covers a whole range of individual and group endeavours aimed at defeating something or somebody to arrive at something good.

The struggle paradigm I am positing is more than just the media participating in an official campaign. That only represents a media struggle in its most visible and straightforward form. Newspaper headlines will shout out the word "struggle"; editorials will celebrate the effort. Taken at that level, a media struggle is always for the state and supported by state prerogatives. But media struggles sometimes end up being perceived as against the state. When that happens, it is insufficient to take a struggle purely at its face value. It is necessary to be sensitive to a complex of subterranean forces. I call them subterranean because they operate beneath the straightforward surface of a media campaign and are not immediately obvious. The lack of visibility
officially-promoted media campaign and personally-driven media activism thus becomes hazy.

The double-edged nature of a media struggle recalls a Vietnamese term — "thác mắc" — that Georges Boudarel (1991) highlights in his study of literary protest in Hanoi from 1956 to 1958. Boudarel (1991:9-21) describes various situations where people could get away with expressing their sense of dishonor or even displeasure with official policies by calling their criticisms "thác mắc". He says:

"Thác mắc" touches all the weak points of a problem, not aggressively nor with any sense of mischief. It is handy to use in any situation. It allows you to say everything and nothing: to break taboos by respecting the rules; to stick to a line but also to be out of step with it.¹

Boudarel, who supported the VWP’s struggle for independence against his native France, lived in Hanoi for a decade after 1954 and his perspective is based on a personal familiarity with Vietnamese society at that time. The "thác mắc" phenomenon reinforces my observation that criticism of the state in Vietnam often seeks a camouflage device. "Struggle", like "thác mắc", is about criticism and contention and is acceptable terminology because it avoids the adversarial and oppositional subtext which makes words like "dissent" and "dissidence" immediately unacceptable within a one-party system.

The double-edged nature of a media struggle gives rise to the second key feature of the struggle paradigm. Struggle contains an element of risk. Media custodians or political adversaries can label articles written "for" the state as "against" the state. This is regardless of whether there is true intent to subvert. Such risky possibilities breed cautious behavior among editors. Those not wanting to test censorship would resort to a pro forma participation in media struggle, making sure that what is published stays

¹ When I arrived in Hanoi for my first field trip in 1993, it was not apparent to me that the word "thác mạc," still served as a camouflage for dissenting opinions. According to a dictionary definition, the word has three meanings: to be unclear about certain points in an explanation, to be uneasy about something, or to be at cross-purposes with somebody (Đặng Chí Luân and Lê Khả Kế, 1989).

safety within the acceptable bounds of criticism. Therefore, the controversies that arise out of a media struggle are usually the results of media practitioners who were prepared to test censorship limits as much as the double-edged facility of a struggle would allow them.

The third key feature of the struggle paradigm is the importance of having the requisite political skills. Appropriating a media struggle as a mantle for what one seeks to express is assisted by an ability to see opportunities in the nuances and subtle shifts of an ideological climate. At other times, it may be necessary to interpret a party policy flexibly or operate within party channels to gather information, protection and support. There are also periods when the climate for media struggle is so restrictive that media practitioners have to encode editorial content in ways that would get these messages past the pre-publication vetting process and also avoid being seen as anti-state after publication.

The fourth key feature of the struggle paradigm is the range of possible motives of those participating in a media struggle, some of which are not remotely connected with the objective of press freedom. I have noted the varying degrees of participation in a media struggle reflected in contrasting willingness to test censorship limits. This suggests diversity in motivations. At the most obvious and visible level, media practitioners would say the professed public goal of a struggle is their reason to be part of it, e.g., to help the state fight corruption or to help promote the party's reform policy. Motives become harder to fathom when people are exploiting the double-edged facility within the struggle paradigm because nobody can be seriously expected to admit to hidden agendas. In a Vietnam undergoing market reforms, participation in a media struggle could just as well have commercial rather than political motives. In other words, the journalistic space that comes with a struggle can be used to produce sensational stories that push up circulation and financial returns. At no editor would admit to that. When occasions permit — e.g., during the NVGP affair and the initial years of doi moi — Vietnam's editors and journalists have spoken of media struggle in terms of a demand for greater freedom of the press. A basic function of press freedom is to be able to play the role of social commentator or watchdog of official policies. My case studies provide instances when Vietnam's media practitioners and its larger intellectual community yearned to have the media play this role because they harboured deep concern over the course of the country set by its leaders. However, the motive for engaging in media struggle is not necessarily so noble. A media struggle may be used to hide a personal vendetta against political opponents or to influence the outcome of a political contention in one's own favour. Whether selfless or self-serving, there is a level of motivation that is politically-engaged. My focus is on those occasions when participation in media struggles suggests these sort of politically-engaged motives. Also, participation in media struggle need not have just one motive. A media practitioner can be struggling for a mixture of the above reasons.

The fifth feature of the struggle paradigm is the "within the system" characteristic of its politics. From what has been said of struggle, an insider's association and familiarity with state processes would be an advantage. My case studies describe situations where media practitioners fortified their struggle by exploiting connections with the party, falling back on their own revolutionary credentials or long-time party members, sheltering under the patronage of powerful party leaders, riding on the prerogative of party-government institutions or relying on officially-provided material resources. In this regard it is important to understand the inter-relation between a media struggle and a range of other struggles, mostly kept out of the media. These are the internal struggles.

In its broadest sense, internal struggle refers to any difference within an institution that is sorted out through internal processes and kept away from public view. It can take place at any level of the party-government and mass organization hierarchies. At its most politically sensitive level, internal struggle is the debate that goes on within the core of the party over policies and ideological lines, and is a yardstick of contending forces within the elite. It takes place formally at politburo

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Footnote:

1 Judy Polumbaum (1990:34-35) writing of China's journalists describes the unhappiness with the imbalance in their work which was skewed more towards serving the hegemonic rather than the petitionary objectives of the Chinese press. Hegemonic objective means helping the state to say what it wanted people to know. Petitionary objective means conveying the message of the people to the state. Polumbaum offers a cultural explanation for this personal dilemma, pointing out that while Confucianist traditions and the more recent Leninist ethos nurture in Chinese intellectuals an identification with the hegemonic objectives of the state, they also inculcate in those intellectuals a need to serve the petitionary needs of the common man by speaking out against what is wrong or bad, even if they are perpetuated by the powerful. Vietnam also comes from a Confucianist and Leninist backgound. In private communications, its journalists also conveyed a similar disgruntlement with media serving hegemonic interest of the state over the petitionary interest of citizens. An example of this was not being allowed to expose some corruption cases in high places that have caused great harm to public interest.
meetings and the party plenum, although the dynamics of an internal struggle include far more informal and complex interaction than that. Internal struggle at that level is instrumental in determining the outcome of an ideological conflict which then sets a party line by which everyone, including the media, has to abide. However, a position hammered out at the top often reflects compromises or attempts to reconcile contradictory positions. These circumstances that produce a particular line do not remain static. A clearer understanding of such an ambiguous and dynamic situation requires knowing the conditions of the internal struggle which produce the decision, and whether these conditions are potent enough to ensure that the particular line is forcefully implemented. Since the situation is dynamic, the media can play a role in influencing the direction of a party line before and after the party has reached a decision. It involves rousing public enthusiasm for a particular position or highlighting socio-economic problems that would have to point to a certain solution (source 1; and Ngoc Dán 1995:62-123 passim).\(^4\) This is where the skills and connections of media practitioners as party insiders come in. Senior editorial staff members are equipped to handle this function because they are usually office-bearers in a newspaper's party branch, or long-serving cadres with some seniority in the overall party hierarchy. This gives them access to information that is restricted to party insiders. Some are likely to be members of the Party CC and would participate directly in party plenums. Below the level of the politburo and the plenum, discussions, debates, criticism and self-criticism sessions take place at state and state-related institutions at all levels. They may be sessions for party members only or they may involve all staff members. They could be organized to disseminate and discuss Politburo and plenum decisions or to address problems specific to their own locality or area of responsibility. All these deliberations are also considered as internal struggle.

A hallmark of internal struggle is its confidentiality. In that sense it stands in antithesis to media struggle which, by its nature, is meant to be an exposed form of debate delivered for public consumption. The two forms of struggle, therefore, have different working assumptions and modus operandi. When issues are too sensitive to be

\(^4\) Both sources identified the role, which the media played from 1980 to promote a political environment that was friendly to market reforms. It involved highlighting the favorable results of market experiments but not doing it to the extent of frightening those leaders with ideological reservations about market reforms.

allowed into media struggle, the contention that they generate can only find expression during internal struggle. This usually happens when censorship becomes stricter and reduces the range of subject and the scope for discussion in the media. Chapter Four depicts such an ideological climate in the 1960s. The privacy of internal struggle allows for a higher level of forthright debate that becomes a more accurate measure of actual differences. Since the state does not want its actual differences to be known, that is why there is a strict injunction against the media divulging internal information. But the criteria for judging what is sensitive can be discretionary and also fluctuates according to the ideological climate. The case studies on the NLF and die n.dti periods provide instances where internal struggles got into the pages of the press.

A few other forms of struggle are worth noting in state-media dynamics. For example, members of the press or newspapers may find themselves the target of a struggle if powerful political opponents are able to command state resources to launch such a campaign. A media organization may have its own internal struggle if the editorial board cannot agree on an issue. Party ideological authority or media custodians may influence such an internal struggle to pull a recalcitrant editor into line.

The Question of Autonomy

In this section, I want to introduce a school of thought that has raised the need to focus on oppositional politics which can grow within an authoritarian socialist polity not despite, but because of, a lack of autonomy from the state.

My engagement with theoretical concern for the question of autonomy from the state begins with the literature on civil society. The problem of differentiating state and media in Vietnam finds echoes in the literature on civil society in socialist states. The language and grammar of civil society can be one way of interpreting state-media relations, particularly when the media show signs of activism against state control. A strand within the vast literature on civil society addresses concern about the autonomy (or the lack of) of societal actors – the media could be considered one of them – when they operate in contention with the state. My terms of reference are taken largely from academic literature produced around the rising wave of dissident activities in the Eastern European socialist bloc and China during the 1980s. Many writers interpret
those challenges to the state in a "civil society versus the state" analytical framework, following the post-18th century tradition of dichotomizing the two entities. A number incorporate autonomy from the state as one of the attributes of civil society (e.g., Maley 1991; Holmes 1992:69; Kelly and He 1992:24; Miller 1992:1, 5-7; Rigby 1992:11; White 1993:64; and Diamond 1994:5-7).

Conclusions about societal autonomy and its contribution to civil society remain qualified and tentative. Firstly, there is the question of how autonomous does "autonomous of the state" need to be. Robert Miller sees civil society as a sphere of societal activity "free of governmental domination" (Miller 1992a:13) but recognizes that civil society is promoted by liberal elements within the communist party establishing spheres of activities free of state control (Miller 1992:7). Secondly, writers like T. H. Rigby (1992:11, 14) are also careful to qualify their use of the term "autonomous of the state" as something "more or less" and "a relative rather than an absolute quality". Thirdly, autonomy from the state does not guarantee civil society, as Ernest Gellner (1993:33) points out when he says that "traditional man can sometimes escape the tyranny of kings, but only at the cost of falling under the tyranny of cousins". He illustrates this with instances from the ancient world and the classical heartland of Islam, where individual freedom was severely restricted by kinship groups.

Fourthly, too much societal autonomy can destabilize the state-civil society relationship. For example, Larry Diamond (1994:14) argues that a "hyperactive, confrontational and relentlessly rent-seeking civil society" can overwhelm a weak penetrated state with the diversity and magnitude of its demand, leaving little in the way of a truly 'public' sector concerned with the overall welfare of societies". Fifthly, growth and decline of societal autonomy can follow many configurations of state-civil society dynamics and not just a simple inverse relationship of civil society growing stronger at the expense of the state. As David Wank (1995:75) points out in his study of China, private businesses gained more autonomy because local authority made money in collaboration with them; thus the richer coffers of the state at the local level reduced its financial dependence on the central state. However, the overall societal autonomy which grows out of this arrangement is not so much the growing autonomy of society vis a vis the state as the heightened autonomy of the locales composed of alliances between local state and society actors vis a vis the central state. Finally, Rigby (1992:14) argues that a robust civil society must reach beyond being autonomous of the state to "substantially colonize the (political) order and remake it in its (civil society's) own image". He refers to parliamentary government as the quintessential consequence of successful colonization of the political order by civil society. If that is the case, then civil society would seem to have travelled full circle to its pre-18th century definition of being coterminous with the state.

Of all such cautionary views raised about factoring "autonomy" into state-civil society relations, X.L. Ding (1994:26-35) may have gone the furthest by warning against being too preoccupied with the condition of societal autonomy. He contends that as the clear separation of civil society and state is very rare in socialist countries, Western scholars misted themselves when they used that framework to assess the oppositional movements in the Soviet bloc. Thus the collapse of Communism surprised them because their criteria drew the inevitable conclusion of weak civil society since opposition was hardly ever autonomous of the state. According to Ding (1994:26), this literally misses the point because it

...omits and obscures what is precisely the most characteristic, dynamic and intriguing phenomena in the devolution and disintegration of the mechanism of party-state control in late communism, a process full of uncertainty, ambiguity, opacity and confusion.

Thus his book sets out to demonstrate that the effervescence of oppositional activities in pre-1989 China involved a fluid and energetic networking based on personal connections to powerful party figures, or astute exploitation of the prerogative of bonafide state institutions by those working inside to provide a cover for their political activism. He calls this phenomenon "institutional parasitism", referring to the parasitic way by which anti-state activism draws sustenance from official bodies. Ding also observes that studies of the Soviet bloc record a similar phenomenon (Ding 1994:29-
31). He speculates interestingly that the collapse of Communist regimes in the Soviet bloc, but not in China, could be due to the greater ability of Soviet bloc activists in working this "institutional parasitism" phenomenon. In other words, the cause may be better understood by looking behind the scenes — where autonomy is compromised or only partial — than hunting for the rare displays of autonomy.

Ding's perspective corresponds with my understanding of struggle as harbouring a double-edged tactic, whereby a form of activism to challenge the state agenda is actually sustained by connections with the state or identification with state goals. Nevertheless, like Ding, I must stress that I am not advocating a total rejection of the concept of civil society and the related issue of its autonomy. I am only stating that it is worthwhile and necessary to look at the other side of the "autonomy" coin, i.e., the lack of it and how it can propel its own potent form of opposition activities from inside the system. Diamond (1994:14) refers to this possibility as a "penetration" of a weak state by civil society. Andrew Nathan (1990:5-6) explains this more clearly by pointing out that the Chinese Communist Party has always enforced its control of society by placing its members throughout every institution, including those that were nominally independent. The result was, paradoxically, "mutual infiltration". Not only did the party-state infiltrate society, but society was beginning to infiltrate the party-state as well. Finally, Thomas Remington (1990:177&184), in his review of theories of transition from Communism, identifies the need for theory to begin to look at how regime and society influence and penetrate each other and how that relationship changes during the transition.

Where Vietnam is concerned, Benedict J. Trin Kerkvliet (1995a:40-41) argues that while at one level it makes sense to see state and society as distinct and relating to each other as separate entities, at another level it is necessary to recognize that "state and society are often intermingled". A small body of works that addresses the theme of civil society in Vietnam also draws attention to the autonomy factor and the challenges it poses when using the terminology of civil society. Carlyle Thayer (1992b), applying T.H. Rigby's model of mono-organizational socialism to Vietnam, describes a tightly-organized and controlled political system which gives little opportunity for activity autonomous of the party-led command structure (Rigby's model will be explained in greater detail later in this dissertation). Thus Thayer's conclusion is that civil society has to remain at "a nascent stage" until the further erosion of monomorphical socialism. Nguyễn Ngọc Già (1995:16), writing specifically about the media as a manifestation of civil society, adopts a somewhat similar perspective of civil society stymied because the Vietnamese state has "dispossessed (society) of every means of autonomous organization" (một số mô hình xã hội không tự tổ chức). Carole Beaulieu (1954) too shares this doubt about the strength of civil society in Vietnam because she finds that while a new breed of NGOs have autonomy in running their programmes, they are often tied up with a minimal but de rigueur level of official patronage and minding. Two papers presented by participants from Vietnam at The Australian National University's Vietnam Update conference in 1994 on civil society in Vietnam convey a similar sense of ambivalence albeit in more discursive ways (Nguyen Ngoc Truong 1994; and Tran Thi Lan 1994). Nguyễn Ngọc Truong sees the contribution of đồ mới to the growth of civil society in terms of the return of private economic initiative and the flourishing of formal and informal societal groups to help solve social problems. Yet he seems to be divided between saying there is and there is no autonomous societal association. At any rate, he thinks "it will be a mistake if we only emphasize their absolute independence or their private nature or confront them with the ruling Party and the State" (Nguyễn Ngọc Truong 1994:17-18). Tran Thi Lan is more forthright in saying at the start of her paper that "if we understand an NGO to be an independent body not linked to Party or State, it is clear that in Vietnam there are difficulties associated with the acceptance of this definition" (Tran Thi Lan 1994:1). Whether or not Vietnamese civil society evinces sufficient autonomy, David Marr (1994:11) reminds us that officialdom in Vietnam is aware of the political risk in the proliferation of societal groups organized informally outside the ambit of the state. He adds that most party writers take the view that the VFF (Vietnam Fatherland Front or

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At the time of the conference, Nguyễn Ngọc Truong was the Chief Editor of the magazine Tạp Chí Quốc Tế (World Affairs Weekly) owned by Vietnam's Foreign Ministry. Trần Thị Lanh was an employee of the Ministry of Forestry who concurrently ran an NGO "Towards Ethnic Women" (TEW) that aimed to promote the welfare of ethnic minority women. She set up TEW with foreign funding.

Truong's use of the clause "confront them (NGOs) with the ruling Party and the State" is idiomatically odd and the references to "Party" and "State" are not adequately defined. However, seen in the broader context of his whole paper, I think he means to say that we should not see NGOs as necessarily taking a confrontative role against either party or government authorities. In a following reference on this page by Trần Thị Lanh, the use of the terms "party" and "state" also means "party" and "government" respectively.
Mặt Trận Tổ Quốc Việt Nam) must be revived and informal organizations assimilated. In other words, the "autonomy" of societal groups does pre-occupy the state even though the de facto policy, as Truong and Lanh indicate in their papers, is neither to prohibit nor encourage them.

This small body of works points to a situation in Vietnam where manifestation of societal autonomy and its acceptance by the authority remain equivocal. Such circumstances are consonant with the kind of "within the system" "double-edged" activism described in my struggle paradigm. There is no point pretending that the separation of state and media is always clear but, at the same time, this does not mean it is impossible to talk about state-media dynamics. I reiterate that my approach would be to take the system for what it is where there is a lack of clear division between media and state and yet they are not exactly one and the same. It is not my purpose to try and devise ways of conceptualizing "state" and "media" as two clearly divided entities. Instead, my aim is to elucidate how this lack of division functions in some empirical situations.

What remains to be done is to explore the struggle paradigm more closely and systematically. To do this, I employ three major components of state-media dynamics to describe media struggle in my five case studies. These components are: the hierarchy of media and organizations, elite manipulations and the response of media practitioners to the first two. Taken together, they encompass all the key players in a negotiation process to determine what finally emerges in the media. The first two make up a form of top-down direction of the media, the last is a bottom-up response from the media itself.

What I have omitted to discuss is the role of newspaper readers. Readers' response is pertinent to media politics because the contention between state and media over what should be printed ultimately boils down to concerns about the impact that a story would have on readers. This relates to a largely unanswered question of how public opinion is made and measured in Vietnam. Further research in this area could look at readers' letters, editorial policy on which letters to publish, opinion polls conducted by the VCP, and the state's regular mobilizational effort — sending out propagandists to explain the party line — aimed at directing public opinion. Unfortunately, I was not able to get reliable data on any of these topics. So the subject of the reader's role in media politics will have to remain a lacuna in my study. I have ensured that this omission does not affect the validity of my conclusions.

Media Regulatory System

János Kornai's (1992) book on political economy under socialist regimes urges the need to understand reforms by first knowing the anatomy of the system. He identifies organizational features intrinsic to any socialist system even though socialist countries may differ greatly in other respects. While the outcomes of socialist experiments may be explained in terms of the personalities of top leaders, or the mistakes made by the leading organizations or the planners, Kornai argues that how the system is structured produces some of the dynamics as well. By that he means the hierarchy of organizations that make up state authority, their institutional prerogatives and the ideology that guides the formulation and implementation of policy. Kornai also extends his system-analysis approach to the evaluation of socialism in transition, arguing that since the fundamentals of the system produce their own internal conflicts and operational dysfunction, they need to be understood in order to comprehend why reforms are needed and how they are faring.

My study is guided by Kornai's rationale but does not seek to replicate his level of detail nor to explain why reforms in the media per se are needed (although a sense of why and how the media is reformed as part of the đổi mới policy does emerge in the overall narrative). Since the struggle paradigm is about how various newspapers contend with the state from inside, a way to depict this process more clearly would be to look methodically at the organs and other systemic features of state that regulate the media.

At one level, literature discussing the Vietnamese media today points to an accelerated waning of ideological and organizational control since the introduction of đổi mới. But there is a need to develop a more textured interpretation of such a picture,
even though it is broadly accurate, because ideology and regimentation can still be intransient within the system. The intransigence comes through when official statements from the Vietnamese state continue to remind us of the socialist media's founding ideological tenets. Apt examples would be found in the collection of essays by Tô Ngọc Tấn (1993) and the periodic speeches made by the country's leaders on the duties of the press. The professed ideological underpinning for the media of the 1990s is no different from that of the 1950s. It is also easy to get an impression from talking to Vietnamese media practitioners that systemic control of the media has never ceased from revolving around the party's Ideology Commission. Apart from the Commission's regular weekly briefing of the press, a regimen of official campaigns, decrees and instructions initiated by itself or other party centres of authority determine the discourse climate in general and press regulations in particular. This is as it has always been, and such unchanging features of Vietnam's media regulatory system support the use of Kornai's (1992) approach which is to look at what is intrinsic to and therefore difficult to reform in the system.

The research literature on Vietnam suffers from a dearth of material on systemic analysis of the type that Kornai attempts in his book. Gareth Porter's (1993) book comes to mind as a rare study of institutions of authority and governance in Vietnam. However, Porter did not write about the bureaucratic hierarchy controlling media per se, although his perspective of a powerful all-dominating state in every sphere of activities is consonant, but not identical, with Douglas Pike's (1973) conceptualization of Vietnam's information system as one labouring under an overarching form of state control. Pike's model of information flow in pre-dổi mồi Vietnam remains the only attempt (known to me) at theorizing about the Vietnamese media as an entire system. He identifies five features that define the system:

a) It is a device for social control managed exclusively by the party-government machinery; pervasive and monopolistic; intrudes into all areas of life at all times and does not allow non-participation.

b) It is motivation-oriented and not information-oriented: seeks to inform only to a degree necessary for motivation and mobilization of the population.

c) It introduces its own exclusive semantic base, providing new words and new definitions of old words; it is high in value judgement and also its emphasis on codification, precedence and hair-splitting legalism.

d) The basic medium of communication is the social organization/movement although the system makes use of the mass media. This system of communication rests on a simple claim to truth and thereafter employs passionate emotional appeals. Fundamental Marxist concepts may be present — e.g., class consciousness, proletarian internationalism, etc. — but are of lesser importance. The system relies on group situations to make people accept emotional, irrational argument more readily.

e) It regards the individual not as a passive recipient of information. He/she is expected to struggle with himself/herself to absorb the information provided and help propagate the message. Dissemination of information under such a system is reliant on the social movements tasked to carry out this job under the guidance of agitprop cadres. Therefore, depending on the ability of the agitprop cadres, communication can be very good/effective or very bad. Owing to the difficulties in finding and training large numbers of good cadres in this field, communications tend to be badly done.

Pike's observations follow in the tradition of Wilbur Schramm's (1956) much-criticized theoretical model of the communist media as a totalitarian system. Schramm argued that communist media was sui generis, not only because it differed fundamentally from the values and practices of the libertarian press, but also because it employed a pervasiveness and absolutism in control not experienced in other non-communist authoritarian societies. The totalitarian perspective was not just a theory of media; it dominated all of Sovietology from the 1940s to the 1960s. The writings of that period tended to highlight the excessive political control in communist societies (Cohen 1985:4-27). Writings about the communist media systems of the 1950s also stress the inordinate degree of party-centred control over media which left little room, if any, for media practitioners to assert editorial independence (Inkeles 1951; Schramm 1956; Yu 1963; Buzek 1964; and Lendvai 1981, to name just a few). Turgid ideological content in the Vietnamese press of his time went some distance to verify Pike's theoretical depiction of 1973. However, the criticisms of Schramm's totalitarian
perspective would also apply to Pike's conceptualization. They over-emphasize the normative functions of the communist press and are too far removed from the reality of the reformed socialist media beginning in the 1980s. Pike's short essay also does not provide the necessary empirical details to illustrate the sweeping state control of information.

The biennial Vietnam's media has been growing in recent years but has generally failed to rectify the lack of research attention paid to the structure of the media system. An example is the body of works on the 1956 NVGsa affair produced from both inside and outside Vietnam: Hoa Mai n.d.; Hoang Van Chi 1959; Nhu Phong 1962; Hoang Ngoc Than 1969; Boudarel 1990, 1991; Xuan Vu 1991; Kurihara 1992; To Hoai 1993:47-126; Jamieson 1995:257-71; Nguyen Van Tran 1995:271-313; Nguyen Hung Quoc 1996:141-65; and Kim Ngoc Bao Ninh 1990). However, except for Nguyen Hung Quoc (1996:15-51), none of these works examines how the media system that proscribed NV and GP was structured. The two recent and most thorough studies of the incident (Boudarel 1991; and Kim Ngoc Bao Ninh 1996) look at it from the perspective of intellectual protest, focusing on what the NVGP writers wrote and highlighting the role of a few of them. Both studies provide readers with a rich appreciation of the intellectual climate of that period and some of its attendant politics. But they are not focused on system analysis.

Another body of media literature looks at the present press situation and emphasizes the impact of doi moi. Once again the issue of regulatory structure is neglected and many studies seldom go beyond documenting observable instances of press restiveness or censorship. Three pieces of work help to fill this information gap on the anatomical structure of the regulatory system: Nguyen Xuan Tho (1992:6-9); Nguyen Hung Quoc (1996:15-51); and Source 1. However, all these are limited accounts, being small sections of larger works exploring more general themes about the media. The literature on ideological influence within the media is also sparse, with the largest source of material being the official ideological texts themselves. That provides a largely normative or prescriptive picture of what the Vietnamese media officially wants itself to be. Nevertheless, this kind of literature still points out what are the ideological preoccupations of the regime and provides an approximate guide to the sensitive areas where media practitioners have to exercise a greater level of caution.

For a more detailed description of the socialist media's structure and ideology I have turned to studies of the Soviet model, the prototype of Communist media systems born out of Leninist doctrines and Stalinist praxis. Some major studies, like those of Alex Inkeles (1951) and Antony Buzek (1964), highlight the ex officio influence of Lenin's works on the media. The organizational structures of the Soviet and Vietnamese systems have basic similarities derived from the principle of "democratic centralism," a phrase the authorities in Vietnam frequently reiterate to the Leninist ethos to which its media aspires. Chapter Two explicates the structure of Vietnam's media management system in terms of ideology, organizational hierarchy and legal regime. I argue that despite the discernible changes in newspaper style and content, the Vietnamese media continue to be regulated by a custodial party ideology, an unchanging hierarchical structure of state institutions comprising party, government and mass organizations and a party regimen of rules and regulations that can override the country's laws. This provides a structural blueprint to understand the media regulatory system that is then taken through the five case studies.

Elite Manipulation

A strand of relevant literature not so much studies elite manipulation as makes the assumption that individual leaders can use the pages of the press to promote a certain point of view. From there it follows that a careful reading of newspapers can reveal contending views at the top and other nuances of intra-elite politics. Many students of the politics of socialist regimes use this methodology of content analysis. The record of applying context analysis to the Vietnamese media can be both impressively accurate as well as highly problematic. For example, based on his reading of the official media, Thomas K. Latimer's (1972:128) deduction that Minh Tranh, the director of the VWP's publishing house, was purged in 1963 is proven to be amazingly

11 Tho was a departmental head at Vietnam Television until the end of 1991. Quoc describes how literature is managed and the structure parallels that for journalism.
accurate by a recent defector's account (Vũ Thư Hiển 1997:131-32). Robert F. Rogers' (1974) methodical analysis of articles written by four senior leaders on five crises between 1954 and 1972 comes up with an extraordinary conclusion that they shared a highly-uniform pattern of pro-Soviet doctrinaire views. However, 20 years later, autobiographical accounts by Vietnamese insiders leave no doubt that during the period Rogers wrote about, Vietnam's leadership was locked in an acrimonious debate over the issue of supporting Khrushchev's revisionist line or its antithetical Maoist line (Thành Tiến 1991, 1993; Hoàng Minh Chính 1993; Nguyễn Minh Cẩn 1995; Nguyễn Văn Trân 1995; Trần Thủ 1996; and Vũ Thư Hiển 1997; the details of these autobiographical accounts make up the greater part of Chapter Four). The point to stress here is that press content alone is rarely a sharp enough indicator of the complex nature of intra-elite differences. One reason for this seems to be the Vietnamese leadership's relative refrainment from using the media as a means of political struggle against each other; certainly not to the extent that was obvious in neighbouring China where Mao Zedong used the media to launch public campaigns against political rivals.

My response to the inadequacy of content analysis is to turn the methodology on its head. This is possible when empirical data is available to track how individual leaders interfere directly with the press, rather than work backwards from tell-tale signs in the pages of the press. A growing body of writings by Vietnamese media practitioners, published both at home and abroad, makes this more reliable approach possible. These works provide a picture of how some members of the leadership were intimately involved in directing the media.

Beyond the media practitioners' accounts, the research literature addresses the issue of elite manipulation of the media rather sparingly. Boudarel's (1991:98-119, 137, 245) study of the NVGP affair provides a rare exception. Apart from that, many things written about the politics of đổi mới make passing references to the regular newspaper column written by Nguyễn Văn Linh, Party General Secretary from 1986 to 1991 (details in Chapter Five). Bearing his initials NVL, the column Things To Be Done Immediately (Những Việc Cần Làm Ngay) was meant by Linh to create a glamorous mood for reforms on which his leadership could then ride to win greater support within and outside the VCP. Some journalists are also aware that their critical articles can be used by the political elite to advance sectoral interest, writes Beaulieu (1994:6), but her supporting illustration is too brief. However, the cursory picture that emerges is still sufficient to alert us to a few pertinent points about elite-media relations. First, elite manipulation should not be seen simply as filling the custodial role of the media regulatory bureaucracy. Instead, a top leader may have his own reasons sometimes for intervening on behalf of the media to strengthen its negotiating position with its regulatory bodies. Second, individual leaders also need not share similar media agenda and may disagree with each other on what is permissible in print. This thesis attempts to take this issue of elite-media connections further, but is not about identifying factions or patterns of interest that characterize the leadership. This is not to deny that factional or other forms of alignment could have been at work in any or all of my case studies. What I am saying is that there is no methodological need or is it yet possible for me to identify precisely the group dynamics within the leadership. In other words, elite manipulation is studied from the individual perspective of each leader who interferes with the media.

Media Practitioners' Response

The literature on media deals more with this third component of state-media dynamics than anything else, e.g., studies of the NVGP affair which emphasize the content of intellectual dissent rather than focus on top-down regulatory forces. Some of these (Boudarel 1991; Jamieson 1995; and Kim Ngọc Bao Ninh 1995) help us to understand the intellectual climate and diversity of personal motives that led the Vietnamese literati to rally to the Communist Party's independence struggle, and some to protest subsequently against the party's regimented policies. Jamieson (1995:97) believes that French colonial domination "insidiously undermined feelings of self-esteem, self-worth and self-satisfaction" in Vietnamese society and plunged a generation of its literati into alienation and bleak despair that masked a romantic individualism. The Communist Party's call to everybody to rally to its armed
resistance against the French provided these writers a way out of their alienation and failed individualism, and imbued them with a new sense of self-worth (Jamieson 1995:159-70, 218-10). Kim Ngọc Bao Ninh (1996:103, 127-50, 165, 171-78, 204-13) disagrees with this perspective of socialism as a form of self-rejuvenation. She argues that many writers were put in a more ambivalent state of mind after coming into close contact with the reality of socialism. From 1949 they began to experience how intrusive the Communist Party's evolving cultural policy was for their creative work. The socialist revolution demanded of them fundame ntal changes in the way they viewed themselves and their creative work. The ideological regimentation grew steadily from being pe rfunctory (e.g., objecting to the form of free verse in poetry and to content that was too introspective) to an "austere organization with a menacing sense of enveloping authority" (e.g., gathering writers in the jungle in the middle of the cold night and forcing each to repeat self-criticisms until the crowd was satisfied) (Kim Ngọc Bao Ninh 1996:205-206). Boudarel (1991:155-64) holds a largely similar perspective, although he agrees mildly with Jamieson that some writers who rallied to the socialist cause often wrote from deep inspiration and were not just pandering to the will of ideology. In dealing with the discontent of writers in colonial days and the early years of the socialist regime, all three works help us to connect the 1980s media struggle with earlier beginnings and the deeper psychological motives of media practitioners than just the situational and specific politics of đổi mới.

Unfortunately such close-up studies of the media practitioner's response are not repeated for post-NVGP media developments, particularly the 1960s and 1970s. The subject of intellectual protest was only picked up again in the early 1980s in John Spragens Jr.'s (1982) report on a discernible trend within creative literature to criticize the country's socio-economic failures. As the pressures for political and economic reforms mounted within Vietnam throughout the 1980s, foreign research and media attention were trained on the issue of the intellectual restiveness that accompanied đổi mới. Most writings about the đổi mới media highlight its transformation in production, style and content, e.g., the upsurge in the numbers of newspapers available, greater scope for criticizing the party-government bureaucracy, exposure of socio-economic problems, and the "rationalization" of market forces on newspapers as a product (Unger 1991:49-52; Kennedy 1993:223; Beaulieu 1994a; Smollar 1995; Heng 1998 and Sidel 1998). Collectively they pose a question as to how much state-media dynamics have changed even as the media is given more scope than ever. The assessments are varied. On the one hand is Smoliar's (1995) most buoyant description of a media environment in which meaningful critical journalism is possible and editors are willing to test the limits of censorship for the sake of public interest. On the other, P'nos (1999) passes the harshest judgement that reforms were minimal and cosmetic from the start, and his entire monograph is given to decrying how the old routine of pervasive control returned after August 1989. Except for Sidel (1998), who provides a microscopic look at how a few Hanói papers covered a scandal involving the police in 1993, all the others adopt a general approach of looking at a collection of media-related developments. Hence they are not close-up analyses of state-media dynamics and do not address, in any systematic way, components such as the media regulatory system, elite manipulation and media practitioners' behaviour (Sidel also concedes that his detailed case study falls short of an adequate picture of the internal processes and pressures under which Vietnamese media practitioners work). My five case studies attempt such a missing close-up look at state-media dynamics.

Even though I have broken up state-media dynamics into separate components for an analytical purpose, it is useful to mesh the observations within some broader theoretical generalization of state-society relations in order to have a framework with which to make sense of a wealth of details. Of the various schools of thought on the issue of state-society relations in socialist states, I have found Rigby's "monorganizational socialism" model most appropriate for my purpose. How my observations of state-media dynamics correspond with Rigby's model will be taken up in the conclusion of this dissertation.

Conclusion

The varied literature on the Vietnamese media is lacking in one major aspect. Studies of the Vietnamese media generally lack a holistic approach that will

14 What I say applies only to research literature produced outside the influence of the VCP. I have not placed media-related literature produced in Vietnam alongside the foreign research literature.
CHAPTER TWO

The Structure of Media Management

Many people sampling what the Vietnamese press has to offer in the 1990s would be struck by the sea change from what newspapers were like before the mid-1980s. Doctrine jargon no longer packs the press columns with the same density as it did before. Some papers carry soft human-interest stories, tabloid-type sensationalism, and exposés of corruption in high places—things which, strictly speaking, are ideologically-incorrect. What we see today would have been unthinkable when Pike (1973) was conceptualizing the Vietnamese media in monolithic terms. So, just reading current newspapers may lead one to think that the media regulatory regime has changed considerably. To get a more accurate picture of the extent to which the system has changed it is necessary to delve below the empirical top layer of media content to look at the following underlying structures that play a major role in determining content:

- ideology;
- organizational control—control organs, supervisory organs, party centrality and self-censorship;
- legal regime; and
- elite manipulation.

Ideology

The media in Vietnam is based on a Marxist-Leninist prototype developed in the erstwhile Soviet Union, derived largely from the writings of Lenin and then moulded by the practice of Stalinit. The following tenets sum up its ideological essence (Giao Trinh Nghep Vu Beat Chi Tap I 1978:38-39): media is a weapon for class...
struggle and should first and foremost represent the interest of the proletariat. Politburo Resolution 60 on Press Work (Nghị quyết số 60 NQ/TƯ về Công tác Báo chí), issued on 8 December 1958, highlighted the Leninist legacy when it declared the Vietnamese media to be "a collective agitator, propagandist and organizer, an instrument of the party to lead the masses, and a sharp weapon of class struggle to oppose the enemy and build a new life" (see Appendix 1 for the text of Resolution 60). But if these are the guiding principles that shaped the media system in the 1950s, the question remains: how does this system function today within a very different environment, where the founding ideology is being seriously challenged by the effects of đổi mới?

An ideological tenet or two usually underpins each distinctive feature of the socialist media. The founding Leninist ideology has radical objectives, such as creating "a new Soviet man" to believe in tenets that would make a classless society workable. This belief that society can and should be changed so fundamentally produces a particular kind of praxis (Bauer 1952 cited in Pool 1973:466). Where propaganda was concerned, the Soviet leadership crafted a programme to mobilize the masses with Lenin’s frequently quoted guidelines requiring the press to be "collective agitator, propagandist and organizer" (Lenin 1992:160). Elsewhere, Lenin added the fourth requirement which was for the press to exercise a controlling function (Buzek 1964:52). All these functions were generally about educating and inspiring the masses to live up to the dictates of the party. Translated into practice they managed press content stringently. The "agitator", "propagandist" and "organizer" functions manifested themselves in slogan headlines, rousing and emotionally-coloured language, the preponderance of news on economic achievements, emulation campaigns, and prominence given to official announcements and the speeches of leaders (Buzek 1964:41-52). These features have been etched into the Western stereotypical image of the stifled socialist media. The “control” function required the press to criticize the shortcomings within the system but criticism meant exposing those who did not fulfil their economic or political tasks, and was usually directed at lower echelons in the bureaucracy (Buzek 1964:52). This provided an opportunity for some reporting of shortcomings; otherwise, a typical Soviet newspaper, particularly during Stalin’s rule (1929-1953), would carry very little else but good news.

Leninist ideology attaches opposite meanings to media terms used in the West. For example, where the Western media model professes to aspire to objectivity in reporting (even though the Western press does not always live up to it), Leninist teachings eschew any attempt to present news without social or class evaluation. Instead, the socialist media enjoins journalists to be deliberately partisan in advancing the interests of the working class (Buzek 1964:56-57). The socialist press recognizes different kinds of truth. Reporting that a Wall Street businessman did a kind act is a “factual truth” that obscures the “essential truth” that he was actually “exploitative” and “imperialist”. “Essential truth” is what a socialist media should purvey (Hollander 1968, 1972 cited in Pool 1973:468).

Democratic centralism forbids any further debate once the party position on an issue has been decided (Buzek 1964:33). For fear of breaching this principle, during the repressive Stalinist era of the 1930s and 1940s, Soviet editors reprinted Pravda’s (the central party daily) editorials and articles and picked up the habit of using well-known phrases, quotations or whole passages from party decisions and leaders’ speeches (Buzek 1964:81). In the most regimented manifestation of democratic centralism, newspapers throughout the Soviet Union imitated Pravda right down to typographical layout. All these ideological demands reached into every field of intellectual endeavour: literature, drama, film, the arts, scientific research and the humanities, thus making up a whole intellectual environment which was far more encompassing than just what news journalists could report.

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1 "... là người có công, nguyên truyện tập thể, là người có chức tập thể, là cương cuo cửa Đảng để lãnh đạo quan chính, là vô kinh đau thân giá cấp sắc bền vững cố giữ và xây dựng đời sống mới." The 1958 Politburo Resolution 60 on Press Work is regarded by the Vietnamese media as "the most comprehensive and fundamental document ever on newspaper work" (cô tiếng ông bản và toàn chỉnh mặt về công tác báo chí) (Giai Thưởng Nghiệp Vui Bao Chữ Tạp I 1974:401). Prior to that document, instructions on media or propaganda work were either cursory (e.g., issued as part of a larger policy statement on the role of the party) or highly specific (e.g., issued to address a particular media-related situation like setting up a newspaper).

2 This function somewhat parallels the Western media notion of the press as guardians of public interest against state misdeemeanour except there is a difference in the latitude and scope for criticism. Nevertheless, this also means that criticism and negative news had always had a place in the socialist media either in the form of news reporting or a reader’s letter. Thus, when the media of most of the socialist world became far more critical of official shortcomings in the 1980s, they were not violating any fundamental ideological principle.
The text of Vietnam’s Politburo Resolution 60 on Press Work is patterned closely on Leninist precedents. Basically, the VWP which issued it in 1958 wanted the press to strive for the same sort of exhortatory journalism. That involved placing the same selective emphasis on the Leninist notion of "essential truth" (sự thật cần phải nói) (see Appendix 1). In practice, it meant the media had to highlight what was positive about the socialist state of Vietnam and promote models for the masses to emulate. Some criticism and self-criticism are published to gain the good news. Although đổi mới has diluted many ideological dogmas in practice, public official pronouncements on media continue to use doctrinaire language and codified terms to remind the media of its ideological duties, e.g., information should "bear Party standards" (mang tinh Đảng); newspapers should be a vanguard for class struggle; and media should fulfill the demands of propaganda, agitation and organization (Nguyen Tri Dung 1990; Tạ Ngọc Tân 1993; Trịnh Đình Thắng 1993; and Đỗ Mười 1997). To be sure, day-to-day journalistic work no longer uses doctrinaire terms such as the media's "working class characteristics" (tình giai cấp công nhân) or its duties as "propagandist" and "agitator". The state has replaced them with another form of didactic terminology, rather more detached from its Leninist roots, and refers instead to media's duty to "protect the interest of the state" (bảo vệ quyền lợi của nhà nước) (Source 4 Interview 9; and Source 9 Interview 1).

In the wake of đổi mới, media practitioners also attempted to revive some basic ideological tenets of the media. At the second meeting held by the VIJA in early 1988 to prepare for the association's 5th Congress, two senior journalists, Phan Quang and Hữu Thọ, argued that the three prescribed roles of "collective propagandist", "collective agitator" and "collective organizer" were proposed by Lenin in 1901 at a time when the Communist Party of Russia was not yet set up. The situation in Vietnam with the VCP already in power was fundamentally different, and the media should keep in step with this new reality. While maintaining that Lenin's prescribed fourth function of "control" (i.e., the duty to criticize official shortcomings) was still valid, they proposed that the foremost task of newspapers should be to "inform" (thông tin). As part of this information function, the press should “educate” (giáo dục) and where the broadcast media were concerned, to "entertain" (giải trí) as well (Người Làm Báo 3/1988:2-4).

Those arguing for ideological flexibility won some battles and this had its liberating impact on media discourse. For example, in the initial stage of đổi mới, in 1987 and 1988, newspapers could not mention words like "market economy" and had to use socialist terms like "commodity economy" (kinh tế hàng hóa) instead. Once market has become a legitimate term, its true significance is not just in the use of a word but in the way market becomes recognized as a legitimate force that shaped society (Source 4 Interview 5). For instance, once market forces are accepted as part of the Vietnamese social-economic-political landscape, they modulate media management in ways that will be described later.

However the market victory is still a qualified one for the media. A central ideological issue continues to beset media development, and that is: should information be regarded as a commodity? Tuấn Minh (1992a) refers to the problem that information as a product is still a capitalist concept, alien to a socialist society like Vietnam. Linked to this are important questions such as private ownership of media, and whether or not the fledgling foreign investment in media should be encouraged or phased out. The 1990 Press Law removed the possibility for private ownership of media which was allowed under the previous legislation in 1957. During the National Assembly debate on the law in December 1989 advocates stoutly defended this proscription of private ownership on ideological grounds by pointing out that "the way to the future for Vietnamese society was to expand collective ownership...and not private ownership", or that "private ownership of media would really mean newspapers would either be at the behest of this class or that class" (ND 28/12/89:1&4; ND is short for Nễt Dần). Chapter Eight's easy case study on the TTCK affair in 1990 illustrates how important is the issue of private ownership of media L.y highlighting the travails of a dissident magazine that could not find any printing facilities because they were all under state monopoly.

In the post-1989 media situation, the earlier forthright approach, which Phan Quang and Hữu Thọ employed to point out how Lenin's teachings were outdated, gives way to a more guarded style when challenging ideological shibboleths. For example,
Tư Ann Minh (1992a) and Nguyễn Thành Sơn (1995) might urge more market-related practices, such as circulation competition and producing more information-oriented news to attract readers, but both were careful to fortify their arguments with socialist polemics. Sơn qualified his call for more information-based content by saying that the ideological duties of “propaganda” and “agitation” would still be able to draw readers, if done well. Minh also acknowledged the continuing importance of socialist practices, such as state investment in media to keep prices low, and making newspapers available to the masses.

A comparison with what has been happening in the larger economic arena will help us to understand the tentative situation with regards to market forces in the media. The policy stance of the late 1980s aimed at creating a “multi-sectoral” economy in which the private sector would play an important role. Yet through the 1990s, economic policy increasingly gave priority to the state sector, so much so that by the late 1990s, no privatization drive was visible; and at the Eighth Party Congress in 1996, the “leading role” of the state sector was strongly asserted (Fordo. 1997:4). In the events running up to the Congress, intense debate arose within the party elite over the meaning of socialist orientation and socialist deviation when carrying out economic reforms (Vasavakul 1997). All these seem like a painstaking re-orientation of ideology and not its abandonment. If the reform momentum already achieved in the general economy could still be so faltering, market practices in a sensitive sector such as media could logically expect to be even more provisional.

However, re-orientation of ideology is difficult not just in terms of rationalizing market practices with socialist tenets but also when it comes to justifying a host of other old socialist tricatures as Vietnam expands its contact with the world, and its citizens become better-informed. Party ideological authority recognizes this lack of ideological coherence and fumbles for a theoretical solution without much success. Where possible, an effort is made to co-opt challenges or to cobble together a model that mixes official propaganda with market realities. But when those tactics fail, ideological custodians resort to no better solution than to forbid outright the raising of sensitive ideological questions (Source 4 Interview 3; and Source 2).

What, then, should one make out of the continued public emphasis on ideological fidelity? The situation approximates Thomas F. Remington’s (1988) description of the Soviet Union in the 1980s, where the propaganda machinery continued to dispense ideological indoctrination even though the authority knew it was falling on deaf ears. He posits that the content of the message was not as important as the structure of its organized dissemination. Even if they did not believe in what they were doing, members of the intellectual and managerial elite who made up this ideological machinery persisted because they were drawn into a nexus of power and privilege. It was not that ideology was no longer important; rather the system should be seen as increasingly not dependent on what ideology had to say, but neither was it free of ideology.

Organizational Control

Since Vietnam’s media system is based on the Leninist model, it also runs on the basic operating principle of “democratic centralism”. This principle has a mix of both centrist and democratic elements. However, the centrist component ensures that the whole system is ultimately accountable to the Party Central (comprising the Politburo and the CC) at the apex of the system because it expects unconditional subordination to the next higher organ in the hierarchy. Its democratic component does allow for a certain level of debate by party rank and file but this has to stop once party authority endorses a position. (For a more detailed exploration of how “democratic centralism” was the basis of the Soviet media system, see Inkeleis 1951:11-21, 26-30; and Buzek 1964:32-37).4

The “democratic centralism” organizational pattern remains the same to this day. The Communist Party’s involvement in media aims at being multi-level and comprehensive.5 The main centre of media control is the “cập ụy”. “Cắp ụy” is a

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4 The prohibition of debate after a policy is officially endorsed has become a popular definition of what “democratic centralism” means but the principle is much broader than that in its ramifications. Both Inkeleis (1951:27) and Buzek (1964:33) base their descriptions of the principle on documents issued at the Soviet Union’s 18th and 22nd Party Congresses respectively.

5 In order to flesh out the bare outline of the media system provided by Politburo Resolution 60, I draw on a series of interviews with three sources (Source 3; Source 4. Interviews 6, 7; and Source 5). Interviews
generic term referring to the party executive committee in charge of each particular administrative level. At the central level, the cảng ủy is the Party CC and its Politburo. Below that, the cảng ủy of a province is the Provincial Party Executive Committee (Tỉnh ủy); the cảng ủy of big cities like Hanoi and HCM City that have provincial status is the City Party Executive Committee (Thành ủy); the cảng ủy of a district will be the District Party Executive Committee (Huyện ủy); and so on down the line till the most basic level of party organization where a factory or a small village may have a party cell of 12 or less party members known as a chi bộ which is headed by a cell executive (chi ủy). Since it has no compact equivalent in English, the term "cảng ủy" is used throughout this dissertation.

Each cảng ủy takes command of a horizontal network of state (party/government administrative bodies) and state-related institutions (mass organizations cater ing for different sectors and groups, e.g., youth, women, workers, farmers, writers, etc.). Where resources and readership make it viable, each level has its state of publications which, by regulation, has to be owned individually by a state or state-related institution. This creates what is usually referred to as the "sectoral" nature of the socialist media where some papers are meant to cater for specific groups such as farmers, artists, women, youth, etc. Under this system, there is a central-level press which serves the whole country. Below that, individual provinces and big cities may have their own newspapers.

A network of criss-crossing horizontal and vertical lines of control is in place when the vertical hierarchy of cảng ủy, from the central level down to the localities, is combined with the horizontal control of each cảng ủy. This structure reflects the principle of "democratic centralism" where all lines of control can be traced upwards to the Party Central in the control of a Politburo at the apex (see chart on following page).

1.3. Unless otherwise stated, the details about cảng ủy and the media regulatory system came from those interviews.

* The capitalist press also has "sectoral" publications for farmers, women, artists or youth, etc, but the variety is initiated more by market demand than political command.
Media-regulatory organs under each cấp ủy can be divided into two broad functions: those which censor newspapers and those which own and assume responsibility for them. In Vietnamese terminology they are respectively called control organs (cơ quan quan lý) and supervisory organs (cơ quan chổ quản).

Control Organs:

The control organs are the party commission in charge of ideology and the government ministry in charge of information. In 1999, this party commission is called the Ideology and Culture Commission (Ban Trị Tường và Văn Hóa) at the central level. Its branches at the provincial and city level are called the Propaganda and Education Commission (Ban Tuyên Truyền và Giáo Dục). Prior to the present names, this particular commission at all levels was known as the Propaganda and Training Commission (Ban Tuyên Truyền và Huấn Luyện). Once more, I wish to remind readers that in order to avoid confusion arising from this variety of names (particularly for those unfamiliar with Vietnamese political terminology), I shall use a generic term Ideology Commission throughout this dissertation. In 1999, the government ministry in charge of information is the MCI (Ministry of Culture and Information or Bộ Văn Hóa Thông Tin). Its branches at the provincial/city level are called the OCI (Office of Culture and Information or Sở Văn Hóa Thông Tin). Together, the party and government control organs approve and issue publication permits, yet the contents of the press and mete out the penalties when editors err. The party commission prevails over the government ministry.

The cấp ủy at the central level issues ideological guidelines and the Ideology Commission sees that they are promulgated throughout the country and observed at all levels. To carry out this duty, the Ideology Commission is assisted by its branches at the lower levels. The cấp ủy at the lower levels may modify the Party Central guidelines within certain limits to suit local conditions. An Ideology Commission at each level reports to its cấp ủy as well as to the Ideology Commission immediately above. Thus the Ideology Commission at the central level has oversight over all the country’s media. During the pre-dugi műi years, party guidelines for media would extend into rather specific matters such as the need to improve the newspaper distribution system, promote subscription, recruit more freelancers (công tác viên) among the ranks of peasants and workers, and organize newspaper reading among the populace (Ban Biên Tạp Báo Hải Phòng. 1972:48-49,135-36). These duties gave the Ideology Commission and its branches extensive prerogatives; and newspapers under their purview had to seek their consent on many issues, an institutionalized practice which continues till today.

I shall describe mainly the relationship between the Ideology Commission and the media at the central level, but basically the same pattern operates for provincial/city level Ideology Commissions and their local media as well. The Ideology Commission performs its key function of censorship by obliging all newspaper editors to attend regular weekly briefings. At these sessions, the commission passes on f... opinions of the cấp ủy about what has been published, provides the party line on key domestic and international issues, and hands out specific instructions to produce articles on certain events or to steer clear of others. Besides these standard weekly briefings, the commission summons an editor promptly if it feels anything remiss in the pages of his paper. When I interviewed media-minding officials in 1993, they stressed that Vietnam did not practise pre-publication censorship. Strictly speaking, this is accurate because the Ideology Commission does not have to approve every page before it goes off to the printers. However the commission’s regular and institutionalized post-publication evaluation of newspapers influences and reinforces the self-censoring habits of media.

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1 At the central level, Ideology and Culture Commission is the name used since 1989. The names of other same functions, for example, Propaganda and Training Commission to Propaganda and Education Commission at the provincial/city level – could not always be ascertained because they may vary with the locality.

2 Theoretically speaking, the cấp ủy at central level is the whole CC but, in practice, decisions are issued by the Politburo or, up till 1996, the Secretariat (Ban Biệt Thu). The Secretariat was a small group of

Poliburo and CC members that dealt with day-to-day organizational problems and oversaw the implementation of party resolutions. At the VCP Eighth Congress in 1996, the Secretariat was replaced by another body called the Politburo Standing Board (Thường Vụ Bộ Chính Trị), but the precise differences between the Secretariat and the Standing Board need not concern us here.

3 I interviewed Lưu Văn Hắn, Director of the MCI’s Press Department on 26 October 1993, and Hồ Anh Dĩ, Deputy Head of the Ideology Commission on 18 November 1993.
The weekly briefings are in fact more important as an instrument of ideological guidance than the myriad of documents issued by the party and the government. Documents tend to get forgotten because there are too many of them coming from too many departments and written in anodyne language.

The Ideology Commission also exercises control by means of its power to endorse or reject proposed editorial appointments within a newspaper. Another channel of control is the practice of sending the commission's media-regulating cadres to be editors, and vice versa, thus obfuscating the roles of media practitioners and custodians. Beyond these specific mechanisms of control, the commission also influences the media through the key role it plays in shaping the larger ideological climate within which the media must function. This role includes preparing material for use as political education which is regularly conducted for all party members and state cadres, a catchment that would include almost all media practitioners.

To be sure, doi moi has changed the tone and substance of the Ideology Commission's media regulatory conduct. Initially, the commission's weekly briefings for the press became less didactic and editors were given more leeway to defend their positions. However, in the post-1989 situation when the political climate became more restrictive, the commission began to hand out more criticisms and instructions at its meetings with editors, although the mood never reverted to that of the draconian pre-doi moi years. A major problem for the commission today is the burden of upholding doctrines which are increasingly rendered obsolete by doi moi. This translates into confused and uneven censorship standards (Source 2). As one writer pointed out, this has a double-edged impact on editorial initiative. Those editors who lack self-confidence or powerful mentors would err even more on the side of caution, while others who are themselves influential or well-protected would see the confusion as room to manoeuvre (Source 6 Interview 1). That means censorship can be highly discretionary and a function of personality politics at the top, an issue which is examined in my case studies.

One significant attribute of the relationship between the Ideology Commission and the media remains largely unchanged despite doi moi. The dynamics of control is still largely quarantined from public discussion even as doi moi widens the scope for discourse on any issues hitherto taboo. Even in the most liberal years of doi moi before 1989, when journalists were frequently self-examining their profession, very little was ever published on this issue. Such paucity of public scrutiny renders the dynamics of control more resistant to change than other more observable features of media culture.

The second control organ – the MCI – plays a subsidiary role to the Ideology Commission. A history of official exasperation over the setting up of a government institution to perform its share of media management functions highlights this. As the record shows, from 1954 the passage to set up a proper ministry for the media took the government through a series of bureaucratic resuffles. This saw the portfolio being handled by a string of ministries: Ministry of Propaganda (Bộ Tuyên Truyền), Ministry of Culture (Bộ Văn Hóa), Directorate of Information (Tổng Cục Thông Tin), Ministry of Information (Bộ Thông Tin) and culminating in the MCI of 1992. From the start the leadership seemed reluctant to have a government ministry handle the relevant bureaucratic responsibilities related to media. In 1957, the Prime Minister's Office confirmed that a Central Press Office (Sở Báo Chinh Trị) had been set up within the party's Ideology Commission. This was a "temporary arrangement" until such time as the government decided to establish its own bureaucratic system to specialize in the field of information (Công Bao 47 (1957):823). Although located within a party organ, this Central Press Office handled the more public bureaucratic functions that are handled today by the MCI rather than the Ideology Commission, e.g., issuing press cards to journalists. It was not till 1976 that the Prime Minister's Office transferred the Central Press Office's duties out of the Ideology Commission into the Directorate of Information (Phụ Luật Cổng Bao số 6 (1976):91). Then, as now, media practitioners did not take the government control organ very seriously. As Bùi Tin (Interview 25/2/98)

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58 The resuffles did not always mean a new ministry neatly replaced an old one. Sometimes, a newly-created institution performed over-lapping functions with an existing ministry, as was the case with the Directorate of Information set up in 1965 and the then Ministry of Culture. During the period when I was researching this thesis (1993-1999), the MCI was the government body performing media-regulatory functions. This ministry was formed with the merger of the Ministry of Culture and Directorate of Information. I have given a simplified version of these ministry changes. For a fuller account, see the official historiography issued by the Ministry of Culture and Information, "Nam Mất Nam Nâng Nhớ Văn Hóa và Thông Tin Việt Nam (28/8/1945 - 28/8/1995)" (Ho Chi Minh City: 1995:121-23.)
recalling his experience at QĐND (Quân Đội Nhân Dân) during the 1960s, the paper’s editorial board hardly ever bothered with the Ministry of Culture at that time. The ministry only called newspapers up to brief them on new government regulations or the publicity required for major celebrations of anniversaries.

However, the MCI’s duties have increased in recent years in line with a more earnest attempt after the 1991 Seventh Party Congress to have government ministries handle the details of governance, while the party should restrict itself just to setting down general policy guidelines. Nevertheless, the Ideology Commission is still regarded as the foremost authority in matters concerning the n.3 directive. The MCI concerns itself with formalistic tasks such as policing the technicalities of media-related regulations (e.g., percentage of advertisement allowed in a publication); setting down the salary structure for all journalists (which really is not that important as market economics dictate salary scales from official decrees); and issuing permits for newspapers and press cards for journalists, after the Ideology Commission has so decided (Source 4 Interview 6; and Source 7 Interview 1).

Supervisory Organs

Supervisory organs make up the other major form of media-regulatory institutions. A supervisory organ refers to a party/government institution or a party-controlled mass organization that has been permitted to have its own regular publication. Like the Soviet system, the ownership structure produces a sectoral press. For instance, Phụ Nгор víct Nam, belonging to the women’s organization, focuses on women’s issues and the army paper, QĐND, concentrates on military matters. Regulation of sectoral coverage has become more relaxed under đổi mới, and major newspapers like Lao Động and TT, which represent trade unions and youth respectively, have become newspapers serving a general readership rather than just the constituencies they were supposed to cater for. TT, which is a HCM City paper, has also transcended the regional focus expected of it to provide good quality coverage of national issues that can surpass that of many central-level newspapers.

A supervisory organ controls its publication by using three mechanisms: it acts as a channel of state disbursement for the newspaper, appoints the editor, and has an oversight over the editorial process. With all supervisory organs being run by the VCP, this constitutes another channel of party suzerainty over media. However, the relationship between a supervisory organ and its paper is usually more nuanced than just an outright supervisor-subordinate arrangement, particularly so with the changes brought about by đổi mới.

A newspaper needs a supervisory organ in order to get state financial disbursement because the money is allotted as part of the state budgetary allocation for the supervisory organ (Source 4 Interview 9). Such reliance on official finance is a major reason why the socialist media has traditionally been so beholden to the state. But that relationship of financial reliance has to be re-examined in view of the changing economic reality. The socialist state could no longer afford to provide for the press adequately. The grim economic shortages which propelled market reforms began in the late 1970s. They affected the press as well because state supply of free newprint became irregular. Thus, the press like all other sectors in society started to fend for itself and the state also tolerated its market innovations. Some newspapers published products that pandered to popular taste, in disregard of ideological rectitude, so as to increase circulation and raise revenue (Heng 1998:30-31). Many expanded into a range of other economic activities, like using their printing presses to do non-media commercial printing or even engaged in farming (Source 1).

Being responsible for its own financial well-being was not just an excuse by the press to overcome an economic crisis. It also meant grappling with a crisis of faith as newspapers realized that they were fast losing credibility with readers by presenting a predominantly party-sanctioned picture, greatly at odds with the harsh economic reality of the times. The world outside Vietnam was also changing: China was launching its economic reforms under Deng Xiaoping; Eastern Europe was also liberalizing and the Asian newly industrialized economies (South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore) were recording impressive growth in contrast to the grave economic problems of Vietnam. Media practitioners started to ask questions of

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11 Except for short intermittent periods when private ownership of newspapers was tolerated for expedient reasons, media since 1954 has been state-owned. Given the level of corruption in Vietnam today, individuals with money can bribe some official body to publish something on their behalf, but this is substantively different from legitimate private ownership of the press.
they survive without state subsidy? Could the press as the voice of the party also not reflect different opinions coming from the masses? Could the press criticize policy if it was wrong? Could it expose cadres of whatever levels if they were corrupt? The last time some of these politically-sensitive questions were publicly raised by media was in Hanoi in 1956 (to be discussed in Chapter Three). Arising from all these questions, many realized that the top-down information flow which so dominated media content was no longer viable in this new set of circumstances (Source 1).

Market economics also resulted in cash-strapped supervisory organs looking to their publications for extra revenue. During the early years of đổi mới, some supervisory organs looked away while their publications engaged in dubious money-making projects such as putting out tabloids (TT 21/7/88:1–6). The supervisory organ then expected a share of the earnings. This market-driven practice undermined the status quo in profound ways and was finally criticized by the August 1989 resolution issued by the Seventh Plenum of the Sixth Party Congress (see nghị quyết Hội nghị Lần Thứ Bảy Ban Chấp Hành Trung Ương khóa VI 1989).

Similar criticism was found in the July 1990 Secretariat Order 63 (Chỉ thị 63) (Nâng Cao Chất Lượng Filme Quê Cống Tác Báo Chí, Xã Hội. 1992:138) in which the party leadership sought to introduce measures aimed at controlling the media more effectively. Both documents accused supervisory organs of giving "khốin trắng" (i.e., carte blanche) to the publications under their charge.

Still, in the 1990s, a muddled situation remains whereby socialist fiat and market reality continue to contend in the running of media. On the one hand, what little the state is able to hand out declines in importance as printing costs climb and supervisory organs tell their newspapers to find their own means of survival on the market. On the other, supervisory organs are still admonished officially for allowing their media to pander to commercialism and neglect their socialist duty (Hải Thịnh 1995). A situation is also emerging where a newspaper such as TT in HCM City is able to earn great advertising revenue, thus making its supervisory organ more determined to strengthen its proprietary relationship with the paper for pecuniary interest. As money reshapes the relationship between supervisory organs and their publications, the question of media reliance on the state comes into a new focus. Lucrative newspapers would tend to stress their financial independence (and with that comes other independence of action), but their supervisory organs would point to many large hidden state subsidies that remain within the media system, e.g., basic salaries paid by the state because a large proportion of media practitioners are considered state employees; and the free use (or nominal rents) of work premises instead of having to pay mark rents (Source 4 Interview 7). So a newspaper's reliance on state munificence is riddled with ambivalence because, on the one hand it cannot do or would find it rather hard-going without the hidden subsidies; but on the other, state handouts are far from adequate to keep it in circulation.

A supervisory organ's second leverage on its newspaper is the entitlement to nominate and remove key editorial personnel, although the final decision is conditional on approval by the Ideology Commission and ultimately the relevant cấp ủy. To ensure an amicable working relationship, a supervisory organ usually does one of two things when picking an editor to run its paper (Source 4 Interview 7). It can appoint one of its own senior cadres, usually a member of its Executive Committee (Ban Thường Vụ), to do the job. This person need not have journalistic experience. Alternatively, the supervisory organ may select an existing member from the newspaper's editorial staff or a professional journalist from elsewhere and then co-opt this person into the supervisory organ's Executive Committee. Generally the relationship between the editor and the supervisory organ is consultatory rather than custodial in tone. A supervisory organ must have some trust in the editor for a relationship to work. However, complications do arise when the supervisory organ feels it needs to keep a close watch on what the editor is doing, an action usually triggered by a warning from the Ideology Commission. When things reach that stage it usually means the editor's days in his position are numbered.

This brings us to the supervisory organ's third leverage on its publication, which is the prerogative to oversee editorial work. Normally, over and above the editor being a member of its Executive Committee, a supervisory organ will also designate another...
member of its Executive Committee to keep an eye on editorial content. This person is usually the cadre in charge of ideological matters within the whole supervisory organ. He is the one the editor should consult when the latter is faced with a politically-sensitive story. Similar to the rationale of sending Ideology Commission's cadres to run newspapers and vice versa, a supervisory organ sometimes switches the editor of its publication with its Executive Committee member in charge of ideology (Source 4 Interview 7; and Source 6 Interview 1).  

However, within this one standard dynamic, supervisory organs can end up running their newspapers in a variety of ways, as follows (TưMARY Minh 1992b):  

a) The supervisory organ sees its function as providing information about the broader political environment, usually in the form of resolutions and decisions passed down by the party; the paper’s editor then uses his judgement to do what is appropriate within these guidelines. This is the most lax form of control.  

b) The supervisory organ takes a more formal approach. It meets with the newspaper’s editorial board regularly to issue official directives, as well as suggests topics for coverage, but stops short of interfering with day-to-day editorial work.  

c) The supervisory organ is highly interventionist and issues orders specifying how topics should be treated, including asking to vet articles or entire issues of the newspaper.  

The management style of a supervisory organ affects the quality of its publication; a dominant style of supervision tends to stifle initiative and creativity, breeding an editorial approach which is frightened of responsibility. An ideologically safe-and-sound publication was not a liability before đổi mới because low circulation did not really matter financially. But as market reforms proceed in Vietnam, supervisory organs are becoming more sensitized to market needs, which means allowing their publications more scope to cater to readers’ interests.  

The leadership scaled down this market-friendly trend in 1989 as part of the overall policy to rein in liberal reforms that were threatening to grow beyond party control. Supervisory organs were enjoined to tighten control of their publications. In Secretariat Order 63 (1990) several clauses stated that supervisory organs should be totally in charge of their newspapers, and heads of supervisory organs should meet regularly with editors and cadres in charge of the press to see that they did not stray from the official agenda. It carried precise instructions on what were occasions which an editor must consult his paper’s supervisory cựu cán (Nâng Cao Chất Lượng Hình Qua Công Tắc Báo Chí. Xuat Báu. 1992:142-43):  

> Depending on the standard and ability of the comrade who is running the newspaper, broadcast station or publishing house, the cáp bý shall stipulate which problems he should not decide for himself and must consult with the comrade who represents the supervisory organ, especially those issues which are concerned with keeping party and state secrets, political and security conditions and foreign relations.  

The trend of getting supervisory organs to keep a tighter rein on their newspapers has grown since. For instance, many supervisory organs regularly attend the weekly meetings at their newspapers to keep abreast of what stories are being planned, whereas previously they would go to these meetings randomly (Source 4 Interview 7). Chapter Six’s case study of the Văn Nghệ affair looks at all these dynamics involved in a supervisory organ-media relationship when the VWA (Vietnam Writers Association or Hội Nhà Văn Việt Nam) sacked Nguyễn Ngọc, chief editor of the association’s weekly magazine. That affair was an early sign of ideology custodians growing wary of newspaper editors becoming too independent of a supervisory organ’s control. Since Nguyễn Ngọc, a number of chief editors from other newspapers have

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9 Media-regulating officials from the Ideology Commission, the MCI and the supervisory organs, and editors of newspapers can be transferred to each other’s job because they are all technically cadres working in the information sector of the state.  

10 TưMARY Minh is the pen-name of TừMARY Công Mạnh who was editor of the important army daily QUỐC in the đổi mới years until he retired in 1989.  

11 Tuy theo trình độ, năng lực phần tử của đồng chí phụ trách báo, đội, nhà xuất bản nhà cấp bý Đặng quà định những vấn đề gì đồng chí/ cô/bạn đưa ra ý quyết định, nhất thiết phải thống chi cấp bý đợn chỉ đạo định cơ quan chỉ quan nhất lì những vấn đề có quan hệ đến việc giữ gìn bì mặt của Đảng và Nhà nước, thống nhất các nhiệm công t vein và quan hệ đối ngoại.
been retired or replaced. The one most frequently remarked upon is the removal of Kim Hạnh in 1991 as chief editor of *TT* by the paper’s supervisory organ, the HCM City’s branch of the Youth League (short for the national youth mass organization called Hội Liên Minh Công Thanh Phố Hồ Chí Minh or Đoàn Thanh niên Cộng Sản Hồ Chí Minh) (Source 3; and Source 4 Interview 3). A more recent example of another chief editor moved for her daring to test editorial limits was Thế Thanh of Phụ Nữ Thành phố Hồ Chí Minh (Women of Ho Chi Minh City), who was transferred in May 1996 to become the cadre in charge of ideology at the paper’s supervisory organ, the Ho Chi Minh City’s Women’s Association (Source 4 Interview 3). That prompted one media practitioner (Source 6 Interview 1) to remark gloomily to me that Thế Thanh was the last of the đội mới editors.

Similar to the relationship between the Ideology Commission and media, the dynamics of control which a supervisory organ exercises over its publication are largely off-limits to media coverage. Kim Hạnh’s removal from *TT* caused much unhappiness at the newspaper and was resisted by many of her staff, but the incident never received any publicity. A similar media reticence greeted the demise of Thế Thanh. This is an enduring systemic feature even as market forces challenge and reshape the supervisory organ-media relationship in unprecedented ways. The rule remains to keep away from public scrutiny the issue of how supervisory organs manage the media under their charge. Thus, while đội mới has its influence, the dynamics of power can still be resistant to change, not least because they are less directly exposed than media content to change-inducing forces such as public visibility.

**Party Centrality**

Viewed in its entirety, a newspaper has to report to three authorities: the Ideology Commission, the MCI and the paper’s own supervisory organization. In reality, however, editors have to contend with more sources of possible interference. These include powerful individuals, the security organs and individual Ministries seeking to direct media content for case-specific reasons, e.g., the Foreign Ministry may object to a story on grounds that it damages foreign policy. All of these come under the Party Central with ultimate authority vested in the Politburo. The basic pattern of two control organs and one supervisory organ gets replicated at the provincial and city (only those cities big enough to be accorded provincial status) levels. Each level comes under a cấp ủy. In principle, every lower level party, government or mass organization has to defer to its central-level mother organization but, in practice, the chain of command is more complex. Regionalism is rather strong in Vietnam and only the VCP has a reliable vertical line of control through its cấp ủy, e.g., the Party Central can order the removal of regional party leaders. Mass organizations at the central level do not enjoy the same sort of power vis-à-vis their lower level branches (Source 4 Interview 7). Mass organizations at the regional levels, however, do have to listen to their cấp ủy and this is mostly the channel through which the Party Central exercises its overall control.

But the cấp ủy too has suffered some attrition to its authority in the process of đội mới. The cấp ủy used to play the role of information gatekeeper when dealing with journalists from outside its jurisdiction. This usually involved newspapers from a higher administrative level reporting on a lower level issue, e.g., a central paper writing about developments in a specific province. According to the working principles of the Vietnamese media, the visiting journalist must “đưa vào cấp ủy”, which means “trust in the cấp ủy”. In practice, it required him to go first to the cấp ủy to get a briefing on the issue being investigated. In the event that the investigation uncovered anything incompatible with what the cấp ủy said, the latter should be told (Giáo Trích Nghị earthly Vụ Báo chí Tập 1. 1978:98-103). Whether the negative story would finally get published depended on the editorial board but, given pre-dội mới conventions, a consensus was normally worked out in favour of highlighting the positive points, albeit with some mention of the problems encountered. Some editorial boards, like that of the party paper of Haiphong city, even required reporters to show any important article first to a cấp ủy for comments “to ensure that what is published is not at odds with the wishes and understanding of a cấp ủy” (để đảm bảo những bài đăng trên báo không trái với ý định, trái với nhận định của cấp ủy) (Ban Biên Tập Báo Hải Phòng 1972:105).

A media development in the initial stage of đội mới saw the major central-level officials exposing corruption involving provincial authorities. Chapter
Five's case study of the Hà Trọng Hòa affair is an example. Such exposés of cựu ủy misconduct could not be written if the central papers abided by the standing principle of "trust in the cựu ủy". While the principle is still around in the 1990s, it is no longer taken very seriously. Journalists today can rely on their own local contacts when they go to a place to investigate an event. Sometimes they call on the local cựu ủy last as a pro forma gesture of showing "trust in the cựu ủy". The more aggressive journalists may even bring all the evidence they have amassed to demand an explanation from the cựu ủy involved. Such media initiatives are now possible because đổi mới has removed travel restrictions within Vietnam, making it very hard for a local authority to monitor all visitors coming into its area. However, the new liberty only applies to newspapers dealing with a lower-level cựu ủy; no media practitioner would dare treat his own cựu ủy or that of a higher level with such impunity. The extent to which media practitioners are allowed this leeway also depends on the newspapers they work for (Source 5 Interview 3; and Source 8 Interview 5).

Self Censorship

The most fundamental, ubiquitous and effective means of censorship in this system begins within the newspaper itself. A culture of caution operates, which begins with the average journalist using his honed instinct and knowledge to avoid what would be unacceptable to publish. A requirement for articles to be approved by an editorial hierarchy may be common to many media systems, but Bùi Tín (Interview 25/2/98) described a punctilious vetting process at QĐND in the 1960s where he was working. Each article had to collect at least five signatures before publication: from the journalist, his immediate supervisor, the editorial secretary (in Western parlance, the managing editor), the deputy chief editor and then the chief editor. It would not be unusual for an ordinary report to take up to a week to be approved, which explains why newspaper content was characterized by a lack of timeliness. Caution did pervade the system, sometimes to an incredible degree going by an anecdote that Bùi Tín (1995:149) tells of QĐND. A deputy editor took objection to a front-page layout where a photo of Ho Chi Minh in one corner was in the trajectory of an anti-aircraft gun in a picture at the opposite corner of the same page.

Up till the present, the media system continues to rely mainly on self-censorship by media practitioners. A comparable system of hierarchical vetting of an article continues except that newspapers today are more conscious of the need to be timely with information (Source 4 Interviews 3. S). To be sure, the culture at the working level within newspapers has changed in major ways. For instance, foreign investment and editorial expertise are now directly involved in upgrading some Vietnamese newspapers to meet international standards. One such example is the Vietnam Investment Review, a business paper published in separate English and Vietnamese language editions, to help service a friendly climate for foreign investment. However, an incident at this newspaper resonates with that idiom "the more things change, the more they remain the same". Sometime between the fall of 1995 and the spring of 1996, the paper's chief editor, Nguyễn Tri Dũng, blocked the use of a picture that illustrated an innocuous story about a festival of ethnic minority sports. The picture had to be changed because it showed an archer with cross bow aimed across the page at a story announcing the visit of a US trade delegation. The similarity with Bùi Tín's story of the anti-aircraft gun picture at QĐND illustrates how some journalistic instincts remain unaltered through three decades and a sea change in Vietnam's political circumstances. This suggests that such techniques may have actually been used sometimes to make political points (or as expressions of irony or oblique humour), so much so that there is an abiding editorial alertness against them.

Another plausible explanation for the editor's chary behaviour is the fear that even if no encoded political message were intended, the honest mistake could still draw the attention of political adversaries and zealous media custodians. Terry Hartney, an Australian trainer at Vietnam News Agency, provided an anecdote to illustrate this particular cause for editorial caginess (Interview in Hanoi 6/11/96). He described an incident at Vietnam News (an English language paper published by Vietnam News

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14 Drew Napier who was the source of this anecdote was describing his first-hand experience as a sub-editor at Vietnam Investment Review, although he could not remember the exact date of the incident (Personal communication on 16/2/99 at The Australian National University where Napier was doing his PhD work). The Vietnamese concern not to be seen as hostile towards the US is understandable given Hanoi's eagerness to woo US trade and investment at that time.
Agency) in 1996 when a reference to the then Party General Secretary, Đỗ Mười, was edited by mistake to refer to him as Prime Minister. The following day the internal security people came to investigate thoroughly who had handled the paper at each stage. The involvement of the security apparatus in such a small editorial mishap would condition editors to be extra-cautious about what got into print.

Legal Regime

The legal regime that applies to the media has two major components: one set of rules comes from the party, and the other originates from the government, comprising the legislature (i.e., the National Assembly which passes the country’s laws) and the various ministries implementing the law. Since it was to focus almost entirely on the importance and effectiveness of legislation, public discourse creates an impression that government prerogatives are supreme in regulating the media. In reality, party decrees hold the preponderance of influence.

The media reforms born of đổi mới actually predate the 1990 Law, and that in itself should caution against placing undue importance on the role of legislation in bringing about change. Furthermore, with the rule of law generally regarded as far from institutionalized in Vietnam, it begs the question of how useful any legal statute on the media may be. For the most part, the 1990 press legislation is written in anodyne imprecise language that lends itself to discretionary interpretation, making it difficult to assess the content at face value (Luật Báo chí và Các Văn Bản Hướng Dẫn Thi Hành. 1996:6-22). As with other pieces of legislation in Vietnam, the Press Law is emboldened by a vast array of governmental rules to manage media: at the level of minutiae, e.g., setting journalists’ pay, freelancers’ rates, permissible advertisement-copy page ratio and the selling price of a newspaper. This creates a familiar situation

seen in many sectors of governance where rules are too numerous to keep track of, bogged down with details that are imprecisely written and in some instances contradict each other. As a result, government regulations are sometimes at odds with the functioning reality and risk being as irrelevant. An example would be the regulation which sets the proportion allowed for advertisements at 10 per cent of printed space (Clause 17.2 of Nghị Định của Hội đồng Bộ trưởng Số 133-HDBT ngày 20 tháng 4 năm 1992 quy định chi tiết vấn hân lưu báo chí) but it is not difficult to find newspapers which regularly disregard this ruling.

Broadly, the same things may be said of the 19 May 1999 amendments to the 1990 Press Law. Judging from the National Assembly debate before they were passed, the amendments were beset by the same problems of imprecise wording, contradictory purposes, non-feasible implementation and an involved process of bureaucratic guidance that would come after the legislation (Lao Động 19/5/99; ND 7/5/99, 19/5/99, 21/5/99; SGGP 14/5/99:11&13; Thanh Niên 19/5/99:7; and TT 20/5/99:1&14). This is not a new situation peculiar to today’s legislative process. Chapter Three’s description of how an earlier press law went through the National Assembly in January 1957 points to a similar situation that evidently has not changed very much in four decades.

14 Whenever I raised the 10 per cent advertisement quota in interviews with media sources cited in this chapter and in many casual conversations with editors and journalists, I got a dismissive response about the importance of this ruling. Some said the quota was flexible and a higher percentage was allowed if newspapers applied to the MCI. A popular view held that the way around the restriction was to print any amount of advertisements in a separate “insert” and that would be all right. Major publications like SGGP and TT of HCMI City have advertisement “inserts” with more pages than the actual papers themselves. However, Tim Kar, foreign Editorial Manager of Vietnam Investment Review, said his paper worked to a 35 per cent limit for advertisements whether as an “insert” or as part of the main paper. He understood that to be an overall ruling for all the press and did not know how other papers could get away with a much lower advertising content (Interview in Hanoi. 11/11/96). I could not get a second interview with the MCI to confirm any of these pieces of information.

15 The two most recently debated articles – 9 and 28 – illustrate my listed shortcomings of the legislative process. Article 9 gives aggrieved organizations or individuals the right of reply in the pages of a newspaper but the reply should refrain from attacking the newspaper or making personal allegations against the reporter. An Assembly representative proposed a more precise wording to clarify the process of adjudication should a newspaper refuse to print the reply but consideration of the proposal was deferred to when the government machinery would be starting work on the details of the legislation. Article 28 has the controversial provision to hold a new newspaper liable to pay damages should its reporting cause losses to anybody. The wording is worded to make it possible to prosecute newspapers even when the reporting is accurate. This militates against the objective to have media expose official corruption and help the leadership bolster its flagging legitimacy by seeming resolute in its fight against corruption. That being the case, Article 28 is going to be difficult to implement and subject to a high level of discretionary interference by media custodians.
The confused situation in media legislation points to a line of argument that John Gillespie (1993:144) propounds in his analysis of commercial law in Vietnam. As he sees it, the spectacular enactment of a wide range of legislation outwardly substantiates the rhetorical adoption of a rights-based legal system. While Gillespie’s discounting of the prodigious legislative programme as being rhetorical is sound, the laws for media are also not entirely devoid of substance. Firstly, legislation gives formal recognition to some important changes in the media sector which have been brought about by larger social-economic-political developments. For example, laws stipulating the permissible proportion of advertisements legitimize the reality of advertisements. Secondly, the legislative process is relatively more open to public debate and scrutiny than other official formats that deliberate on state-media relations. Thirdly, by holding the state to its expressed intention of strengthening the rule of law, media practitioners can use the country’s legislation as a means of resisting discretionary censorship or obstruction within the party-government hierarchies. Based on press reports, there were instances when journalists used media-protective clauses of the 1990 Law to contend with petty officials and challenge minor bureaucratic obstructions. However, given the nature of Vietnam’s political culture, few would take the legal guarantees of media rights entirely at face value. In essence, what legislation provides is a rough set of guidelines which is very much a part of the country’s evolving legal culture, where the “rule of law” is still unsettled in many ways. As much as its injunctions can be implemented with discretion or uncertainty, the law’s protective clauses may also have to be negotiated, case by case, depending on the relative power of the parties to a conflict. It would be a naïve journalist who thinks the ‘law has the same efficacy when used in the upper reaches of power (Source 3; and Source 4 Interview 7).

Ultimately, what determines the access of media to information and the acceptability of media content is the political climate at any one time. A set of fixed laws is not up to the task of defining this mutable climate that has to be continually adjusted to suit the cut and thrust of ideological debate within the party. Party resolutions/directives are the instruments that signal these shifts in the ideological environment and from which media must take its cue. This was how party decisions shepherded the media reforms that came with đổi mới, and not any piec of legislation. For example, if newspapers are carrying less unimportant protocol news about top leaders nowadays, it was Secretariat Order 19 (Chí thị 19) on 20 November 1987 entitled “Reforming news about protocol events” (Cải tiến thông tin những sự kiện cấp cố tình lês tân) that freed the press of that obligation (Điều Mới Thông Tin Báo Chí/1988:25-27).

Many of Vietnam’s media practitioners credit Secretariat Order 15 (Chí thị 15) with giving the media the critical space that it needed in the initial years of đổi mới. The order, issued on 21 September 1987 and entitled “On strengthening the leadership of the party with the purpose of better utilizing the press in the struggle against negativism”, empowered the press to expose corruption in high places (Điều Mới Thông Tin Báo Chí/1988:17-24). In particular, the order reinforced the prerogative of chief editors to decide what was to be published, thus helping them to negotiate censorship limits with control and supervisory organs on a more equal footing (Source 1). The case study in Chapter Five illustrates the impact of Order 15 on newspapers struggling to expose corruption in high places in 1987.

Another important party decree that promoted greater intellectual freedom, thus affecting media profoundly, was the 28 November 1987 Politburo Resolution 05 (Nhận Quyết 05-NQ/TW) (ND 5/12/87:1&4). Bearing the title “to reform and raise the standards of leadership and management of literature, develop creative potential, and take literature, arts and culture to a higher stage”, it paved the way for some of the most

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20 A good example is when the press went to check on a controversy surrounding the legal eviction of some residents from a Hanoi building in July 1996. The police officer present warned reporters against covering the event but they, in return, invoked the 1990 Press Law which stipulated that it was illegal to stop journalists in their legitimate pursuit of news. The officer then threatened them with arrest and also hit a reporter and smashed his camera; another reporter had his press card torn and camera confiscated. The journalists then pressed the city’s Legal Office to press charges against the police officer (Càp An Thạnh Phố Hô Chí Minh 7/89:7). Another example took place in a courtroom when a reporter (Mạnh Tuyền 1996) was prevented from using his tape recorder. He challenged the court that this violated articles in the Council of Minister’s Decree 132 issued on 20 April 1992 (Nghị định 133-HĐBT quy định chỉ đạo thực hiện Luật Báo chí - a set of instructions elaborating on the Press Law). Finally, the court backed down.

21 The Vietnamese name is “Chí thị 15 CT/TW về tăng cường sự lãnh đạo của Đảng nhằm đối mặt với bạo lực chính trị”.

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Chapter Six's case study on the sacking of a major literary magazine's chief editor looks at the political implications of this party resolution.

But the mood began to change with the Fifth Plenum (Sixth Congress) in June 1988, where the Plenum resolution warned against the media straying from the party line (ND 22/6/88:1). Finally, the party decree that was decisive in pulling back from bold political reforms was the Seventh Plenum (Sixth Congress) Resolution in August 1989, a meeting which took place in the wake of the Tiananmen incident in China and a restive Eastern Europe where Communist regimes were disintegrating. It bore the evidently anxious title "Some pressing problems in the field of ideological work in view of the present domestic and international situation." (Nghi Quyet Ho Chi Minh Thit Baly Ban Chanh Trung Uong Dan 1 (Khoa VI) – Mot so van de cap bich ve cong tac tu truong truc tu hinh trong ntu: va quoc te hinh may). From then on, the cautious mood deepened; and if Order 15 of 1987 was a document that enhanced the chief editor's prerogative, the years after 1989 saw the demise of Secretariat Order 63 (cited earlier) which constrained the chief editor. In the aftermath of the dissolution of the Soviet Communist Party in 1991, the Secretariat issued Order 08 (Chi thi 08) on 31 March 1992, which aimed at strengthening control over all forms of publications. In practical terms, it meant the Party sought to raise flagging media enthusiasm for its traditional mobilizational duties. This order set a deadline of three months for all cdp uy and relevant organs to straighten out any ideologically-wayward editor or publication (ND 9/4/92:1&3). As recent as 1997, Order 08 continued to serve as the basis for ideological management of the press, and this is evident in the organizing of a national conference, in August of that year, to review the implementation of this directive (Do Muoi 1997).

Besides being the more authoritative of the two, a party decree also differs from legislation in that it is a rather more closed process in its gestation. Debate within Party CC, which is "internal struggle", carries with it an air of secrecy. Media attention is only geared towards publicizing some party decrees, usually in a celebratory way. Hence the media operates under a legal regime where control is vested more in that component which is quarantined from the moderating influence of public scrutiny. This has been a feature of the Vietnamese media from its origins in the 1950s, and while đổi mới has relaxed the management style of the party vis a vis media, it would seem some attributes of party control remain fundamentally unchanged.

Finally, one should avoid any simplistic tendency to understand the legal regime as representing only authoritarian control to repress media practitioners' struggle for more freedom of expression. David Marr (1998:5) describes a present-day media scene where journalists stretch journalistic licence to write sensational stories by fudging the line between fact and fiction. In some cases of a high-flying entrepreneur or official being charged for nepotism or corruption, basic rules of evidence are often ignored, no right of reply is honoured and libel charges have no opportunity of being heard in court. Thus, greater journalistic space is not always used responsibly and cheque-book journalism, where reporters produce their stories according to financial disbursement, has roused public concern. The media profession shows no sign of being able to regulate itself with a code of professional ethics and state legislation is partly aimed at addressing these growing problems within the country's media.

Elite Manipulation

Media practitioners do not only have to contend with institutions having media regulatory prerogatives. Traditionally they also had to be mindful of senior political leaders who took a close interest in what newspapers published, or even had a hand in the actual running of these papers. I shall describe briefly two prominent examples, Ho Chi Minh and Truong Chinh, to give an idea of the extent to which Vietnam's top leaders personally interfered with the editorial process.23

23 From 1951 till his death in 1969, Ho Chi Minh was VCP Chairman (a revered status ranked above that of Party General Secretary). Truong Chinh is widely regarded as the VCP's foremost theorician up till his death in 1988; he was Party General Secretary from 1941 to 1956, and then Acting General Secretary for a few months in 1986 before retiring. Although he lost his general secretary position in 1956, his Politburo ranking was always second only to that of Le Duan, the Party General Secretary from 1960 to 1986.
Ho Chí Minh published a huge number of press articles using mostly pen-names. In the party daily ND alone, since its first issue in 1951, he had a total of 1,205 articles. Most of these were signed with any one of his 23 pen-names (NDCC 10/3/91:3; NDCC is Nhan Dan Chinh Tri). On their own these are already impressive statistics, not to mention that he had also written prodigiously for other newspapers and magazines as well. According to some Vietnamese media practitioners, an article bearing Ho’s imprint would signal to others in the party that this was the preferred line and should be supported (Hoàng Tùng 1962:305,313; and Trần Thư 1996:111). The use of pen-names is part of Vietnam’s literary tradition, although such a big range would have the usefulness of softening the glare of Ho’s personality cult as well.

Ho also took a great interest in what other people wrote, not only the political and economic articles related to national policies, but also literary pieces. He would underline in red and blue those lines which caught his attention and then call up editors for discussions (Nguyễn Thanh Lê 1996:110). These comments could have an intimidating effect on the journalists concerned, if one goes by Đỗ Phương’s (1994:27) account of his own experience. In the early 1960s, Đỗ Phương wrote an emotional column on a literary debate in the paper Chí Quốc, only to have Ho pen a comment beside it, asking to know who was the writer and what were his intentions. For Đỗ Phương, Ho’s query was to have a lifelong impact. He said, “From then on, I always checked myself and never wrote anything with a hot head” (Tự độ, mình tuyên trương như báo giới viết trong lúc nóng đầu).34

Trương Chính did not write as copiously as Ho, but was far more involved in the actual running of newspapers. From 1954 to 1957 he corrected every editorial in ND himself, sometimes late into the night. He did not just concern himself with the thrust of political arguments, but also corrected grammar right down to punctuation marks (Nguyễn Thanh Lê 1996:109). At other times, ND staff were used to him telephoning early in the morning after he had read the newspaper, to tell them what he thought of the edition. Sometimes it was just about the inappropriate use of some words. Once he

served notice that he would visit the paper in one hour’s time. On arrival, he asked some cursory questions and then left (Nguyễn Đức Thi 1996:181). According to some of today’s media practitioners, such tactics were calculated to remind journalists that he, Trương Chính, was in control. In actual fact there was no need for such tight monitoring because articles were very carefully written during those war years (Source 5 Interview 2; Source 6 Interview 2; Source 7 Interview 3; and Source 9 Interview 3). Trương Chính’s micro-management of media was also evident at the magazine, Vietnam Pictorial, belonging to Vietnam News Agency. Up till 1965 he checked every issue before it went to print (Vũ Thị Hiền 1997:76n*). In 1969, he personally wrote to government departments to resolve little problems like improving the quality of printing and training for Vietnam Pictorial’s journalists (Thương Tấn Xã Việt Nam 1985:123,124).

The case studies in this thesis provide more examples of how Trương Chính micro-managed the media, and not always to impose stricter censorship either. They also show that from 1954 through the đổi mới years, other Politburo members such as Nguyễn Chí Thanh, Nguyễn Văn Linh and Đào Duy Tùng, took an active role in manipulating the media to suit their own political agenda.

Conclusion

In summary, what has been described is a party-dominated organizational system that, despite many discernible changes brought about by đổi mới, still carries out a very extensive range of media-management functions in the following ways (modified from Buzek 1994:114):

a) Proprietorship of all forms of mass media thus excluding private ownership.

This makes the press reliant on the party for licensing facilities and financial matters, e.g., access to printing presses, editorial premises and operating funds.

b) Decisive role in staffing, particularly the senior positions.

c) Guidance in the form of regular directives that cover ideological, political and organizational matters.

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34 Đỗ Phương was not precise about when he wrote that article. He rose to become Director of Vietnam News Agency in the 1990s, retiring in 1996.

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d) Custodial institutions to ensure (c).

These, together with the feature of elite manipulation, give us an idea of what institutional and individual obstacles media practitioners have to work through in their struggle to publish something editorially risky. A longitudinal time perspective is added to provide an appreciation of the system's Leninist origins and to track how, despite the far-reaching changes of đổi mới, the trappings of ideology continue to define the system in characteristic ways. I hope to have provided a sense of how the whole media system operates which can then serve as a template to understand better the specific cases of state-media contention in the following chapters.

CHAPTER THREE

The Nhân Văn Giai Phẩm Affair

In 1956, less than two years after the VWP took over formal control of the northern half of Vietnam from the French, two literary magazines, NV and GP, appeared in Hanoi. This was the first time the party faced a significant challenge from newspapers under its jurisdiction. Writers, more so than journalists, were behind this dissent. Their expression of unhappiness with the increasing control over literature embroiled the ALA (Arts and Literature Association or Hội Văn Nghệ) in this controversy. A few prominent intellectuals from other professions joined them. Together, they went far beyond protesting literary censorship to mount a broad-based assault on party shortcomings in key areas such as land redistribution, transition towards a state-run economy, education and the rule of law.

Since translations and discussions of the content of NV and GP are extensively available in the following works – Hoa Mai n.d.; Boudarel 1991:23-46, 128-41; and Kim Ngọc Bao Ninh 1996:215-91 – repetition will be avoided as far as possible. The two magazines and other primary source materials are instead mined for what they demonstrate of the struggle paradigm in operation: the politics of newspapers using a state agenda to contend with the state. Almost all of NV and GP's writers were VWP members and/or had joined the party's struggle for national independence since 1946, or even earlier. The two magazines came under intense official attack almost immediately and aroused great controversy and debate. They were able to survive for three months and the struggle then continued through another magazine, Văn.

The Setting for the Struggle

Both magazines did not just emerge out of the blue. The gestation of discontent among the literati started when party policy began in earnest to stifle literature with socialist doctrines round about 1950. It is convenient to start the narrative at the point when GP published its first issue on 5 February 1956, just a week before the Lunar New Year Festival of Tet. Known as Giai Phẩm Mùa Xưa or Spring GP, this festive
issue was a 47-page paperback-size collection of poetry, prose and music, only mildly critical of the system.1

Three writers, Hoàng Cam, Lê Đạt and Trần Đản, took the initiative to produce this first issue of GP. Hoàng Cam and Lê Đạt solicited the articles for this issue while Trần Đản contributed two pieces, one of which, the poem "We Shall Overcome" (Nhất Định Thắng), became the chief target of subsequent official criticism. Lê Đạt, interviewed in Paris four decades after the event (Phan Tam Khê 1998:20-21), gave an impression that this initial issue of GP was driven more by a youthful sense of derring-do than any serious intent to launch a political protest. The three were then a group of young writers who had said to each other that with the war against the French over, the time was opportune to publish something together without any mutual censorship, and each would be personally responsible for his own writing. At that time, none of them expected the official reaction to be so draconian.

Some of the contributions expressed an unmistakable ambivalence about life and the arts in the DRV. Those articles would have given pause to a more cautious editor, yet the overall message of the publication affirmed the need to contribute to a new socialistic society. Although Lê Đạt later disclaimed any political agenda in what he and his literary colleagues did, the socio-political environment of the DRV at the time suggested that intellectual discontent was growing. Already, writers within the armed forces had petitioned the military authority to interfere less with their creative work, and had spoken out against ideologically-driven writings that lacked literary merit. Furthermore, for writers with a social conscience at that historical juncture, there was more to the larger oppressive socio-political climate than just the censorship of literature. Violence and injustice permeated a land redistribution programme (officially called land reform or cải cách ruộng đất). The state intruded into highly matters, such as

1 Georges Boudarel (1991:26-41) and Kim Ngọc Bao Ninh (1996:227-72) have written ample accounts of the events leading to the publication, so I shall just provide a summary of the main factors as well as add some details that have emerged in recent years.
2 "We Shall Overcome" best epitomizes the subset of doubt and ambivalence in Spring GP. While the poem closer with the line "We shall overcome", its leitmotif is a grey sombre rain enveloping Hanoi even as many red flags celebrate the new socialist regime. The poet evokes the scene of people leaving the DRV for the non-communist south, a traffic that was allowed up till 20 July 1955. In querying their reasons for leaving, Trần Đản seems to rehearse his own reservations about the regime.

the choice of marriage partners, and both Hoàng Cam and Trần Đản had personally suffered this particular form of official interference in their private lives. An official residential permit policy (đăng ký hộ khẩu) restricted freedom of movement to an extent unprecedented in living memory (Kim Ngọc Bao Ninh 1996:236; and Hoàng Cam's article in NV 1 (20/9/56):2&4). Members of the intelligentsia, e.g., Lê Đạt (Phan Tam Khê 1958:21) and Nguyễn Mạnh Tường (Hoạt Khánh 1990:62), were beginning to be wary of the increasing level of social regimentation and political repression in the DRV.3

On 15 February 1956, Trần Đản was arrested and all issues of Spring GP had to be recalled. The ALA took the cue and commenced a criticism session against Trần Đản and his "We Shall Overcome". About 150 people attended the six-hour session which lasted till 1 a.m. Nobody spoke out for Trần Đản even though some participants felt privately that this was an over-reaction by the ALA. In the first week of March 1956, the ALA also published a harsh criticism in its magazine, NTV, branding Trần Đản a reactionary and an enemy of the people (see page 11 of Phan Khôi's article in GP Mới Thá Tập 1:3, 13-16). Even though Spring GP's initiators were among its members, the ALA's relationship with the magazine was not exactly that of a supervisory organ with its media. Spring GP was an independent publishing effort using a private publisher. But since the magazine was a literary publication and launched by writers, the ALA was the most appropriate organ to lead a criticism session. The ALA was a mass organization of writers and artists. Its mobilization effort against Spring GP underlined the party's organizational reach into the writing community, barely two years after taking over formal control from the French.

But the party's Ideology Commission (then known as the Propaganda and Training Commission), the foremost control organ of the media system, was the major instrument for action taken against GP. More specifically, Tô Hữu, Head of the Ideology Commission and alternate CC member, played an intimate role in the

3 Eminent lawyer and university lecturer, Nguyễn Mạnh Tường, wrote critical articles on the law in the DRV for GP and was consequently removed from all his appointments. He died in 1997, but in 1992 he managed to publish in Paris his memoir, Un Excommuénté, on his role in the NVPG affair.
proscribing of Spring GP. Phan Khôi (see page 34 of his article in GP Mùa Thu Tập 1:3, 13-16) recounted how Tổ Hữu deliberately signalled displeasure with the magazine at the ALA office on 12 February 1956. The occasion was Tết, the New Year festival on the lunar calendar. Tổ Hữu was expected to call at the association. Before his arrival, Spring GP was already on everybody’s lips although there was as yet no official reaction to it. Phan Khôi noted:

In a room full of people, he (Tổ Hữu) asked me what I thought of Spring GP. I said only Trần Đạo’s poem was confused, somewhat ill-advised; but I found the pieces by Phùng Quân and Lê Đại very correct in what they said. “Fighting against rigid formulas” and “Getting rid of ideological drags” were things we should do; not only should we warn them to speak out clearly, we should encourage them to write in the press. In front of everybody present, Tổ Hữu said this: “Why waste ink and paper on them?” Whereupon I kept quiet. I have too many experiences in life not to know that it would be stupid to say anything more under the circumstances. 4

Three days later, Trần Đạo was detained and all issues of Spring GP had to be recalled.

Such a punitive reaction raises a key question as to how Spring GP was able to make it past the media regulatory system into print in the first place. Two reasons may be identified. The first was the relaxation of pre-publication censorship in 1954. In 1945, when the Viet Minh launched the August Revolution and took over Hanoi in the wake of the Japanese surrender, the Communist Party imposed direct pre-publication censorship (Lưu Văn Lợi 1996:165-66). This was written into Section 2 of Decree-Law 41 (Sắc Lệnh 41) of the newly-nationalized DRV and signed by Hồ Chí Minh on 29 March 1946. 5 In October 1954, five days after regaining Hanoi formally from the French, the DRV announced informally to journalists a new press policy that did away with pre-publication censorship (Hội Nhà Báo Hà Nội 1995:39). This light touch derived from a need to be conscious of its public image. According to Nguyễn Minh Cần, who was then a member of the Hanoi Party Executive Committee and Head of the city-level Ideology Commission (Trường Ban Tuyên Huấn Thành ủy Hà Nội), the regime wanted to woo public opinion in the south while waiting for the national elections prescribed by the Geneva Conference of July 1954 (Nguyễn Minh Cần 1957:70-71). 6 At that time, a party-centred media regulatory system like that described in Chapter Two was more or less in place. What was peculiar to the situation then was the existence of private publishing which had yet to be nationalized (Tổ Hoà 1993:5; và Hội Nhà Báo Hà Nội 1995:46). This provides the second reason why Spring GP was able to get into print. It was run as a private venture by a few individuals thus obviating the need to have its material vetted by a party-related supervisory organ. In a nutshell, the availability of a publication industry in private hands enabled the censorship system to be short-circuited. Kim Ngọc Bảo Minh (1996:252), citing Ministry of Culture statistics, records that there were still 17 private publishers in Hà Nội in 1955, down from 84 the year before. An aggressive private publisher, Vình Đức, produced Spring GP (Tổ Hoà 1993:50-51). Later in the year, Minh Đức publishers also put out NV as well as a few other magazines as a test of the regime. The VWP’s desire to woo the people in the south with a moderate image probably contributed to this initial tolerance of private publishing. The DRV government did make some attempts to regulate the publishing industry but were hobbled by bureaucratic incompetence and economic exigencies. For instance, some publishers printed objectionable material such as titles from the French colonial period, books which were not consonant with the revolutionary perspective, and literature from political parties and social organisations which did not have the proper permits. Many publishers did not bother to have an

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5 Tôi nhận được photocopy của Sắc Lệnh 41 by applying at the University of Nebraska Library by paying a USD1 fee.

6 A peace conference in Geneva followed the French defeat by VWP forces at the battle of Điện Biên Phủ in 1954. The parties at the conflict agreed at the conference to a partition of Vietnam for two years, after which elections would be held to unify the country under one elected government.
Launching the Struggle

The Spring GP controversy might have just ended there but for a momentous event which took place halfway round the world at the same time. On 25 February 1956, Nikita Khruščev, then First Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, delivered his controversial speech at the party’s 20th Congress, denouncing Stalin’s repressive legacy and proposing a more moderate form of socialism. This would allow Soviet citizens more personal freedom and pursue a less confrontative foreign policy of peaceful coexistence with the capitalist world. Khruščev’s action precipitated ideological uncertainty throughout the socialist world. Within the DRV, such doctrinal relaxation was problematic for those leaders who sought to strengthen rather than loosen the party’s ideological and organizational grip on society. The party leadership had to examine this new situation in international Communism and set down a party line to guide everybody.

Khruščev’s speech sparked off a clamorous intellectual debate in the DRV. Some Vietnamese have since written or spoken of their 1956 experience and the legacy of Khruščev (Nguyễn Minh Cẩn 1995; Trần Thư 1996:102-108; and Vũ Thư Hiền 1997:91-109). Lê Đạt confirmed Khruščev’s impact on himself and his friends who had so recently produced Spring GP. Although he did not read the actual draft of Khruščev’s speech, he was aware of the message of the Soviet 20th Congress. He and those of his friends who were VWP members felt that, as good Communists, they had to experiment with new ways to make the system more democratic (Phan Tam Khê 1998:21). That helps explain why GP emerged again later in the year, together with a few other magazines, to promote a more liberal political agenda.

The Ninth Plenum of the VWP Second Congress, from 19-24 April 1956, issued a resolution that moved closer to Khruščev’s liberal position, announcing the party’s resolve to carry out criticism and self-criticism regularly in order to amend the lack of intra-party democracy (ND 27/4/56a:1). Although the plenum resolution did not say so explicitly, the party was grappling with the major problem of public discontent caused by cadres who implemented the land redistribution policy in a highly-repressive and arbitrary manner. From 28 April to 3 May 1956, senior and middle-ranking cadres attended a session to study the Ninth Plenum (Second Congress) Resolution. We know from Nguyễn Minh Cẩn’s (1997:70-91) retrospective eyewitness account that it was a no-holds-barred session where harsh and repressive party policies were criticized. The older cadres led the way, which moved it younger ones to follow their example. So forthright were the criticisms that even questions about the growing personality cult of Ho Chi Minh were raised. Party General Secretary Trương Đình Chinh was so taken aback by the intensity of the criticisms that he had to admit that “there were instances of personality cult but it had not reached a serious degree” (cũng dĩ cỡ hiền tương sông bì cã khanh nhưng chưa đến mức trầm trọng). He promised to review all the problems raised by the cadres, such as land redistribution, party rectification to get rid of undesirable members, and the unjust treatment of some intellectuals/artists. Five months later, Trương Đình Chinh was to be demoted from his Tıp party position, the culmination of the critical tide that began at the April meeting.

Within the framework of the Ninth Plenum (Second Congress) Resolution, the press could no longer be more forthright about official shortcomings. This underlined how a party plenum sets the political tenor and lays down the parameters within which every institution, including the press, functions. Even as it became more critical in its reporting of official mistakes in land redistribution, the press gave readers very little idea of the systemic process that led to the policy reappraisal. For instance, party daily ND told its readers no more than that the Politburo and CC practised criticism and self-criticism with a view to correcting errors (ND 27/4/56b:1). It said nothing about what happened at the study session organized for middle-ranking cadres and above. Media practitioners were bound to be among the participants at the plenum and the study session because journalists and editors (as the system’s propaganda workers) were also

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1 It is necessary to be clear about the numbering of plenary sessions as they get repeated after each Party Congress. The Ninth Plenum of the Second Congress in 1956 should not be confused with the Ninth Plenum of the Third Congress in 1963 which will be discussed extensively in Chapter Four.
insiders. But as Nguyễn Minh Căn (1997:91) noted, such internal deliberations were “internal struggle” (tranh đầu nội bộ). Media practitioners were highly sensitised to the injunction against revealing such secrets on the inside to those on the outside.

Following the Ninth Plenum (Second Congress), the party started to rectify the repressive errors and finally announced the termination of the land redistribution programme on 20 July 1956 (ND 20/7/56:2). Cadres who were wrongly detained during this programme were released. In that general climate of the party wanting to set things right, Trần Đản was also freed on 5 May 1956. But the response to the call for criticisms continued to be cautious, suggesting that official encouragement was seen as not firm enough. On 26 May 1956, Lu Dingyi, Head of the Chinese Communist Party’s Propaganda Department, made his speech announcing the Hundred Flowers campaign. This encouraged Chinese intellectuals to be critical of official policies. ND, which otherwise could be very prompt if it wanted to when reiterating policy lines from Beijing, chose to say nothing of the event until 5 August 1956 (ND 5/8/56:3). That kind of editorial caution was not surprising coming from the party daily.

A pluckier spirit was to be found elsewhere in public discourse. In late June 1956, Vietnamese students translated excerpts of the speech from China’s People’s Daily and displayed them as wall posters known as báo tường or bích báo (Nguyễn Minh Căn 1997:21). In July 1956, the university’s in-house magazine, Tạp San Đại Học, published the speech (Boudarel 1991:239-41). Its editor, Trần Đản, was a philosophy lecturer who had returned from France in 1951 to serve the DRV. He later wrote for NV and GP, and also took part in their editorial discussions. By 14 July 1956, or possibly earlier, the group of writers behind the Spring GP decided to resurrect their banned magazine and started to solicit articles for it (see Phan Khôi’s article in Giai Phán Mùa Thu Tập 1/3-16). It would seem that some people were sizing up the internal struggle of the party and beginning to convince that the ideological climate was really softening and was conducive for them to step up media struggle for more change.

In August, clearer signs emerged that the party definitely wanted to intensify the criticism campaign. On 7 August 1956, a ND editorial, entitled *Step up criticism and self-criticism* (Đẩy mạnh phê bình và tự phê bình), stated that not enough was being done and reproached the press for this inadequacy (ND 7/8/56:1). Then, on 18 August 1956, ND carried Hồ Chí Minh’s open letter to the peasants admitting to mistakes made during the party’s land redistribution programme and promising to rectify the errors (ND 18/8/56:1). These firmer indicators of an ideological shift coincided with the 1-18 August 1956 meeting of the ALA to study the doctrinal implications of the 20th Soviet Party Congress and China’s Hundred Flowers campaign. Gathered under one roof in Hanoi were 300 of the DRV’s most articulate citizens. Under normal circumstances, such an occasion would have witnessed an enthusiasm for debate. So when ND ran its positive article on the Hundred Flowers campaign on the fifth day of the meeting, the floodgates opened and many writers spoke up against the association’s leadership. They criticized it for factionalism and favouritism, narrowly-defined and formulaic guidelines on literature, and stigmatizing writers who disagreed with the official viewpoint.

This meeting saw two major developments. Under popular pressure, Tô Hữu backed down and made some self-criticism. Nguyễn Hữu Dạng and Phan Khôi emerged as leaders around whom the alienated writers rallied to produce NV.10 These events also gave an impetus to the existing plan to relaunch GP and a call went out at the meeting for writers to contribute articles to the magazine (Boudarel 1991:238-51).

From 29 August to 28 November 1956, GP brought out three autumn and one winter issues before it stopped publishing altogether. NV brought out five issues from 20 September to 20 November 1956, but its sixth issue was aborted at the printers on 10 October 1956.

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10 Sagar (1991:39) identified 7 August as the date the letter was actually disseminated. Although he did not state his source, it is plausible considering that this was the day ND made its public call to step up the criticism campaign.

11 Nguyễn Hữu Dạng joined the revolution in the late 1930s and organized the 1945 ceremony where Hồ Chí Minh declared independence. He was then appointed Minister of Youth in the first DRV government, declared on 24 September 1945; but in 1954, for reasons still unknown, he ended up in a modest position in the magazine PNV (Huß Lean 1993:19).
December 1956. They were not the only new magazines published that autumn. Other titles included Dhma, Tranh Hoa, Nghi Thanh, and Tlp San Phd Binh, and more titles were planned but the official crackdown in December stopped them. NV and GP went beyond the format of Spring GP which was to carry literary works with oblique criticisms of DRV society. Readers were now given sharp, direct commentaries or satires on a gamut of official failings in fields such as literature, tertiary education, scientific research, the rule of law and the economy. Running through them was the prevailing message that the party was intruding too many areas of life. There were open calls for more freedom and democracy.

From reading NV, it is evident that its editorial board was operating on a struggle paradigm. The word "struggle" was frequently seen in headlines or in text. The first issue of the magazine stated clearly that it regarded writers as taking part in a "struggle" for more freedom and democracy (NV 1 (20/9/56):6&5). But it was not just a struggle by the literati for more creative space. In the words of the eminent historian, Đào Duy Anh, who was interviewed in the second issue (page 1 of NV 2 (30/9/56):1&2), there was also a need for a "struggle" within the party "to drive back the regressive forces that hinder the progress of our system and obstruct the development of culture" (đánh bại lực lượng lực hậu làm vong bướm tiến của chế độ chính ta, cản trở sự phát triển của văn hóa chúng ta). NV saw its editorial effort as a contribution to this struggle by the party. In an article in the fourth issue, Trần Duy, the magazine's Editorial Secretary (thư ký tạ soạn; or in Western journalistic terminology, the Managing Editor), made clear that NV was taking part in a "struggle" to fulfill the VWP's 10th Plenum (Second Congress) call for freedom and democracy (NV 4 (5/11/56):2).

True to the features of the struggle paradigm, NV and other outspoken publications appropriated many official policies or positions to fortify themselves against charges of ideological deviation. For example, NV and GP articles stressed their firm belief in the leadership of the VWP. GP and Dhma carried on their byleaf a statement supporting the objectives of China's Hundred Flowers campaign in the hope that this would provide some protective justification for the critical things they were saying. Like state-owned publications, NV also compiled and sent complaints from readers to relevant state organs for their reference (Huu Loan 1993:18). Once its first issue was out, NV also wrote to seek the advice of the Prime Minister, the Party General Secretary, Heads of the VFF and the National Assembly Standing Committee, party and government departments overseeing the media, Hanoi city's party and municipal authorities, and the ALA. These moves underline the fact that the people running NV were insiders who understood the power dynamics of the system and were trying to sustain their protest by operating astutely within acceptable parameters.

Such a situation is easier to comprehend if we keep in mind the poet Hữu Loan's explanation that the NVGP affair should be understood within the framework of a mobilization of culture in a socialist society (Huu Loan 1993:17-18). He said:

*There was a slogan then which exhorted us to "Tell it straight, tell it true, tell it all" in order to build the party. Not only should we say it with our mouths but we should also write our views in newspapers. The government then encouraged the setting up of private newspapers to carry such writings. That was how we had our Nhân Văn Giai Phạm and Nguyễn Bính had his Tranh Hào.*

Furthermore, once the official call to step up criticism was made, all party and government departments and mass organisations started to organize criticism and self-criticism sessions throughout August and September 1956 (ND 23/12/56:2). Take, for instance, what was happening at the People's University (Trường Đại Học Nhân Dân) which was then holding its first political instruction course on Marxism-Leninism for civil servants/professionals who worked under the French (Nguyễn Văn Trần 1995:181-88). Such a background would have rendered them politically inhibited, yet they too made wall posters to query or even parody what they were being taught. Their wall posters drew inspiration from NV and GP. Over at the Văn Khoa Teachers Training University (Trường Đại Học Sở Phạm Văn Khoa), students were speaking out against...
the authoritarian university administration and the party cell system which was the source of many inequitable practices in their life, e.g., class background had become an important component in assessing students. When they did not get a fair hearing they launched the magazine Đất Mới to publicise their grievances (ND 23/12/56:2 and Đất Mới Tiếp I. 10/11/56:13). Some of this pugnacity was also spreading to the rest of the media (Hội Nhà Bào Hà Nội 1995:56). But more critical than this political effervescence on the surface was the shift being experienced in the inner processes of the party. This was summed up in the December 1956 issue of party theoretical journal Hèo Tiếp (republished in ND 30/12/56:2) as follows:

_In the past, due to the lack of democracy in the Party, people were wary of criticising errors especially if they were committed by more senior levels. These days it is exactly the opposite where people criticise with such vehemence especially if they see that the fault lies with those above, so much so that it has reached a stage of blaming upper echelons for everything, and neglecting to see their own responsibilities._

More than just the sharpness of their intellectual arguments, NV and GP were posing an even greater challenge to the regime by daring to provoke authority or defy conventional injunctions such as that against divulging the details of internal struggle._

Examples would include the following. In October 1956, the GP group reprinted the banned Spring GP issue and declared, in a new preface, its intention to promote discussion and debate on sensitive questions such as the rights of writers and how much should literature serve politics. Phan Khôi (Giai Phẩm Mùa Thu Tiếp 2, 13-16) reminded readers of the injunction against divulging internal struggle, but this did not stop him from going on to describe at length the behind-the-scenes machinations by ALA officials when they deliberated on a prestigious literary award. The first issue of NV ran an account reflecting the rebellious mood at the 1-18 August 1956 meeting organized by the ALA to discuss the Soviet 20th Party Congress and China’s Hundred Flowers campaign. This was information which DRV readers could not find in the official media. Subsequent issues of NV provided forthright, telling details of how the state tried to curb the media.

These developments also signified the swing in the official political mood. The outspoken content of NV and GP was contributing to the ideological shift as much as being a product of it. The momentum of criticism against the VWP’s shortcomings, particularly for its land redistribution policy, was to gain so much force that it led to the demotion of Trọng Chinh for his Party General Secretary position at the 10th Plenum (Second Congress) in September 1956. This underlines the risk of mass mobilization growing out of control and explains why members of the political elite would show a deep interest in instruments of mobilization like the media because it may affect their political fortunes in critical ways. It also illustrates how party internal struggle and media struggle can feed on each other.

The System Responds

_Shortly after NV and GP were launched, official reaction unfolded in the following ways:

a) cautioning the magazines’ organizers in face-to-face discussions;

b) mobilizing other papers to attack the two magazines;_  

c) using administrative and extra-institutional measures to obstruct production and circulation; and_

The exact date of the plenum is not known because Vietnamese media only chose to say it was held in September. Given that the General Secretary was demoted at this plenum, it would have been a highly sensitive session, further illustrated by the delayed media announcement of the plenum resolution till the end of October (ND 30/10/56:1). Three top leaders were demoted for the errors of the land redistribution programme. Trọng Chinh lost his General Secretary position but kept his Politburo status. Lê Văn Lương lost his Politburo and Head of the Party Organization Commission (Trưởng Ban Tổ Chức) positions but remained an alternate member of the CC. Hồ Vinh Thắng was removed from the CC and became an ordinary party member. NV and GP bore the brunt of the official campaign although the party daily, ND, also published a few articles against another magazine, Điểu Mới. I believe this targeting of NV and GP was because their organizers and contributors were prominent in the world of letters, as well as the sharpness of the magazine’s content._

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14 Trong đây do thiên dan chủ cho nên trong Đảng nho kia có hiện tượng thây căi sai khống nói, nhất là nên thây căi tên sa lạy càng ngã nói. Hễ nay thì lại khác, ai nói cài sai mà mang báo nói, nhất là thây căi tên sa lạy chăng báo nói, di đến xu hướng đặc trách nhiệm lên tên, thây trách nhiệm cả bản thân nói.

15 For the purpose of this thesis, I see no need to set down the details of the debate between the state and the magazines, NV and GP. Readers who are interested may refer to Kim Ngọc Bảo Ninh (1996:215-91) and Kerkvliet (1998:21-26).
d) finally launching a mass criticism campaign against NV to justify the ultimate move of an official ban.

Five days after NV started circulating on 20 September 1956, ND ran a stern article by Nguyễn Chuông (ND 25/9/56:4) accusing both NV and GP of attacking the VWP leadership in the guise of discussing the bureaucratic shortcomings of the literary establishment. This is an illustration of how a media struggle can be so swiftly labelled as being "against" the state. Nguyễn Chuông was Deputy Chief of the Ideology Commission (Nguyễn Minh Cán 1997:231). If this was not evident to the average reader of ND, writers and journalists were more than likely to know. It would signal even more clearly to them that the Ideology Commission, the chief control organ of the media, looked poorly on the two magazines. They would also have taken note of another ominous sign of official displeasure. Another daily, Thời Mới (New Times), which was privately owned, joined the criticism of NV and GP after being initially supportive (H寮 Nhà Báo Hà Nội 1995:56).

From late September till the closing down of NV in December, ND frequently ran commentaries and readers' letters against the two magazines. Under normal circumstances this would have sufficed to intimidate the target into backing down. But instead of retreating, NV and GP used their own pages to debate some of these establishment critics. The resolve was partly the result of the men behind the magazines, but it must also have been sustained by a continuing uncertainty about the party line at that time.

In September, eminent oppositions against rigid ideological orthodoxy were gaining currency at the 10th Plenum (Second Congress), welling up to force Trương Chánh’s demotion. Although this decision was not publicly announced in the party daily, ND, until 30 October 1956, the larger community of party cadres – among whom were writers and journalists – were likely to have heard of what was happening. The trend not only spurred liberal critics of the system into action but also enjoined apparatchiks to distance themselves from the hard-line doctrinal positions they had been policing. Họi Thánh, an ALA Standing Committee (Bàn Thường Vu) member was an example. He led the earlier ALA criticism session against Trần Dân and the poem “We Shall

Overcome”. Sensing the changing ideological wind, he published his self-criticism in the ALA's magazine, PV, on 20 September 1956, admitting that he had gone too far in his harsh attack on Trần Dân. Họi Thánh's change of heart was prompted by bóng Chí Minh's words of remorse for the party's land redistribution errors during Hô's National Day speech on 2 September; and also by an unnamed CC member's reproach (see Họi Thánh's article in PVN 20-26/9/56:2; and NVN 3 (15/10/56):3&5). Hôi Thánh was not alone in his recantation. On 2 October 1956, the ALA Standing Committee issued a statement to admit to a similar mistake và và Trần Dân (a copy of this statement was inserted into the 8 October 1956 reprint of the banned Spring GP between pages 12 and 13). The committee's statement also intimated that it had been criticized by the Prime Minister's Office for its earlier harsh action. It would seem if there were leaders who were inclined to be stern with critical writers, there were apparently others who tried to mitigate any Vietnamese treatment of these writers.

Those political leaders who did not approve of NV and GP were in a bind. On the one hand, official displeasure must be signalled to warn NV and GP not to get out of hand with their criticism of party performance. On the other hand, restraint must be exercised when dealing with these outspoken magazines because the party was being held to its words about wanting to hear forthright criticisms and promote democracy. We know only broadly that the party leadership met the publishers of NV and GP several times in September 1956 when the tense 10th Plenum (Second Congress) was going on, to tell them not to be so provocative. This was mentioned in passing in ND (16/12/56:3) which provided no details about who were present and what was said. In all likelihood, Tổ Hưu’s Ideology Commission was involved because all press matters came within its purview, and other sources corroborate the major role played by the commission in dealing with NV and GP.

Tổ Hưu was one example of a leader who disapproved of NV and GP but had to maintain a certain level of civility. According to Trần Duy (NVN 5(20/11/56):6), the organizers of NV wrote to Tổ Hưu for advice in the latter's capacity as Head of the

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14 The Prime Minister was then Phạm Văn Đông, ranked sixth in the Politburo. In Vietnam today, Đông is regarded by some as an upright intellectual leader who eschewed the factional politics of his
Ideology Commission before launching the magazine. Writers were all too familiar with Tô Hữu’s reputation as a key figure in censorship matters to risk him unnecessarily. After all, he had said in front of everybody at the ALA in February 1956 that the Spring GP was a waste of good ink and paper and, shortly after that, draconian action struck against those involved. It took two letters before Tô Hữu would meet the organizers of NV, indicating a level of reluctance. Trần Duy said the NV editorial board wanted to ask for his guidance and moral support but this was, in all likelihood, a struggle tactic of seeking identification with the official agenda. Trần Duy also chose to say nothing of Tô Hữu’s response. Whatever the latter’s reply was, NV went ahead to publish, which meant the Head of the Ideology Commission had his reasons for letting the magazine go ahead or was not able to stop it directly.

Behind the scenes, Hữu was less circumspect. Nguyễn Minh Chinh’s (1997:68-69, 72) personal advocacy what happened in his office after NV released its second issue on 30 September 1956 confirms Tô Hữu’s aggressive role in co-ordinating the media attack on NV and GP. Càn said:

One day, the Standing Board of the City Party Executive Committee (Trưởng Vũ Thanh Úy) received an order from the Party Central to convene a meeting. We turned out in full force. Tô Hữu represented the Party Central. The minute he arrived, he said immediately, “Look at what Nhan Vinh Giap Phan are doing and you people still have not taken a clear stand.” Of course, I had to say something to defend my colleagues and myself. I replied, “But what had been carried in Nhan Vinh issues 1 and 2 are only the views of intellectuals and are not creating attacks on us. In my opinion, let’s wait and see how their position develops...”. Trần Dạnh Tuyên, the city’s Party Secretary who was sitting beside me, kept muttering me and signalling that I should say no more. From that moment, the meeting became a monologue by Tô Hữu with words like “You people have lost your vigilance in the face of a capitalist campaign against the...”.

... colleagues, while his critics present him as an ineffectual, timid man who stayed above the fray to protect himself.

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system.”. “The newspaper Hanoi which you run has not shown enough understanding of the current situation.”

After that, Tô Hữu proceeded to set down what must be done to route the public against NV and GP. Some Viet-... writers believe Tô Hữu initiated the anti-NVGP campaign because he wanted... 97 scores with some of the NVGP writers who had criticized his poems harshly (Kim Ngọc Bảo Ninh 1996:248n43; and Vũ Thư Hiền 1997:541). Tô Hữu may have harboured a personal grudge, but he was neither the only nor the most senior leader instigating action against NV and GP.

Party General Secretary Trương Chinh too was deeply involved in orchestrating the attack on the magazines. According to one recent account, the eminent musician, Văn Cao, who helped to organize GP, saw Trương Chinh as the mastermind of the anti-NVGP action. He believed the demoted General Secretary needed something to distract attention from his land redistribution debacle. 98 NV and GP could not claim to be the major cause of Trương Chinh’s political downfall, but the latter, who was also the party’s chief theoretician, could have regarded the magazines’ trenchant and critical appraisal of the party’s socialist creed as a threat to his ideological authority.

Quang Đam, who was ND’s Editorial Secretary during the NVGP controversy, provides a personal anecdote of how Trương Chinh was intimately involved in the press campaign against the two magazines (Quang Đam 1994:65-66; and Hà Minh Đức... 97

98 Một ông, Trần Trọng.wordpress có vụ vấp phải việc tập hợp ông Trương Văn Thanh 97, trong đây ông Trần Trọng với ông Hữu đã làm ông hữu hài lòng: “Nhan Vinh Giap Phan nói ra như thế mà các anh không có thái độ gì tôi rất cãi”. Tô Hữu lại nói phải giữ tôn vinh những bài của và các anh em khác: “Nhan Vinh làm gì đó trước bàn bên nhìn Nhan Vinh để, số 2 là quan điểm của các anh... chỉ cho các anh làm nên sự đồng lòng của các anh em khác. Thế thì, chỉ với dự kiến với chúng tôi... và Tô Hữu đã làm điều này để để tương tự của ông Tô Hữu... các anh mãi cần giữ chức trách trước mọi tranh luận trước trên vấn đề chính chế độ”, “Hai Nha các anh chưa phải như vậy để została hiện Hiện Nay!” — The newspaper which Tô Hữu called Hanoi was the newspaper, Tin Hải Nha (Hanoi News), belonging to the Hanoi Party Executive Committee. It began in 1954 as a daily, but this was reduced to 2-3 issues per week before it folded up at the end of 1956.

99 Văn Cao, who composed Vietnam’s national anthem, was also implicated during the anti-NVGP campaign. He was called up by Trương Chinh for a stern one-hour lecture (Vũ Thư Hiền 1997:540-41).
1994:380). Aı’ publishing his first criticism against NV and GP in ND (1/10/56:2), Quang ă’מ close to be silent for a few weeks,كريم his ears pricked (nghe ngơng) for any reaction. At a weekly Ideology Commission meeting, an official needled him that somebody in the NVGP group had said words to the effect that he (Quang Đam) was hiding behind the party daily to attack true revolutionaries with long years of service. Quang Đam confessed that this grazed a "raw nerve" concerning the past (điểm dừng cái "huyệt mạch cầm" về quá khứ) but still maintained his wait-and-see attitude. His prevarication drew the attention of Party General Secretary Trường Chinh. The latter made it clear to Quang Đam that he wanted a more forceful attack on the two magazines by saying: "Why? Are you backing down? Continue writing! Go on hitting! Only action like that is in the spirit of revolutionary struggle!" So Quang Đam wrote his second piece against the NVGP writers which was published in ND (11/12/56:3).

For those caught in the midst of that ideological struggle, the dynamics of confrontation were not always straightforward or clearly etched out. Instances of mixed signals would include Phan Khôi’s being allowed to travel to China for a literature conference which was reported with uncharacteristic promptness on the following day by ND (20/10/56:1&4). The party authority also met with intellectuals on 20 October 1956 to listen to their grievances. As the experience of lawyer Nguyên Mạnh Thông illustrates, Trường Chinh too played a public role in encouraging forthright criticisms. Trường recalled how Trường Chinh (and Trịnh Hữu also) privately urged him to give a lecture on democracy at the VFF (see Chapter One for definition of VFF). Trường did not provide the date of his meetings with these leaders, but said their invitations were made at a time when the party leadership wanted to pacify widespread discontent over the party’s repressive land redistribution programme (Hoà Khánh 1990:60). When Trường finally addressed the VFF on 30 October 1956, Trường Chinh was present and set the tone of remorse for the party’s land redistribution errors by saying, "We have wounded ourselves by striking at our own people." (Nguyễn Mạnh Thông 1992:152-53). That day, Trường spoke without prepared notes and was subsequently encouraged by Trường Chinh and some VFF officials to produce his lecture as a written draft (Hoà Khánh 1990:60). Trường obliged the request and lodged two typed-written copies with the VFF Secretariat but, when the text of his lecture found its way outside the DRV, he was held responsible for it—a leak, although he protested his innocence (Nguyễn Mạnh Thông 1992:154). To be sure, Trường’s political troubles also stemmed from his other outspoken views published in NV and GP. Furthermore, retribution came as part of an overall campaign against the liberal critics of the regime, and not just for him alone. It would be far-fetched to believe that Trường Chinh deliberately plotted Trường’s political troubles in this way, but it does illustrate the dangers that were inherent even when one was encouraged by the powerful to speak at a legitimate forum. The political risk was enhanced by the close involvement of senior leaders who were encouraging participation on the one hand, and curbing it from behind the scenes on the other.

According to NV, systemic counter-action against the magazine went beyond just the elite-promoted attacks in the official media. Action to obstruct NV’s publication and distribution began with warnings to financial contributors and printers that the magazine was politically unsound. Then newscasters were admonished not to sell the magazine and mailed copies had problems reaching subscribers. A whispering campaign by teachers and neighboring cadres made people nervous about reading the magazine. (NV 4/5(11)/56:6, NV 5/11/56:6). Bureaucrats restricted the newsprint supply for the magazine. For instance, the fourth issue of NV, for which the editors planned a print run of 12,000 issues, only received enough paper for 2,000 issues from those state agencies co-ordinating paper supply (Kim Ngọc Bảo Minh 1995:256). The Ideology Commission also resorted to less conventional means such as a semi-covert operation to bribe another private magazine, Trâm Hòa, to criticise NV. The bribe involved an offer of free newsprint if Trâm Hòa would publish two supplied

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21 Some may think Quang Đam’s account reads like an ex post facto attempt to distance himself from his involvement in the anti-NVGP campaign. While that may well be true, it is still plausible to believe his account of Trường Chinh’s active role in proscribing the NVGP writers because others have said similar things about Trường Chinh.


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23 Although NV was printed by a private publisher, the DRV had started to impose official quotas in the newsprint supply which affected everybody. Supplies needed over and above the allotted quota have to be purchased at market rate which was much higher than the cost of the officially-supplied newsprint.
anti-NP articles. This was traced back to the Central Press Office and it had to apologize publicly (NP 4(5/11/56):1&6). A second bribery attempt went through an intermediary, Tô Hoài, Director of the ALA’s Văn Hght Publishing House. He was directed to use the publishing house’s paper stock and finances to help Trần Hòa and, at the same time, to urge the latter to maintain its independently-held but anti-NP position (Tô Hoài 1992:56).

Three days after it exposed the plan to bribe Trần Hòa, NP was charged with failing to “nộp lưu trữ” – a regulation which required a fixed number of copies of a publication to be deposited at the Central Press Office. All daily newspapers were obliged to carry the official announcement of NP’s mistake on the following day, 9 November 1956 (ND 9/11/56a:4). The Central Press Office based its charge on two sets of regulations, one issued by the DRV government on 31 January 1946, and another supplementary set of instructions issued by the Ministry of Propaganda on 15 April 1955. But the reality betrayed a muddled legal environment where rules were confusing and even the official custodians were unable to keep proper track of the number of instructions issued by a bureaucracy which was subject to frequent departmental reshuffles. The 1946 law did not stipulate that three copies of a publication had to be lodged with the press office. The Ministry of Propaganda’s 1955 regulation did contain that requirement, but that ministry had subsequently been replaced by a Ministry of Culture, which did not inherit the Propaganda Ministry’s press regulatory duties. Even if NP had been remiss in observing the deposition rule, the Central Press Office had been prepared to overlook the violation for the magazine’s first three issues, signalling the discretionary nature of state action. NP resisted the charge on legal grounds and, after the mediation of the President’s Office of Ho Chi Minh, was let off with a warning (NP 5(20/11/56):2).

The effort by Ho Chi Minh’s office to mitigate disciplinary action against NP raises the question about who within the leadership was on the side of the critical writers. The empirical data available, however, does not enable us to answer this question with any precision save to say that, on occasions, these protesting publications had more sympathetic treatment from some individuals or institutions than others.

Boudarel (1991:100-19) identifies a few senior military cadres who might not have agreed with the treatment meted out to NP and GP but his observations are speculatory. As for the role of Ho Chi Minh, no hasty conclusion should be formed that he either stood apart from the anti-NVGP campaign or disapproved of it. A more rigorous reading of Ho’s role would credit him with a restraining role on occasions when the bureaucracy appeared too manifestly unreasonable. But the overall enterprise to improve official control over media probably would have had his consent or acquiescence.

Nguyễn Văn Trân’s (1995:187-88) eyewitness account of what happened at his People’s University illustrates how Ho Chi Minh was the iron fist in the velvet glove during the NVGP affair. Ho visited the university at a time when the students were making wall posters in support of NP and GP, and were critical of the regime. One of the posters posed the question: “What is democratic centralism?” Ho looked at all these and just smiled. When it was time for him to address the students, he took the opportunity to answer the question on democratic centralism. He said, “If all of you own property or wealth, you are the master of what you own. That is democracy. But you do not know how to keep your wealth and I look after it on your behalf. I centralize everything by throwing all your possessions into a trunk, lock it and then put the key in my pocket. That is centralism.” The students were reduced to silence.

International and domestic unrest in early November 1956 prompted a firmer action taken against NP. Liberal reforms brought Hungary to the brink of renouncing its communist party which prompted Soviet military intervention on 2 November 1956. In the central Vietnam province of Nghệ An, peasant unrest in Quỳnh Lưu from early to mid-November resulted in clashes with soldiers, and casualties. In the wake of those events, ND editorialized that there were limits to democracy and warned of the state’s determination to take action against anybody who “spread confusion among the people and disseminated reactionary, corrupt and decadent ideas” (ND 9/11/56b:1). If Khrushchev’s liberal line had been restraining the Vietnamese leadership in its treatment of restive intellectuals, his action in Hungary conconed the use of repressive
measures when the situation called for them. This does not mean Hanoi was totally beholden to the Soviet Union, but the line from Moscow had great influence on all Communist countries at that time. In December 1956, the actual move to close NV began.\textsuperscript{25}

ND reports from 14-17 December 1956 presented NV's termination as the popular demand of an angry public. It began on 10 December 1956 at Xuân Thu Printers where workers were allegedly so incensed by the content of NV's sixth issue that they refused to print it. They held a trade union meeting instead to demand that the Hanoi municipal government take a firm stand (ND 14/12/56:4). The truth is that Tô Hữu was once more personally involved. Descending upon the Hanoi Party Executive Committee for the second time, he told them that the forthcoming sixth issue of NV was going to call for a public demonstration at the National Assembly (Nguyễn Minh Căn 1997:69-70).\textsuperscript{26} So the city's Party Executive Committee had no choice but to send Vũ Đình, the cadre in charge of trade unions, to tell the workers at Xuân Thu not to print the issue. Tô Hữu also left instructions to initiate a mass mobilization campaign against NV. The coverage in ND gives the impression that the maoist campaign resulted in thousands of letters sent ... the press and relevant government departments. The came from individuals, neighbourhoods, work units, government departments and mass organizations, contriving to create an impression of a popular reaction from the masses (ND 14/12/56:1&4). Having set the stage, the Hanoi city administration signed the order to suspend the publication on 15 December 1956 and banned all its five issues (ND 11/12/56:1). No mention was made of GP or the other private magazines which had emerged that autumn, but they also petered out.

On 14 December 1956, the day before NV was formally terminated, Ho Chi Minh as President signed a new press law, Decree-Law 282 (Sắc Lệnh 282/SL), which was passed by the National Assembly the following month.\textsuperscript{27} It went much further than the existing Decree-Law 41 of 1946, in that it expanded on the rather rudimentary existing rules regarding the application for a newspaper permit, the code of conduct and the penalties for non-compliance. More significantly, its general thrust set down what was required of editorial content by stressing the media's duty to serve the political objectives of the government. The example of legal confusion over NV falling to perform its deposition obligation in November highlighted the messy media environment since the August Revolution of 1945, and the new law sought to tidy that up. In that regard, the decree functioned somewhat like a manual of instructions on how to fulfill procedural bureaucratic demands, but its overall role as a regulatory instrument of the press should not be overstated. Firstly, the Hanoi city authority did not have to rely on it to close NV. Secondly, developments during this whole NVGP affair had shown that in state-media relations the nucleus of action was the party's Ideology Commission and the basis of its action seemed to derive overwhelmingly from party prerogatives, with scant attention paid to the law of the land. The one example of legal contention over the law on material deposition highlighted the tautness of legal documentation and pointed to implementation as a matter of extemporizing with discretionary power rather than observing due process.

The nature of the press bills' passage through the National Assembly on 24 January 1957 also illustrates how cavalier was the law-making process. The Assembly's Law Drafting Sub-Committee (Tiểu ban Dự Luật) proposed only one amendment, to change the word "government" (chính phủ) in the draft to "political authority" (chính quyền). If this made a substantive difference, it was not immediately evident to this reader and no explanation was offered. Then, when the house broke up into smaller working groups (6), each to examine one of the four bills being passed that day, the group looking at the press bill had no opinion. At the final reading before the bill was voted on, a member, Trần Quý Đồng, did raise a reservation about some words in article 9 that said journalists "should not write articles which oppose the system of

\textsuperscript{25} "Như các cơ sở, các chủ cơ sở đã đề nghị, thì đúng gì để chỉ các chủ cơ sở là chỉ, đó là dân chủ. Các chủ cơ sở không biết gì, thì giữ làm cho. Tôi tập trung bố vở rưng. Tôi khó카 biết bà chủ không vào tôi tụi dầy. Đó là tập trung!"

\textsuperscript{26} At this stage, the Hundred Flowers campaign in China was still on. It was not until June 1957 that Mao Zedong launched his Anti-Rightist movement against the campaign. This may be one reason why the liberal intellectual climate in Hanoi did not end with the closure of NV in December 1956. It continued until late into 1957.

\textsuperscript{27} No copy of the sixth issue exists since it was never printed and the publisher and contributors who would know of its content have never spoken about it. Hence Tô Hữu's claim remains unverified.

The term "decree-law" sounds peculiar in English but it is the translation of "sắc lệnh" preferred by the Institute of Law Research in the SRV Ministry of Justice.
people's democracy" (không dự 'việt bái cũ thủ chúng lại chế độ dân chủ nhân dân). Đặng argued that the wording could lead to the state causing difficulties for journalists and wanted it discarded or clarified in subsequent documents. The Sub-Committee swept this aside by saying the government would work out the details and the law was then passed by an unanimous show of hands. (Cong Bao 19 (1957):248-49; Cong Bao 21 (1957a:372-73; and Cong Bao 21 (1957b:384-85).**

The Struggle Continues

The NVGP affair did not end until more than a year later, in the first half of 1958. What happened in the interim has been described in some detail (Boudarel 1990:168-73; Kurihara 1992:177-91; Nguyen Hung Quoc 1996:157-65; and Kim Ngoc Bao Ninh 1996:276-91) and can be summarised as follows:

a) The restiveness continued in the VWA throughout 1957. From May it found a voice in the association's newly-launched magazine Vân which grew increasingly bold and even ran articles by those actively involved with NV and GP.**

b) Despite a certain level of official tolerance for (a), thereby allowing it to persist, the formal doctrinal position on literature gradually hardened. At its Second Congress in February 1957, the ALA branded what NV and GP did as "revisionism", thus putting the whole affair in the context of a major ideological crime (ND 22/2/57:3).** The doctrine line also strengthened

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20 In May 1999, those following Vien’s newspaper coverage of the National Assembly debate on the amendments to the 1990 Press Law, not to mention that, despite a gap of 40 years, the form and substance (if its lack of) of the law remain basically unchanged.

21 At the Second National Congress of the ALA in February 1957, the association changed its name and organisational structure. It became the Federation of Literature, and the Arts (Hội Liên Hợp Văn Học Nghệ Thuật) and compiled the individual associations representing the different arts, one of which was the VWA.

22 Revisionism dates back to a movement at the turn of the century when some Marxists rejected aspects of Marx theory which they said were out-dated or disproven by developments in Europe. Thus they revised the theory in favour of a peaceful transition to socialism rather than through violent revolution (Ball and Dagger 1995:152-55). This translated into a more liberal and flexible form of socialism than the Leninist type. In the 1950s debate within the communist world, revisionism was used pejoratively to refer to any such liberal tendencies that favoured the reduction of dogma, of collectivization and of inhumanity into personal lives. Tito's moderate brand of socialism in Yugoslavia then was branded

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when both Moscow and Beijing cracked down on their liberal writers in May and June 1957 respectively. Then a November 1957 meeting in Moscow of the world's ruling Communist parties reached a common decision to oppose revisionism.

c) In the wake of (b), there was no longer any need for equivocation by the Vietnamese leadership and, on 6 January 1958, the Politburo issued a resolution for a rectification campaign in literature. The magazine Vân was stopped and another mobilization campaign began not only to criticize Vân, but also the errors of NV and GP as well.

These developments at Vân illustrated how media practitioners capturing a supervisory organ and its publication could advance a struggle. It underlines how protest can sometimes be sustained by finding means to embed itself within the system rather than stand apart from it. This is a key feature of the struggle paradigm that I have posited.

Vân also underlines the tenacity and the political skills of a section of the DRV literati who, instead of accepting passively the termination of NV and GP, took the struggle right into the VWA and its publication. The key individuals were the three who ran Vân - Nguyễn Công Hoan as Chief Editor, and Nguyễn Tuân and Nguyễn Hồng as his assistants (Hoàng Văn Chí 1959:32). Hoan was also elected Chairman of the newly-formed VWA. Judging from the way they were subsequently prepared to engage their critics (Hoàng Văn Chí 1959:210-13), these were independent-minded intellectuals.

We do not know enough of the internal process of the ALA to say how the final personnel appointments came about. For this to happen so soon after the Stae had put a stop to critical magazines like NV and GP does hint at a residual official vacillation as to how hard to come down on the country's restive intelligentsia. Both Boudarel (1990:168-70) and Kurihara (1992:177-8) saw this duality in the outcome of the
SecoAL Congress. On the one hand, the literary policy announced at the congress left no doubt that a hard-line policy was being shaped that would intensify state control of writers; on the other hand, some tempering words promised to respect writers' independence, albeit conditionally. Although NV was condemned at the ALA congress, no action was taken against those associated with it or GP. Some, like Hoàng Cầm, Lê Đạt and Trần Dần, even continued to hold office in the newly-formed VWA. Hoàng Cầm, who was on the Board of Directors of the VWA's publishing house, went on to publish pre-August Revolution books that party ideological custodians frowned upon (Kim Ngọc Bao Ninh 1996:281).

Both the international and domestic political climates also were not conducive to any hardening of ideological orientation. At the time of the Second ALA Congress, Mao had not yet called off China's Hundred Flowers campaign. When addressing that same congress, Trương Chinh, who had earlier commanded attacks on NV and GP, affirmed the same liberal goals of creative freedom for Vietnam as those of the Chinese campaign (Kurihara 1992:179). It is also important to appreciate that ideological contention within the DRV was more broadly based than just over how strictly to censor its writers. It was really about deciding the pace and scope of socialist policies for the country. Party daily ND acknowledged that there were influential views which cautioned the VWP against rushing into any socialization programmes, and called for a neutral policy that would woo the South into earlier reunification (Kurihara 1992:181). In such an undecided climate, those who wanted to be draconian with independent-minded intellectuals were unlikely to get a clear party line to support such a course of action, thus ensuring a measure of moderation in cultural and ideological policy. Although the rhetoric affirming socialism and condemning "revisionism" and ideological indiscretions grew steadily through 1957, the VWP stopped short of organizing a mass movement to promote those objectives. Thus, Văn was able to survive for 37 weekly issues after it first appeared on 10 May 1957. This line of events illustrates how ideological climate played a key role in determining censorship limits and how this climate was in turn a function of internal party deliberations.

On the part of Văn, caution was also evident in the way editorial content avoided the obvious political activism of NV and GP, and stayed within the confines of literature. But the realm of literature itself was an arena of intense contestation about its role in ideology and party unity. At the heart of the contention was the party's increasing promotion of "socialist realism" as the primary (indeed sole) criterion for literature. This became a formula that reduced all creative writings to works that must not only reflect reality, but should also provide models of positive behaviour in the quest to build a socialist society. Socialist realism also frowned upon expressions of what was personal and introspective. Văn, however, was determined to ignore the socialist realism formula and publish works based on their literary merit. The magazine also provided a forum for writers to air their discontent with the mounting ideological encroachment on literature (Nguyễn Hùng Quốc 1996:158-60).

Like NV and GP, Văn demonstrated that its political message was sometimes delivered more forcefully through the power of literature. Given the popular love of poetry in Vietnamese culture, DRV leaders understood well how a well-written verse could strike a chord with people far more effectively than a polemical essay. The following stanza from Phùng Quát's "What My Mother Taught Me" (Lời Mẹ Dần), published in the 27/9/57 issue of Văn, provides a flavour of the emotional impact of lines which have since entered proverbial usage for describing moments of honest courage:

For those you love, say that you love  
For those you hate, pronounce your hate  
Flatter me with your honeyed words  
But I will not say that love is hate  
When love is what I want to say.  
Or place your knife against my neck  
But I will not say that hate is love

31 For an understanding of the impact of the socialist realism formula on literature see the chapter "The Problem With Literature Reflecting Reality" (Vấn đề văn học phản ánh hiện thực) in Lê Ngọc Trà. 1990. Lý Văn và Văn Học. Thành Phố Hồ Chí Minh. NXB Trần. 107
When hate is what I should pronounce.23

The problem Vân had with ideological custodians began when the July 1957 issue of the party theoretical journal Héc Tạp criticized the magazine for being engrossed with trivial topics (Hoàng Văn Chí 1959:211-13). Héc Tạp was really saying that Vân was straying from the party line of socialist realism. Phương Quán’s poem brought party daily ND into the foray. On 24 November 1957, NDCN carried an attack on the poem. This was no ordinary article. Politburo member Hoàng Văn Hồan wrote it under a pen-name, Trúc Chi, taking pains to craft it in a matching verse form with the original.24 The extent to which Hồan involved himself in this affair attested once more to the level of elite interference in the DRV media.

A November 1957 joint declaration made in Moscow by communist parties in power (text carried in ND 23/11/57:1, 2&3) became a watershed of ideological change throughout the socialist world (Kurihara 1992:186-88). The declaration, with its emphasis on “universal principles of Marxism-Leninism” and agreement on what constituted the revisionist threat, was a boon to those DRV leaders who wanted to implement a more vigorous policy of socialist transformation but for the detracting opinions since 1956. With the socialist world (most importantly, both the Soviet Union and China) unanimously backing this harder line, any party authority would no longer have any qualms about moving against the ideological challenge represented by Vân. This was the ideological climate at the start of 1958, a situation markedly different from 1956 when NV and GP were launched.

Thus the stage was set for the state to move against activism within the literati. On 6 January 1958, the Politburo issued a resolution that expressed its concern with the ideological recalcitrance among a great number of writers. It also ordered a rectification campaign that would see writers sent to work in farms and factories (Nguyễn Hưng Quốc 1996:163-64).

Shutting down the magazine Vân was rather more straightforward than terminating NV. Vân’s supervisory organ, the VWA, announced that it was stopping the magazine for one issue to prepare for a special Tet edition (Hoàng Văn Chí 1959:36). But the magazine was never published again. Furthermore, the supervisory organ mobilized two criticism sessions from late January till late April 1958 against those liberal writers connected to Vân, NV and GP. These sessions aimed at getting some targeted individuals to confess their mistakes. Hoàng Văn Hồan presided over the exercise. Tô Hữu was also present. Hoài Thanh, who had recanted his attack on Trần Dân, was once more back at the helm, organizing criticisms against his peers (Xuân Vũ 1991:19, 204). But this was not solely the effort of the VWA. The Ideology Commission’s Culture Section (Tiểu Ban Văn Nghệ) did the preparatory work with the assistance of the Division for Cultural Promotion (Vụ Bảo Vệ Văn Hóa) in the Ministry of Public Security (Nguyễn Minh Cán 1997:28-30). The process involved identifying the participants for different roles, such as:

- targets (đối tượng) because they belonged to a reactionary (bộ phân động) or saboteur (bộ phận hoài) clique;
- problematic people (những người có vấn đề) who were those who had made mistakes but were not considered to be obstinate (ngạo cố);
- half-hearted people (những người lúng túng) who would not participate actively in the struggle session; and
- the bedrock (chổ đá) who held steady positions (lập trường vững) and could be counted on to be aggressive towards the targets.

23 Vân ai chủ báo là yêu
Ghé ai chủ báo là ghét
Đồ ai ngon nọt mới ra chủ
Cùng không nói yêu thành ghét
Đồ ai có bờ doa đâu biết
Cùng không nói ghét thành yêu

24 Phương Quán did not know Trúc Chi’s true identity till years later (Vân Xương 1994 reprinted in Diên Dân). In 1972, a reputed Maoist, continued to intervene in literary discourse in the ensuing years but he was most significantly remembered for his defection to China in 1979 after the outbreak of hostility between Beijing and Hanoi.

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When dividing participants into small working groups, this classification was extremely important to ensure that a favourable ratio of targets to bedrock was maintained in every push so as to reach the desired outcome. At the outset of the study session, participants were told in no uncertain terms that there would be no sitting on the fence; that each of them was either with the party or with the enemy. It was now clear that the struggle of NV, GP and Văn was no longer regarded as a legitimate part of the party’s struggle to rectify authoritarian ways. The struggle was being branded as “revisionism” and against, rather than for, the state.

Some writers were confident enough to resist the manipulation of the state. Nguyễn Tuân openly said he disagreed with the mobilization campaign against those connected to NV and GP, causing Hoàng Văn Hoan to flash an angry look at him (Xuan Vũ 1991:20). Nguyễn Huy Tưởng refused to go on stage to denounce anyone. Tô Hoài spoke briefly but was so general that nobody was sure whom he was criticizing, which had Tô Hữu and Hồ Thanh grimacing in their seats. Kim Lan was supposed to nick the playwright Hoàng Cầm but chose to tell the audience how he was once moved to tears by a Hoàng Cầm play (Xuan Vũ 1991:204).

Many, however, gave in to official pressure. Vũ Thú Hien (1997:416) narrates an account (tol’d to him by the musician Văn Cao) of how the talented writer, Nguyễn Đình Thí, abused Văn Cao on stage, but hugged him afterwards to ask for forgiveness. In July 1958, Thí replaced the more independent-minded Nguyễn Công Hoan as Chairman of the VWA and kept that position until his retirement in 1989.

From early March the media started to carry the self-criticisms of some writers involved in producing the three magazines and the strident personal attacks on them by others. Officially, the campaign ended on 5 June 1958 when Tô Hữu made his speech to round up the campaign at the Federation of Literature and the Arts (the body that replaced the ALA). The consequences for those implicated writers included expulsion from the VWA or pto or both and, in some cases, incarceration. But the details announced in the official media were far from comprehensive. In addition, all writers and artists were collectively subject to a work experience campaign where they were sent out to labour in farms, mines or factories to enhance their political identification with the working classes. Finally, on 19 January 1960, five people were put on open trial for espionage during which NV was presented as part of a foreign plot to sabotage the DRV. Nguyễn Hữu Dank and a writer, Thuy An, were identified as group leaders. The owner of Minh Đức publishing house and the person who helped raise money for his publishing venture were also among the five. The role of the fifth person was not made clear. They were given prison sentences ranging from three to 15 years (ND 21/1/60:1&4).

Other than the mobilized political action, the leadership institutionalized measures to regulate media more rigorously. In addition to the 1956 Decree-Law 282 on media, a party initiative at the very top, Politburo Resolution 60, was issued on 8 December 1958, setting down for the first time a comprehensive set of ideological guidelines for the press (see Chapter Two and Appendix I). Ideological education for journalists was also stepped up (Quang Dsm 1994:66-67).

At the same time, throughout 1957 and 1958, a shake-up took place within the Hanoi city press. After Tô Hữu criticized Tòa Hạt Nghĩa, the Hanoi city-level party paper, of a listless response to the NVGP affair, the city’s Party Executive Committee decided to start a new paper, Thôi Đô (The Capital). The paper was launched on 24 October 1957, giving Hanoians their fourth daily newspaper; the other three being ND, Thời Đại and Nhà Nơi Hằng Ngày (Hanoi Daily). But action was being considered against Nhà Nơi Hằng Ngày as well. Towards the end of the year, the Central Press Office sent two ND journalists to be its director (chủ nhiệm) and editor (chủ bút). A year later, on 9 December, the city’s Party Executive Committee decided to absorb the paper into its Thôi Đô on the grounds that media resources should be rationalized to meet the new challenges set down by Politburo Resolution 60 issued just the day before. The merged

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34 Nguyễn Tuân had a devil-may-care streak in him. Vũ Thú Hien (1997:541) tells of an incident when Trương Côn was giving a rambling one-hour lecture on ideological duty and Nguyễn Tuân just looked at the ceiling and yawned conspicuously.

35 All these reluctant writers were either office-bearers in 1958 or had held official positions in the literary organization of the party.
paper was called Thổ Độc Hà Nội (Capital Hanoi). Thus, only one private daily paper, Thời Mới, remained, and that was absorbed by the city party paper in January 1968 to become today's Hà Nội Mới (New Hanoi) (Hội Nhà Báo Hà Nội 1995:47-49, 56-57, 103). What was happening was the phasing out of a privately-owned media in definite stages. It is likely that the NVGP affair had made the party leadership see how private publishing could facilitate dissidence against the state.

Conclusion

The memory of NV and GP resonates whenever intellectual protest in Vietnam is discussed. What lingers through the years is a leitmotif of intellectual courage; individuals speaking their minds at great risk of incurring the wrath of the state. In terms of state-media relations, some would see it as a repressive state seeking to curb activist newspapers, two separate entities locked in a relationship of tension and conflicting agendas. This is a valid interpretation up to a point. This chapter, however, draws attention to another facet of the whole affair. This other facet does not deny the independent spirit of the protagonists in the NVGP struggle but it recognizes that the independent-minded writers of 1956 had to learn to work within the system to deliver their message of protest. Media activism rode on the struggle paradigm that I have posited.

My study highlights the dynamics of the press being able (or even better placed) to challenge the state by working within its parameters. In 1956, when the first issue of GP rolled off the press, the political system represented by this state had been in place for less than two years in Hanoi. In a sense, the NVGP protagonists were pioneers negotiating an early form of state-media (or state-society) dynamics in a young socialist state. What does it tell us about the state-media dynamics? The events in this chapter leave no doubt that the young media regulatory system was party-centred. The party’s Ideology Commission with its Head, Tô Hữu, and not any government ministry, was the nucleus of state action co-ordinating the mass campaign against NV and GP. The Central Press Office — in those years still a department located within the party’s Ideology Commission rather than a government organ in its own right — discharged certain bureaucratic functions like policing the deposition regulation and disbursing the newsprint supply. Laws were peripheral in the control of the press. Instead, discretionary power, vested in top party leaders (e.g., Trương Chinh) or those who held key appointments in the sphere of ideology (e.g., Tô Hữu), was the basis for most action taken against the press.

But state-media dynamics, as we saw them in this chapter, extended beyond just an account of how the state, or its various components, manages the press. The dynamics required media practitioners to be sensitive to a whole political environment, its conventions and ways of doing things. For example, we have seen how internal struggle at two party plenary sessions helped produce the sort of ideological climate that sustained the struggles of NV, GP and Văn. A major domestic event — the disastrous outcome of a land redistribution programme — fuelled this process. Feeding into this formula for change were developments in the larger socialist world beyond the DRV (e.g., Khrushchev’s liberal line or China’s Hundred Flowers campaign). A resulting mass campaign to mobilize criticism and self-criticism then provided an opportunity for press activism. Among the environmental signals that press activism had to be aware of were the gist of party plenum resolutions, the tell-tale signs of ideological change within the core of the party and the shifting foci of leaders locked in intra-elitist competition. All these made up a nexus of interactive forces that bound editorial content to the competitive politics of the state. The key features of this relationship between the activist magazines and state forces are characteristic of the struggle paradigm (see Chapter One). We have seen how the state agenda could be used in a “double-edged” way to promote an unconvincingly critical editorial policy. The process was risky and required of its protagonists the skills and familiarity of system insiders. State-media dynamics could be described as “within the system” because the press activism was so much an action of the party’s internal struggles.

The NVGP saga also raises the issue of opportunity in struggle. Specifically, it tells that circumstances and timing are crucial factors. We saw this in two instances.

First, NV and GP were possible because, at that juncture of DRV history, private publishing was available. Having recourse to private publishing allowed NV and GP to distance themselves from the writ of censorship that applied to those publications that belonged to the socialist state. But this window of opportunity for independent
journalism was only available if the state did not want to tamper with it. It highlights how total state ownership of publishing facilities contributes to the whole regime of media control, a situation that operates today.

Private ownership facilitates but does not guarantee the media its independence of state control. We saw this when *Spring GP* was confiscated quickly after publication and its three initiators disciplined. Private publishing continued to be available after the short-lived *Spring GP*, but it required a change in ideological climate to allow *GP* to be relaunched and joined by *NV* and other critical newspapers. This was the second opportunity that came the way of the NVGP protagonists. Their restiveness coincided with a confluence of domestic and international developments which delivered a criticism campaign that allowed more leeway to debate with the state. This other opportunity tells us that media activism can only survive in an environment that promotes, or at the very least tolerates, critical journalism.

The impression given here may be that the media can only wait passively for the state to determine the ideological climate and then set aside an allowance for intellectual restiveness. That is not the case. While it is true that the state, or more precisely the party, plays an inordinately huge role in defining the ideological line of the moment, I do not see it as entirely a unilateral top down process. Up to a point, the media (and other societal forces) can help make the opportunties. Many media practitioners, particularly the senior ones, are there in the party hierarchy. They can argue a position during internal struggle at various levels or serve as a stalking horse for members of the political elite by writing in support of certain issues or ideological positions (better illustrated in subsequent chapters). At the every least, as insiders they are well-placed to sense the opportunities for activism more acutely and then to decide whether to help take the activism forward or steer clear of the risks involved. When such initiatives are taken, they strengthen the process which forms the basis of this dissertation: that a challenge to the system has a facility of developing from within the system itself.

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**CHAPTER FOUR**

**The Xét Lại Chống Đảng Affair**

On a rainy 1972 night in Moscow, a Vietnamese man jumped to his death from a six-storey apartment. This story could only be told more than two decades later, after the collapse of Communism in the Soviet Union, by the dead man's fellow exile, Nguyễn Minh Căn, who was with him that evening before he committed suicide (Nguyễn Minh Căn 1995:38-43). The dead man was Colonel Văn Đoán, Chief Editor of *QĐND*, an important DRV military paper that was frequently scoured by Vietnam analysts to track Hanoi's conduct of the war in the south. In 1964, Căn and Văn Đoán sought political asylum in Moscow where they were studying. They did not want to return home because an anti-revisionist campaign in Vietnam was targeting those alleged to be harbouring pro-Soviet sentiments. Căn's explanation of the suicide was that Văn Đoán was never happy living in exile, often depressed when he received news about his family in Vietnam. With its Chief Editor seeking refuge in Moscow, *QĐND* was investigated for revisionist tendencies. Finally, in 1967, the paper's acting editor and six other staff members were among the scores of high and middle-ranking party-government cadres detained in a massive internal security operation (Nguyễn Văn Trân 1995:331; and Thanh Tín 1993:240). Today, these events, which spanned the years 1960 to 1967, are popularly known inside Vietnam as the XLCĐ affair (Vụ Xét Lại Chống Đảng or Anti-Party Revisionist affair).

My main objective is not to detail the XLCĐ affair. Văn Đoán's suicide and other incidents related to the affair serve only to recall the tense ideological struggle that formed the backdrop to state-media dynamics during the early 1960s. This chapter's aim is to explore state-media dynamics at a time when media control was possibly at its strictest. It is about how media practitioners reacted to a situation where powerful members within the party elite were whipping up an intimidating climate of
vigilance against revisionists, an amorphous term that could include anybody suspected of ideological recalcitrance. The defiant assertiveness of NTV and QP could not be replicated in the 1960s. In its stead was an acrimonious internal struggle that media practitioners participated in but could not divulge. Media practitioners were among the liberal intellectuals who became the target of the anti-revisionist campaign. This chapter goes on to look at how newspapers used encoded content and other cautious tactics to signal their disagreement with the prevailing orthodoxy. The available data provides only a brief description of the role played by the control and supervisory organs in the media regulatory system, and so the systemic dynamics of state-media relations will be explored more in terms of elite involvement.

A prominent strand in this chapter relates to Hanoi's ideological alignment in the growing Sino-Soviet conflict of that period and the positions of individual DRV leaders vis-à-vis Moscow and Beijing. A stream of Western writings has addressed these questions, drawing tentative conclusions that are supported by analysis of DRV media statements or a variety of diplomatic and intelligence sources. As we shall see, DRV leaders had their differences over the Sino-Soviet rivalry, and media content bore the impact of this domestic contention. These were sensitive issues that were kept well hidden from outsiders. Consequently, to surmise about them based on press accounts does have its margin of error. What is now methodologically possible is to look at such internal struggle primarily from the accounts of Vietnamese who participated in the debate. Like those of the analyst looking from outside, insiders' accounts can also be challenged for bias, inaccuracy and speculation. Nevertheless, the way they perceived their own political environment, even if skewed, was the reality which shaped their responses, be it to seek asylum in Moscow or to write something challenging in the press. Media-based analysis could not penetrate to the depth of that first-hand experience.

The works of five writers — Thân Tín also known as Bùi Tín (1991, 1993, 1995); Nguyễn Minh Cẩn (1995); Nguyễn Văn Trần (1995); Trần Thu (1996); and Vũ Thị Hiền (1997) — make up the backbone of my narrative. These works are critical of the Hanoi regime, setting them apart from the more familiar form of officially-endorsed exhortatory literature. Trần and Cẩn were once cadres holding key positions in the party-government apparatus.3 Bùi Tín, Trần Thu and Hiền were practising journalists.3 All but Trần were intimately linked to the XLCD affair. Of those directly involved in the XLCD affair, Bùi Tín was the official sent to investigate QĐND for its revisionist content in 1964. Revisionism charges forced Căn into exile. Hiền and Trần Thu were among those arrested in 1967 as alleged revisionists. Hiền's father, Vũ Đình Huỳnh, was Ho Chi Minh's private secretary, and this gave Hiền an intimate knowledge of intra-elite politics. With such backgrounds, the knowledge base of these five individuals would be qualitatively better than the Hanoi rumour mill. Three of the five have written their accounts in exile while Trần and Trần Thu continued to live in Vietnam after their books were published. This range of backgrounds contributes to some balance in perspectives. There is also a high degree of convergence in how they perceived the main events, protagonists and political forces that made up the XLCD affair. To supplement the accounts of these five writers, I have also used shorter works by Vietnamese who lived through that period - Lê Xuân Tá (1994) and Tự Đăng (1998).4

Finally, I should add that this affair had been largely ignored in Western writings.3

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3 Nguyễn Văn Trần joined the Communist movement in 1936 and was Secretary of the Southern Region Party Executive Committee (Bí thư Tỉnh ủy Nam Kỳ) by 1944. After 1945, he worked in Hanoi in the field of ideological education under Tô Hiến and held positions as a section head (vụ trưởng) in the party's Education Commission (Bộ Giáo dục) and Reunification Commission (Bộ Thông Nghiệp) (Nguyễn Văn Trần 1992:207,485-86; and Free Vietnam Alliance biography archive on http://www.fva.org/ Nguyễn Minh Cẩn's background has been mentioned in Chapter Three.

3 Bùi Tín moved from the General Political Directorate (Tổng Cục Chính trị) to QĐND in 1964. The directorate oversees political discipline within the military and has sections that take charge of important sectors like security and ideological education within the armed forces. Trần Thu was Editorial Secretary at QĐND. Vũ Thị Hiền worked at Vietnamese Pictorial which belonged to Vietnam News Agency.

4 Lê Xuân Tá is the pseudonym of a Vietnamese who worked at the State Committee for the Sciences in the early 1960s. He sent this article to Đền Đìn in Paris when he was visiting Moscow. His account is consonant with those of the five writers I am using. Tự Đăng was a student in Hanoi in the 1920s. He wrote his account from Germany where he now resides.

Domestic Ideological Setting

In the early years of the 1960s, as the Sino-Soviet rift became public and increasingly acrimonious, revisionism, or "modern revisionism", was a key charge which Mao's China levelled against the moderate line that Khrushchev was promoting at home and abroad. This put many socialist nations of the world in a quandary as to which side to support. For the DRV, the issue was particularly delicate because both Moscow and Beijing were big providers of military and economic aid. The DRV never publicly equated Khrushchev's policy with revisionism, but at the ground level, DRV citizens gradually got the message that the Soviet influence in their country was revisionist and should be resisted. At places of work, propaganda cadres sent by the party's Ideology Commission painted a bleak picture of the Soviet economy and blamed it on Khrushchev's policy (Vũ Thư Hiền's interview 9/4/98). Party theoreticians tuned in conscientiously to Radio Beijing's broadcasts to get the latest anti-Soviet line and used it in their lectures (Vũ Thư Hiền 1997:264). In schools, teachers were warning students about the undesirability of Soviet revisionism. Tô Đặng (1998:58), who was then a teenager, recounted how his teacher would warn him against falling under the unhealthy influence of Soviet revisionism just because he wore a fashionable Soviet-made shirt. The orchestrated anti-Soviet domestic mood reached a stage where the man-in-the-street was making jokes about it. For instance, the name of the Soviet Communist Party abbreviated in the Russian alphabet – КССР – was rendered into "Các chữ cỏ phát" (Go ahead and attack) or "Càng cho càng phát" (The more aid you give, the more I attack you) (Trần Thư 1996:130). Foreign observers reading the DRV media would be surprised to know about any of these because the press was under strict orders to adhere to the DRV's equidistant foreign policy on the Soviet Union and China. Media was careful to be even-handed in their generally effusive coverage of Soviet and Chinese policies (Vũ Thư Hiền 1997:271; and Trần Thư 1996:127). At most, foreign media analysts may get a sense of the occasional swings in Hanoi's preference for the Chinese or Soviet positions, depending on the issue.

The surreptitious campaign against "Soviet revisionism" was intertwined with other elements that increasingly constricted the space for discourse. Anti-intellectualism and intense censorship characterized the mood of the times. Intellectuals were suspect, especially those who were espousing a liberal line akin to that propounded by Khrushchev. A "red versus expert" personnel policy increasingly marginalized technocrats in favour of those who were ill-qualified but had the right ideological credentials (Vũ Thư Hiền 1997:269-70). Censorship was tightened to the extent that writers were censored for the most unexpected reasons (Trần Thư 1996:121-24; and Vũ Thư Hiền 1997:354-55). Since many who favoured Khrushchev's moderate line were well-educated technocrats, they bore the brunt of the policy in favour of reds over experts and also resented the excessive censorship most.

Those in the DRV leadership who were behind the dualistic policy towards the Soviets had two main reasons for doing so. Khrushchev's liberal line made it inconvenient for them to impose socialism more forcefully and to launch a war in the south, which they were contemplating. This is adopting a narrow focus on a broad range of social-economic-political issues that overlapped with or fed into the issue of the VWP's alignment in Sino-Soviet rivalry. In so doing, I may have oversimplified a complex situation. Still, this reductionist approach does help to clarify a tangled affair and was also the perspective adopted by the Vietnamese writers I am citing. It is also sufficient for my purpose of examining state-media dynamics.

Beginning with the NVGP affair, the Soviet-endorsed ideological flexibility provided the justification for intellectual resistance to any doctrinal imposition of socialist tenets within the DRV. Voices were raised to question the role of a proletarian dictatorship, the outcome of the land redistribution policy, rapid socialization of the economy and generally to urge for more democracy (Kuribara 1992:188 citing the December 1957 issue of party theoretical journal Hạc Tỉnh). So the DRV authority had to counter the liberal influence of the Soviet Uc Tụ if it wanted to proceed with the more regimented aspects of socializing the country.4

4 Khrushchev, who started the liberal thaw in the Soviet Union, was not beyond qualifying his position when he needed to deal sternly with dissidence at home or in the Eastern European satellites, e.g., Hungary in 1956. But generally, up till his demise from office in 1964, Khrushchev's line continued to promote a moderate, flexible ideological line relative to what went on in Stalin's times or in Mao's China.

5 The NVGP intellectuals had also used Mao's Hundred Flowers campaign to justify their criticism of the state, but Mao very quickly rescinded the campaign. Khrushchev did not make such a clear and protracted reversal. His policy remained a moderate alternative to the radicalism of Mao.
Khrushchev’s peaceful coexistence with the capitalist world was antithetical to the DRV’s policy to fight a war in the south to bring about reunification. Those who were against pursuing a military option in the south felt it would cost too many lives and resources with no guarantee of success, and might draw the US into attacking the DRV (Lê Xuân Tá 1994:21). Their preferred approach to reunification was to develop the north in peace and win the south over by the success of the socialist example. In essence, they were invoking Khrushchev’s principle of peaceful coexistence to fortify their position. In contrast, Mao’s policy of aggressive confrontation with the capitalist world was more conducive for advocates of a military option in the south.

Thus the domestic debate was to take on the overtones of Sino-Soviet ideological contention. On the one side, dominant forces within the political elite were accusing some intellectuals of harbouring Soviet-inspired revisionist views that fell short of the true revolutionary standards of Marxism-Leninism. On the other, these intellectuals saw their accusers to be the vanguard of a growing Maoist influence within the DRV which might take the country into a destructive form of socialist regimentation that Mao was introducing in China (Thành Tin 1993:35-39; Trần Thư 1996:120; and Vũ Thu Hiền 1997:222, 260-61, 276, 373).

A situation like this may invite characterization as a contest between "pro-Soviet" and "pro-China" factions in the DRV. These terms are, however, too sweeping. "Pro-China", as a description, is also hard to sustain when leaders who were invoking Maoist tenets in the 1960s would eventually preside over a Vietnam that aligned itself strategically with the Soviet Union in the 1970s as well as fight a bloody war with China in 1979. Basically, the empirical data only tells us that contending opinions within the DRV were using the country’s powerful foreign allies to fortify their respective positions in some issue-specific domestic debates. Those who invoked the Chinese position found it opportune to equate the Soviet line with revisionism, which was regarded in the socialist world as an ideological offence. They then rendered their opponents as revisionists. Those who were so denounced as revisionists would in turn label their accusers as Maoists. These are allegations to which neither side would care to own up and are difficult to verify in any objective sense. A more accurate set of terms to describe the two sides to this conflict would be the "anti-revisionists" and the "alleged revisionists".

The Intra-Elite Contention

Intra-elite contention underlay the situation just described. A convenient point to begin explaining the intra-elite configuration would be the watershed Third Party Congress on 5-12 September 1960, when Lê Duẩn became Party First Secretary, and Lê Đức Thọ became Head of its Organization Commission (Trưởng Ban Tổ Chức). This formally confirmed the political ascendancy of both men, a trend which started to be evident as early as 1958 in the wake of Trường Chinh losing his Party General Secretary position in 1956 (see Chapter Three). As new leader, Lê Duẩn had a very modest profile without significant revolutionary achievements to his name. Thus, he faced the challenge of being eclipsed by leaders who were more outstanding in the eyes of the public and enjoyed great influence within the party-government apparatus: Hồ Chí Minh, Trường Chinh and Võ Nguyên Giáp. In 1959, Lê Duẩn managed to get the VWP to endorse his intention to step up efforts to destabilize the ROV regime in the south (Bùi Tín 1995:41) but this still fell short of a clear commitment to seek reunification by military means. The project was important for him because of the prestige and power that would come from a big military campaign (Lê Xuân Tá 1994:21). Thọ supported Lê Duẩn’s objective and thus a partnership began that was to dominate politics in socialist Vietnam till the latter’s death in 1986. For convenient reference, I call it the Duẩn-Thọ partnership.

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8 Besides Lê Xuân Tá's account, the VWP First Secretary, Lê Duẩn, also identified this line of argument existing in the DRV during his December 1963 speech at the party’s Ninth Plenum (Third Congress) (Lê Duẩn 1963:569-73)
However, Lê Duẩn could not have his way immediately because there was no ready consensus in the VWP on a large-scale military campaign. It took him till the party’s Ninth Plenum (Third Congress) in December 1963 to get rid of the opposition. Khrushchev’s line of peaceful coexistence was a powerful ideological argument that his detractors — among them many intellectuals — could use. After all, the DRV had publicly supported peaceful coexistence when it was first raised. There was thus a motivation for Lê Duẩn to weaken the validity of the Soviet line and this explains why the rise of the Dương-Thọ partnership also saw the beginning of the domestic campaign against Soviet revisionism and the antecedent effort to curb the role of intellectuals. Also beginning in 1960, the DRV stopped its public support for the principle of peaceful coexistence (Honey 1963:24).

Some cadres had looked to Ho Chi Minh to temper Lê Duẩn’s hostile campaign against the Soviet Union (Nguyễn Minh Căn 1995:24-25; and Trần Thu 1996: 111). But, in the final analysis, Lê Duẩn and Lê Đức Thọ managed to deny Ho any significant role in the struggle to have the party Ninth Plenum (Third Congress) endorse Lê Duẩn’s military plans for the south (Nguyễn Minh Căn 1995:35; Nguyễn Văn Trần 1995:328; and Vũ Thị Hiền 1997:359-60).

Then there was Trương Chinh, whom Western scholars such as P.J. Honey (1963) and Thomas K. Latimer (1972) identified as having differences with Lê Duẩn on a cross section of issues related to ideology, strategy for the south and the DRV’s position in the Sino-Soviet conflict. Whatever the accuracy of these studies by foreign observers, Trương Chinh’s ability to retain his influential status as the VWP’s foremost theocritician up till his retirement in 1986 would suggest a modus vivendi existed between him and Lê Duẩn. Vietnamese insiders’ accounts say Trương Chinh was a lot less inclined than Lê Duẩn to oppose Khrushchev’s line of peaceful coexistence because, initially, peaceful coexistence appeared to be the prevailing trend within the international communist movement. At the same time, Trương Chinh was too frightened of the rising power of the Dương-Thọ partnership to resist their anti-Soviet campaign (Thành Tin 1991:130; Hoàng Minh Chinh 1993:17; Bùi Tiến 1995:44; Nguyễn Minh Căn 1995:29-30; and Vũ Thị Hiền 1997:164, 274-75). Furthermore, Trương Chinh’s active role in attacking the NVGP writers (see Chapter Three) indicates that he was no supporter of liberal critics of the system. Hence, it is not hard to imagine him sharing or being at ease with the orthodoxy of the anti-revisionism campaign.

Where General Võ Nguyên Giáp was concerned, Lê Duẩn had good reasons to be envious and nervous of his standing in the party, the army and the eyes of the Vietnamese public. Giap was Politburo member, Deputy Prime Minister as well as Minister of Defence, and hero of the history-making Điện Biên Phủ battle which brought an end to French colonialism. After Trương Chinh lost his Party General Secretary position, Giap was a strong possibility to succeed him, rather than the then little-known Lê Duẩn (Thành Tin 1991:139-40). Even though Giap did not get the senior party post, his standing and network of influence in the military were still a source of worry to Lê Duẩn. Thus, throughout his tenure as party leader right into the 1980s, Lê Duẩn, with Lê Đức Thọ, was preoccupied with clipping the wings of Giap (Thành Tin 1993:187-200). For Lê Duẩn, running a military campaign to reunify the country would give him the ultimate prestige to rival Giap when victory came.
Furthermore, he could use the opportunity to take away decision making within the military from Giáp.

Võ Nguyên Giáp is not known to have taken a clear stand against Lê Duẩn’s military plan for the south. However, one personal account of life in Hanoi in the 1960s describes a public perception that saw Giáp as favouring a peaceful option (Hoang Hưu Quỳnh 1989:84). According to Trần Thư (1996:113-15), the question was not really to fight or not to fight for reunification, but what sort of fighting strategy the DRV should adopt. He said that Giáp, in contrast to the reckless Lê Duẩn, was more careful in weighing the implications of waging an all-out war and provoking a massive US response. The behaviour of Lê Duẩn and Lê Đức Thọ indicated that they saw Giáp as a political threat. They tried to implicate Giáp as a collaborator of Moscow and detrimental to DRV interests. Another tactic was to reduce Giáp’s influence in the armed forces by promoting another senior military leader, General Nguyễn Chí Thanh, and letting the latter run the war effort in the south. Thanh played a major role in the anti-revisionist campaign by whipping up a vigilant intellectual climate against any hint of liberal challenge to socialist orthodoxy. He was also one of those who went around criticizing Khrushchev and praising Mao at meetings (Trần Thư 1996:106).

of Lê Đức Thọ who, being the Head of the Organization Commission, had a great say in matters of personnel appointment and removal (*Vì Thù Hính 1997:326-29*).

9 Hoang Hưu Quỳnh was a university student in Hanoi from 1960-1964. He joined the VWP in 1967 and defected in Paris in 1979.

10 Trần Thư, who was Editorial Secretary of *QĐND*, was recounting what Võ Nguyên Giáp told Dinh Chinh, a *QĐND* staff member sent to help Giáp with some research. Dinh Chinh, like Trần Thư, was also detained as an alleged revisionist.

11 According to Bùi Tín, Lê Duẩn and Lê Đức Thọ tried to convince Ho Chí Minh that Võ Nguyên Giáp had some suspicious secret dealings with Khrushchev (Thành Thịnh 1993:190-91). Tho, who controlled the security apparatus, also had Giáp under close surveillance (Võ Thù Hính 1987:205). When the Duẩn-Thọ partnership started to arrest people for alleged revisionism in 1964, young officers in key positions within the military and who were close friends of Giáp were among them. During their interrogation, questions were aimed at establishing a case that Giáp was plotting something with Khrushchev (Thành Thịnh 1993:189-90, 193). Trần Thư (1996:187) and Võ Thù Hính (1997:362-63), who were both detained in 1967 as alleged revisionists, also said they were interrogated about Giáp’s intention to usurp power.

12 Politburo member Nguyễn Chí Thanh headed the General Political Directorate of the armed forces until he was transferred out in 1961 to head the CC’s Rural Affairs Commission. Since the Directorate was in charge of political discipline, Thanh retained considerable interest and influence in the sector of ideological education and censorship despite his formal redeployment to oversee agriculture. In late 1964, he was rumoured to have gone to the south to take charge of the military campaign there (Heaney 1983:31; and Võ Thù Hính 1997:354-55). In 1967, he either was killed in an air raid by US B-52 bombers or died of a heart attack.

13 Vietnam Document and Research Notes was a US government research service in the pre-1975 ROV whose function was to translate and present selected materials on DRV affairs. All the Vietnam-based sources I use do not speak of the resolution in its two components. For convenient reference, I shall continue to speak of the Ninth Plenum Resolution in the singular.
for the Ninth Plenum (Third Congress) Resolution, but did not shy away from criticizing the Soviet’s peaceful coexistence line (Gaiđuk 1996:6-10).}

The Alleged Revisionists

Although Lê Duẩn’s politburo peers were not forthright in opposing his policy, more junior members of the political establishment did take a clearer stand and bore the brunt of the anti-revisionist campaign. These visible detractors were mainly intellectuals and professionals who were concentrated in three places where the intelligentsia worked in large numbers: the State Committee for the Sciences (Ủy Ban Khoa Học Nhà Quốc Dân), the Sự Thật (Truth) publishing house of the VWP, and the Institute of Philosophy (Viện Triết Học) (Vũ Thư Hiền 1997:132). At these places, the following senior cadres were forthright in their disagreement with Lê Duẩn’s line: Bùi Công Trừng, who was Deputy Chairman of the State Committee for the Sciences and headed one of its subsidiary institutes, the Institute of Economics (Viện Kinh Tế); Minh Tranh, who headed Sự Thật publishing house and had a high media profile writing about military strategy (Latimer 1972:96-97); and Hoàng Minh Chính, who was Director of the Institute of Philosophy. All three had reputations of being independent-minded and outspoken (Lê Xuan Tấn 1994:22; Vũ Thư Hiền 1997:131-32; and Võ Nhan Trí’s interview 13/6/98). The were making their views heard at internal meetings and also at informal gatherings among colleagues (Vũ Thư Hiền’s private correspondence with author 3/3/98; and Lê Xuân Tấn 1994:22). Bùi Công Trừng was an alternate CC member, while the other two were senior enough in party ranking to be heading key party-government institutions. Other senior party-government leaders implicated by the Duẩn-Thọ partnership as revisionists were: Foreign Minister and CC member Ưng Văn Khánh, Deputy Defence Minister Nguyễn Văn Vinh and Deputy Culture Minister Lê Liêm. Vinh and Liêm were alternate CC members (Nguyễn Văn Trân 1995:330). Yet others held key positions within both the military and civilian government

bureaucracies, like Nguyễn Minh Nghĩa, Head of Military Intelligence (Bùi Tín 1995:144), and General Đặng Kim Giang, Deputy Agriculture Minister (Nguyễn Thị Mỹ n.d.:10). The exact number of people implicated in the XLCĐ affair is not known, but from the five main insiders’ accounts I am using, 48 individuals were identified. Of these, 29 were media practitioners and among them were staff members of major publications such as ND, QĐND and Hồi Tập.

The struggle against the anti-revisionist line is best described by the events of 1963, culminating in the Ninth Plenum (Third Congress) in December. According to Nguyễn Minh Cán of the Hanoi Party Executive Committee, it was the summer of that year, when he returned from his studies in Moscow for a short home visit, he could sense the apprehension and discord in Hanoi (Nguyễn Minh Cán 1995:33-35). No sooner had he reached home when Phạm Viết, a colleague who would eventually be punished for alleged revisionism, came to tell him about the political situation. Immediately after that, Trần Vỹ, the Deputy Secretary of the Hanoi Party Executive Committee who lived a floor above, came to warn him to stay clear of Phạm Viết. Cán visited friends in various government departments and found a deep sense of division everywhere.

As the plenum drew near, cadres in key positions were being put under scrutiny for their alignment, and detractors pressurized to support the plenum resolution. For instance, Hồng Chương (1986:219), who was then a member of the Hồi Tập’s editorial board, said board members met on 7 September 1963 to examine each other’s stand on “theoretical issues related to trends in international communism and proletarianism” (cái vấn đề lý luận trong phong trào cộng sản và cộng sản quốc tế). Around this time, Nguyễn Minh Cán went back to Moscow from Hanoi. Subsequently, the DRV Embassy gathered all Vietnamese students to conduct a criticism session against him. He was accused of being pro-Soviet and pro-revisionist and therefore an enemy of the revolution. It was after that meeting that he discussed with some like-minded friends, among whom was Văn Doàn, the possibility of seeking political asylum in the Soviet Union (Nguyễn Minh Cán 1995:35-36).
Lê Duẩn did not meet with any opposition from his Politburo colleagues over the plenum resolution (Nguyễn Minh Căn 1995:30; and Vũ Thư Hiền 1997: 374-75, 334-35, 359). It was intellectuals, worried that the resolution might be a harbinger of the DRV’s intention to emulate Maoist policies, who petitioned the party leadership against it (Vũ Thư Hiền 1997:260-61; 373; and Hoàng Minh Chính 1993:1). Three CC members, Bùi Công Trí, Lê Liên and Ung Văn Khiêm, spoke up at the plenum but were too junior and too few in number to be effective (Nguyễn Văn Trần 1995:327-29; and Vũ Thư Hiền 1997:360). Thus, Lê Duẩn had his resolution passed and the anti-revisionist campaign intensified against those who had spoken out against it. Some lost their jobs or were suspended from active duties. Fear of guilt by association made colleagues ostracize them (Lê Xuân Tạo 1994:23; Vũ Thư Hiền 1997:131-32; and Vũ Nhân Trí’s interview 26/2:38).

Impact on Media

Despite the crackdown on liberal writers beginning in 1958 (see the NVGP affair of Chapter Three), some media practitioners still showed signs in the early 1960s of resilience against the growing censorship. QPND was one such paper with a streak of intellectual liveliness. Under Văn Đoán, the paper had acquired a reputation for being more interesting than most. This gave its staff a sense of pride. Occasionally its earnest staff went overboard and selected news from foreign newspapers which were considered too racy, prompting Nguyễn Chí Thành to brand it “the Chicago paper” (Trần Thư 1996:99,128). When Văn Đoán left for studies in Moscow in 1962, that independent streak continued under Hoàng Thế Đăng as the acting Chief Editor. In 1961, an act of mischief at the literary magazine, PV, provided another example of how the press was still capable of being playful in the wake of an increasingly stern ideological climate. A member of the editorial board, Đỗ Quang Tiến, slipped in a short story “A Sleepless Night” (Dêm Mất Ngủ), which would have little chance of making it past the cautious editorial vetting system. Thiên was a friend of the story’s author, Vũ Thư Hiền. Thiên explained in private correspondence with me (3/4/98) that Thiên submitted the story with many other articles to the editor just before the paper was going to press. This was the stage in newspaper production when things were usually in a rush. The Chief Editor glanced over everything quickly and signed.

“A Sleepless Night” was subsequently attacked by Tô Hội, still Head of the Ideology Commission, as a piece of revisionist literature (Vũ Thư Hiền 1997:187-88). This was part of the growing climate of prohibition in the press, partly an extension of the anti-NVGP action and partly the design of the Đoán-Thi partnership to intimidate its detractors. Nobody was immune from the growing fervour to criticize anything that was seen as ideologically suspect, no matter how slight. Nguyễn Dinh Thi and his play, The Black Deer (Cơn Nài Đen), was one example. In Chapter Three we saw how Thi went against his better self to oblige the state’s demand that he criticize liberal writers of the NVGP affair. That made it possible for him to replace the more independent-minded Nguyễn Công Hoan as Chairman of the VWA. Thi kept this position until 1989, an indication of the official trust in him. Nevertheless, in 1962 or 1963 Thi’s play was criticized by the ideological authority for no more than a very subtle allusion to how some successful people turned their backs on friends who had helped them through hardship (Vũ Thư Hiền 1997:420).

The injunction on editorial content was particularly sensitive where the Soviet Union was concerned. Although there was an official policy to give equal positive coverage to Soviet and Chinese affairs (Bùi Tin’s interview 25/2/98; and Vũ Thư Hiền’s interview 9/4/98), media practitioners were naturally cautious about anything they wanted to write about the Soviet Union because the party’s Ideology Commission was sending out cadres led by its Head, Tô Hội, to disseminate anti-Soviet views in the

18 “A Sleepless Night” tells of an insane, wounded veteran who went for a walk through the city at night and was talked by a security policeman. At the crack of dawn they met face to face and, in their conversation, discovered that both had once taken part in a joint assault on an enemy position. The story’s veiled criticism of the police-state atmosphere of the DRV is too strong to be missed.

20 Vũ Thư Hiền, who knew Nguyễn Dinh Thi personally, could not remember when exactly The Black Deer was criticized, but said it was either in 1962 or 1963.
made known his agreement with the decision to withdraw missiles from Cuba, Văn promptly prepared an article in Hôc Tạp to affirm the Soviet position (Trần Thư 1996:111).

Phạm Kỳ Văn did not have an amiable working relationship with Hồng Chung, fellow editorial board member and acting Chief Editor of Hôc Tạp, because both men were ideologically at odds over the issue of DRV's attitude towards Moscow (Vũ Thư Hiền's interview 9/4/98). Given Ho Chi Minh's pre-eminence as the state political leader, any editorial board would find it hard to stop an article written in support of a position endorsed by him. Văn's ruse of riding on Ho's imprimitur ensured that what he published would be considered as self-evidently for, rather than against, the state.

This episode in Hôc Tạp also demonstrated the importance for members of the elite to have personnel they could trust in key media organs during a sensitive ideological struggle. An official historiography of Hôc Tạp (Hồng Chung 1986:218-19) reports that Hồng Chung was appointed as acting Chief Editor by Lê Đức Thọ with a Politburo decision issued on 24 June 1961. Hồng Chung was useful for the Cảnh-Thố partnership in terms of being able to keep an eye on alleged revisionists like Văn. If senior personnel changes at Hôc Tạp from 1960 to 1963 are considered, further indicators provide a strong prima facie case to believe that editorial appointments were made to serve competitive elite interests. Prior to Hồng Chung acting as Chief Editor, one Trần Quỳnh was the Chief Editor from 6 February 1961 for four months. Quỳnh was popularly known to echo Lê Đức's views (Hoàng Văn Hoàn 1988:326,328) and Trần Thư (1996:143) called him "Lê Đức's loudspeaker". The three years 1960-1963 also saw four changes in the Chief Editor position, a statistic that stands in stark

revisionism in 1967, his health deteriorated so badly that he was released (specific date unavailable) to die at home (Trần Thư 1996:111; and Vũ Thư Hiền 1997:255).

This was not the only time Lê Đức Thọ pushed Hồng Chung into a more senior position at the journal. On 17 February 1967, Thọ signed a Secretariat decision to appoint Hồng Chung as Deputy Chief Editor (Hồng Chung 1986:220).

Nguyễn Minh Ctin và Bùi Tin also referred to the close relationship between Trần Quỳnh và Lê Đức, dating it back to the time when both were jailed by the French in the same cell in Pueo Condor for their resistance activities (Thành Tin 1993:187 and Tivi Trần-san 26/8/98:34).
contrast with the period 1965 to 1982 when the Chief Editor position did not change hands even once in the 18 years. Furthermore, the changes over the period 1960-1963 also saw the complete replacement of an old editorial board comprising Trường Chinh, Vũ Nguyên Giáp and staff familiar to Trường Chinh (Hông Chuong 1986:218).  

Events at QĐND also underlined why the Đunakan-Tho partnership would want to keep a careful eye on the staffing of newspapers. QĐND’s Chief Editor, Văn Đoán, was so opposed to the anti-revisionist policy that he chose exile in the Soviet Union. Acting Chief Editor Hoàng Thế Dũng, who took over from him, was also an alleged revisionist. Quite a number of journalists at QĐND, including the paper’s Editorial Secretary, Trần Thư, were also implicated as alleged revisionists in the XLCD affair. With such a group of journalists gathered under one roof, the paper may be suspected as one of those papers likely to find subtle means of resisting Lê Duc Anh’s effort to denigrate the Soviet line.

After Văn Đoán chose to stay in Moscow, in 1964, QĐND’s supervisory organ, the General Political Directorate, sent an official from its Propaganda and Training Section (Cục Tuyên Huấn) to investigate if the paper had shown any pro-Soviet editorial bias (Trần Thư 1996:102). Bùi Tin was that official and I asked him if he found a bias (Interview 25/2/98). He said yes, but the bias was not immediately perceptible. A pro-Soviet bias was also a relative rather than an absolute measure. When placed alongside party daily ND over a long period, QĐND did seem to display items which supported the Soviet Union more prominently in terms of their positioning on the page, column width and length – essentially these were the technical subtleties of page layout rather than any bias in editorial content. This was also what some members of QĐND staff told him.

Some may dismiss Bùi Tin’s observations as a prosecutor’s version and so I asked Vũ Thư Hiện for a second opinion (Interview 9/4/98). After a silent thoughtful pause, he said yes, QĐND did show a bias. Having spent a large part of the interview warning me against over-reading telltale signs of differences in media, an opinion like that should be taken seriously. Like Bùi Tin, he also stressed that QĐND showed a bias (lêch lệch) only and should not be regarded as pursuing a clear pro-Soviet editorial policy. The latter was not possible given the tightness of the media regulatory system. Hiện also explained how a newspaper could slip its bias past the watchful eyes of the censors through what he called a tiptoe (ňôn rên) approach. These encoded protests were, as Bùi Tin said, in the form of playing with page layout but it also included the amount of relative emphasis that was given to the socio-economic achievements of the Soviet Union and China. Hiện said any ruse could only be occasional and last for a period of a month or two at the most before the Ideological Commission would be alert to it. Since the representation was so encoded, there was room for denial. Furthermore, the problem for the censors was compounded by the fact that the policy, while very clear in a broad sense, was subject to situational uncertainty when it came to specifics. Members of the political elite had to deliberate on a specific position for Vietnam almost on a case by case basis. This provided room for both honest errors and little manoeuvres.

Finally, there is the view of Trần Thư, the paper’s Editorial Secretary himself. He does not deny that there could have been a bias although he also does not directly own up to one. His perspective is (Trần Thư 1996:127):

“We were always checking ourselves several times more stringently than any censorship authority. Once the order came down from the top that press treatment of the Soviet Union and China should be equal, we made sure that for every article published on one country, there was one on the other. They would be matched for length and pagination. The headlines used should be of the same length and preferably using the same font. Actually all those things were very easy to carry out because they could be measured. What was difficult was to

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24 Trường Chinh was Hoa Thu’s Chief Editor since its founding in 1955 but was replaced in 1960. For a while, the new Chief Editor was Trân Quốc Huy, an old staff member who identified ideologically with Trường Chinh (Nguyễn Văn Trân 1995:322). After Huy was replaced by Trân Quyết, Trường Chinh issued Politburo Order 41 (Cűl thi 41/CT-TU) on 7 April 1962 that formally placed Hoa Thu under direct Politburo supervision. It meant a Politburo member was assigned specially to guide the journal and approve every article. The editorial board also had to report every six months to the Politburo. So Trường Chinh did not lose total control of Hoa Thu. This was also an indication that, despite its rising power, the Đunakan-Tho partnership could not always have everything its way.

25 For an understanding of what is the General Political Directorate, see footnote 16 on page 120.
write them with the same enthusiasm because enthusiasm was something you could not weigh up against each other. Furthermore to write about Lei Feng with the same enthusiasm as writing about Gagarin was truly difficult. 26

While all three views are not identical, a common conclusion may be drawn from them: even when the media regulatory regime was very strict, media practitioners could find ways of expressing discontent. Media activism that was highly encoded could not count on having the same dramatic impact as an open media struggle such as during the NVGP affair. But the conspiracy implied in hidden messages reaching out to articulate readers would still make media custodians apprehensive.

Indeed, from 1960 to 1963, the intellectual environment was characterized by a rising spiral of official paranoia over the slightest hint of criticism which escalated a climate of intimidation and discretionary censorship, and that in turn caused dissenting views to be even more encoded. Censorship was not only concerned with hunting down pro-Soviet bias. The official bugbear was also directed at writings that cast any doubt on the DRV socialist enterprise. In a nutshell, the writ of socialist realism grew stronger and was policed with increasing vigour (for an explanation of socialist realism, see Chapter Three). The Ideology Commission was not the only authority policing the regime. Nguyễn Chí Thanh was taking the initiative to persecute writers and whip up a climate of vigilance against any suspected liberal tendency in literature.

The most prominent example of what Nguyễn Chí Thanh was doing was the press campaign against the novel Entering Life (Vào Đình) in the middle of 1963. The story, set in a factory, contained some very mild allusions to the incompetence and corruption of minor bureaucrats and would not have been a problem under normal circumstances but for Thanh’s instruction to attack it (Trần Thù 1996:121-22; and Vu

26 Lei Feng was a propaganda character made out to be a paragon of revolutionary virtues and publicized extensively in the Chinese media. Yuri Gagarin was the Soviet cosmonaut who was the first human to fly in space. The Vietnamese text reads: “Cho nên chúng tôi luôn luôn thư kèm đầy chữ, cẩn thận nhắc bắn máy bắn cắp quan kiểm duyệt ném. Chỉ cần cất truyện trên tay ngắn bằng giấy Liệt Xã và Trang Quốc thì khi đong mỏ bắn về Liệt Xã, tư chúng tôi phải lo ngay đến kiểm duyệt mồm bài về Trang Quốc. Bây nay dải 2000 chiếu bài chỉ bắn cách cất мыft sort,jom kiếm không đăng ký. Bài ấy đăng trang một bắn bài không giấy. Còn ở đâu trongasyarakat, tôi nghĩ là sống sòng sòng như cái củi. Và chủ đề chính bài phải cất một con <oo> chất, tốt nhất là cày một kễu. Thú ra Hải cá những cái đó đều đã về cơ thể do đến được. Cái kễu là viết một chút như nhau. Vì viết chất là cải không cần dòng được. Và lại viết về Lê Hiểu mà càn, viết một chút như viên về Gagarin thì quá thật là khó.”


The novel’s author, Hà Minh Tuấn, was an unlikely person to write a controversial novel and get into political trouble. He was a little-known writer of a few forgettable works and was transferred from the army “to strengthen the literary front” (tăng cường cho mặt trận văn học) (Chu Giang Nguyễn Văn Lư 1995:342) as part of the official response to the NVGP challenge. When the book was published, he was Director of the VWA’s Văn Học Publishing House, an important position that could only have been given to the politically trustworthy Tuấn had even adhered to the practice of first going to live in a factory to collect material about the working class characters he wanted to write about. However, these were unusual times and Tuấn was probably an unwitting victim of its ideological tensions. He and those around him were staggered by a campaign of such ferocity springing up out of the blue. Tuấn told Trần Thù (1996:123):

“At that time, I sat alone every morning in my office because all my colleagues were avoiding me for fear of being implicated. I would look through all the newspapers of that day, feeling like a besieged unit and could only clench my teeth and endure in silence as enemy fire showered upon me from all directions.”

Tuấn lost his job and was banished from the literary world to work in a seafood production unit for about 10 years (Chu Giang Nguyễn Văn Lư 1995:343).

QĐND’s response to the controversy provides an example of how the feverish censorship caused dissenting viewpoints to become deeply encoded. Its editorial board, extremely reluctant to join the attack on Entering Life, stonewalled for as long as possible. Finally, it was getting dangerous for the paper to be the only one not to join the campaign and so the editorial board assigned a reluctant journalist, Mai Luan, to write something. Having no choice, Luan produced a critique that repeated pro forma

27 “Tôi hay, mỗi buổi sáng, ngồi một mình trong phòng làm việc, và anh em cùng trạnh mặt mảnh ồn à nhỉ vậy. Mình giờ chẳng xuất bản trong ngày ra xem mọc lở và cả cái tước analy về một mảnh vụ việc bao vẻ. Cái câu rằng chịu đúng những đợt pháo từ tia phẩn Nathan.”

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what the other papers were saying, but at the end of it he signalled his contrition for attacking the author by addressing him as "Comrade H. Minh Tuan". Tuan spotted it and expressed his appreciation in private (Tran Thu 1996:121-23). It seemed like a very small gesture, but the moral support in that one surreptitious word "comrade" could perhaps only be fully appreciated by a Tuan who felt as though he was under siege from enemy fire in battle. For those authorities that were worried about opponents lurking among the intelligentsia, this was the sort of crypto-dissent and furtive association that had to be checked.

Nguyen Chi Thanh's objection to another novel, *Breaking Through The Encirclement* (Pha Vay), soon after *Enter T*ing *Life*, was indicative of the suspicious frame of mind at the top. The book was accused of not differentiating between just and unjust wars simply because it had a character, a regimental political commissar, who philosophized about war in a few sentences (Tran Thu 1996:124). At a time when war and peace was a contentious domestic issue, Thanh could have viewed this as an encoded form of struggling for peaceful coexistence.

Nguyen Chi Thanh's behaviour was reminiscent of what Truong Chinh did during the NVPD affair. Both actively directed the press to serve personal political objectives. Truong Chinh's motive was to fight the critical mood in the party that had precipitated his demise as Party General Secretary. Thanh's design was to generate a political climate that would facilitate L. Duan's war plans for the south and thus enhance his (Thanh's) position in the military.

In the summer of 1963, the climate of intimidation against liberal intellectuals was also enhanced by a mood of mobilization throughout the country. In July, ND carried articles and pictures of mass meetings in the DRV to decry US support for the Ngo Dinh Diem regime in the ROV, which was then arresting Buddhist activists for their protests against religious persecution. Through the second half of the year, a campaign bearing the theme "For our flesh and blood in the south" was launched to rally citizens into emulating model production units and raise production in all economic sectors. The official media also frequently attacked "revisionism", but since this could not be directed at the Soviet Union, articles with strident headlines were aimed instead at Tito's Yugoslavia, which had already been condemned as a revisionist pariah by the rest of communist world (for an example, see ND 9/7/63:3).

Pressure on dissenting intellectuals to fall in line was also stepped up during internal struggle sessions at places of work. These internal debates were more forthright, with cadres at some places making clear they could not agree with the anti-revisionist agenda, or reserving their opinion on the Ninth Plenum (Third Congress) draft resolution (Le Xuan Ta 1994:22; Nguyen Minh Can 1995:33-36; and Vu Nhan Tr's interview 26/2/98). For example, at Hoc Tap's 7 September 1963 editorial board meeting called to discuss individual member's ideological alignment (mentioned above), Pham Ky Van said he could not agree with the proposed party line, making him the odd man out in the board of three (Hong Chuong 1986:219).

As was the case with the NVPD affair, a party plenum resolution determined the outcome of intense ideological struggle within the party and set down the parameters to be observed by all. The Ninth Plenum (Third Congress) brought a sense of finality to the festering debate of the past three years. Actions were taken against some of those who disagreed with the resolution. At Hoc Tap, the Party Central issued an order to remove Pham Ky Van from the editorial board (Hong Chuong 1986:219). The same thing happened to Minh Tranh, Director of Sg Th's publishing house (Nguyen Van Tran 1995:326; and Vu Thu Hien 1997:131-32).

At QDND, acting Chief Editor Hoang Thuy Dung was reduced to a quiet shadow in the office and sat through political meetings to study the Ninth Plenum (Third Congress) Resolution, wearing his sad smile and uttering not a word (Tran Thu 1996:128). Several times, Tran Thu tried to share some private thoughts about the

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28 Mai Linh was eventually arrested as an alleged revisionist (Thinh Tin 1993:240).

29 Hong Chuong's account of the Hoc Tap meeting only identifies the dissenting editorial board member as Ph.V.D. Pulling together information from Tran Thu (1996:111) and Vu Thu Hien (1997:22; and Interview 9/4/98), I deduce Ph.V.D. to be Pham Ky Van who was mentioned earlier.

30 Tran Thu's book refers to the acting Chief Editor after Van Doan as Hoang Lich. However, Binh Thao and Vu Thu Hien said during their interviews that they had always known the acting Chief Editor as Hoang Thuy Dung. Common to literary convention in Vietnam, Hoang Lich was likely to be a pen-name of Hoang Thuy Dung.
political situation with him, only to be told, “Enough, Thu. There is now a resolution. Don’t say anymore unless you want to court disaster.” Dũng was being loyal to the principle of democratic centralism which stipulated that once the party had officially adopted a position, the debate must stop and everybody must fall in line.

But a mood of defiance remained among some in the intelligentsia. Unable to be expressed in the press, defiance was more manifest in the internal channels of debate. At sessions organized to study the resolution, reluctant QĐND cadres resorted to speaking in an incoherent, roundabout way or pretended they had problems understanding it. One Nhô Phan was the most forthright and brought with him a stack of documents to prove that the resolution violated Marxist-Leninist tenets and even previous resolutions of the party (Trần Thu 1996:101).22 Probably as a means of assuaging the disquiet beneath the surface, the party had allowed people to reserve their opinion (bào lưu ý kiến). Some people did, although later they realised that this stigmatized them (Trần Thu 1996:128). The situation at Vietnam Pictorial, where Vũ Thư Hiền worked, was broadly similar (Vũ Thư Hiền 1997:129, 283). Here, people competed with each other to criticize the revisionist line and demonstrate their correct position by memorizing long tracts from the party documents. Others kept quiet or reserved their opinions.

Ideological management went beyond just studying the resolution. A movement began whereby colleagues had to review and criticize what each other had written in the past two years. Võ Nhận Trí (Interview 26/2/98) of the Institute of Economics said he was criticized for putting too much emphasis on aid from Eastern Europe and not attaching due importance to Chinese assistance. Vũ Thư Hiền’s colleagues at Vietnam Pictorial nit-picked over wordings in some of his articles, even though many of these lines happened to be lifted from old speeches made by the country’s top leaders, Phạm Văn Đồng, Trương Chinh or Lê Duẩn (Vũ Thư Hiền 1997:131, 188; and Võ Nhận Trí’s interview 26/2/98). The message would not be lost on media practitioners: what was permissible to write and publish at a certain time could be retroactively pronounced ideologically unsound at another.

The investigation of QĐND’s pro-Soviet bias by its supervisory organ also took place at this time. Trần Thu saw it as an attempt to find an excuse to disband the staff of a worrisome newspaper whose Chief Editor had defected and many of whose journalists were still reluctant to support the Ninth Plenum (Third Congress) Resolution. Indeed, after the investigation, members of the staff were gradually transferred to other jobs outside the media (Trần Thu 1996:127-29).

The anti-revisionist mood went on for quite a few years and reached a peak when Lê Đức Thọ engineered the arrest of many alleged revisionists. Many questions surrounding the arrests still have no satisfactory answers. Why did the Dương-Thọ partnership wait till 1967 to detain their alleged-revisionist targets? Was it Thọ rather than Lê Duẩn who ordered the arrests, as some detainees alleged? Was there any truth behind Thọ’s claim that an anti-revisionist group was plotting a coup? There is no need to address these details, however, because my purpose is to look at state-media dynamics rather than explore the XLCD affair in its entirety.

Conclusion

Media developments in the DRV years (i.e., prior to its formal reunification with the south in 1976) have been largely opaque except for what we know of the NVGP affair as a prominent incidence of intellectual protest. For the most part, many people have made assumptions about the DRV’s press and intellectual life based on a broader knowledge of the practices of socialist regimes in the Soviet Union or China. What this produced were vague notions of tight censorship and a high level of regimentation imposed by socialist fiat and the exigencies of war, but tempered by a conventional belief that authoritarianism in Hanoi never went to the repressive extremes of Stalin’s Soviet Union, Mao’s China or Kim Il Sung’s North Korea.

22 Nhô Phan, whose real name was Dạo Duy Đình, was a brother of Dạo Duy Auh, an eminent historian. Both of them were active during the NVGP protest. For his troubles at QĐND, Nhô Phan was transferred out of the newspaper to work in a museum.
Through this period, outsiders often thought that intellectual resistance to the DRV state had disappeared or was minimal. The closed nature of DRV society through those years reinforced this perspective because it was difficult to know the details of internal struggle. I have meant this study of the XLCD period to help fill the large empirical gap.

In doing so, I have put names, action and motives to some of the assumptions that have been made about the DRV press, e.g., the use of encoded communications. I have also tried to capture the tensions and pressures that were felt by the intellectual community facing a hardening ideological climate. Although I agree that Hanoi's leaders were relatively modern compared to a few other communist dictators, life in the DRV also had its own phase when ideological fervor rose to a height and, as a result of that, the intellectual climate became more intimidating than usual. This is a perspective of the 1960s that the Vietnamese references I have read sought to convey. It is important to know so that we understand what legacy of discontent it had left for the subsequent media reforms of the 1980s to redress.

The NVGP and XLCD affairs provide two different pictures of state-media dynamics in the DRV. In the NVGP case, a lively press activism was allowed (albeit for a short period), or at least suffered. The XLCD case was just the opposite. There was hardly any opportunity for the press to be critical and journalists had to express dissent in deeply encoded forms.

Despite their differences, the XLCD affair, like the NVGP affair, also experienced the politics of the struggle paradigm. The contention of a struggle, although banished from the pages of the press, was played out in the internal channels of the party and also prevalent as atmospheres. That had its impact on those who worked in the press. We have seen how they had to remain alert to intra-elite competition and the shifting party line. The deliberations around a party plenum continued to affect them (and those in other professions as well) in significant ways. There was no opting out of struggle for the journalists mentioned in this chapter. They were obliged to participate and make clear their positions at internal forums; a venture that was no less risky than speaking one's mind in the pages of the press (assuming that was allowed). These empirical details add vividness to our understanding of the media practitioner as a system insider. They also tell us that state-mind was not solely an occasional outburst of controversy when a newspaper transgressed censorship limits. A docile press that eschewed all risks of controversy and censorship carried with it an intimidatory climate of pervasive tension. Paranoia among media custodians and self-censorship by media practitioners were the by-products of such a situation. In a general sense, these features are much in the nature of this system and its modus operandi.

Another common feature binds the starkly different media outcomes of the NVGP and XLCD affair and says something about media practitioners (and the larger intellectual community) in the DRV. I shall call it a propensity to struggle. At the end of the chapter on the NVGP affair, I noted the importance of "opportunity" to a press struggle. Time and circumstances play their role in promoting press activism. At the risk of sounding obvious, opportunities need to be seized to produce results. The NVGP protagonists demonstrated the propensity to struggle when they seized the opportunities of private publishing and a change in ideological climate that favored their short-lived activism. Media practitioners during the XLCD affair had few such opportunities but continued to demonstrate a propensity to struggle. This was evident in how they looked for ways to resist or subvert a censorious authority. We saw this propensity when Phạm Ky Văn at Học Thái seized the chance to write in support of the Soviet position; and when Mai Luan of QĐND referred to Hà Minh Tuân as "comrade". Not all disagreement was so discreet. The resistance was explicit in those who spoke out against the Ninth Plenum (Third Congress) Resolution before and after the plenum. Despite the hardening political control of a Leninist system setting in, editors, writers and journalists involved in these struggles showed initiative, will and energy. It is all the more significant that this doggedness followed in the wake of a draconian campaign against the writers of the NVGP affair in 1958.

I do not intend to explain the source of this propensity to struggle because it is hard to be brief and yet do justice to such a large and complex subject. For the

29 Vietnam watchers did develop a sense of how the leadership was divided over a collection of issues, but these studies never really engage the subject of how the media or the larger intellectual community engaged in debate on these issues.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Hà Trọng Hòa Affair

The press campaign against Hà Trọng Hòa began in a politically-restive climate of 1986. Journalists in Vietnam remember the campaign as one of the remarkable victories in the struggle for more journalistic space. As Provincial Party Secretary of Thanh Hóa, Hòa had been running the province like a personal fiefdom. Journalists in Hanoi began to publish scandals related to him, beginning in September 1986. Twelve different media organs, comprising newspapers, radio and television, criticized the Thanh Hòa leader. The struggle took some 18 months to have the problem resolved (Đinh Văn Nam 1988:4; and Lê Điền 1988:8). Three major newspapers were particularly active: TTT (Tưfür Tin Tức) belonging to VNA (Vietnam News Agency), TP (Tiền Phong) belonging to the Youth League, and Phụ Nữ Việt Nam belonging to the Vietnam Women’s Association. Together, the three papers brought to light four scandals linked to Hòa:

- the case of Đảng Đình Tâm, an official who abused his position for financial gains and sexual favours, requiring 14 official investigation teams to bring him to justice;
- the case of Lê Huy Chung, a university student facing possible expulsion because a senior Thanh Hòa bureaucrat wanted to settle a private score with Chung’s family;
- the detention of three teenage girls by Thanh Hòa police for more than a year without due process; and
- the case of Cao Thị Lan, a woman notorious in Thanh Hóa for gold smuggling.

The media exposure eventually led to Hòa’s demotion. It was the first time media criticism had led to the fall of such a senior party official. Hòa was not only a...
had borne fruit in 1975 when the DRV totally defeated the armed forces of the ROV and united the country under the VCP. This feat enhanced the legitimacy of the Đunnel-Thọ partnership which enjoyed primacy in decision-making and personnel appointments until 1986. However, both Lê Dầu and Thọ did not, or were not able to, remove completely the influence of their generational peers, especially Trương Chinh, and Giáp. By early 1986, the legitimacy of the Đunnel-Thọ leadership was also waning because the country was in dire economic straits. The post-war plan for socialist reconstruction had disappointing results (Fforde and de Vylde 1996:128-29). Socialization in the so-called run into widespread resistance, state capital was squandered, production was low, distribution was distorted and economic shortage and hardship were almost everywhere. Corruption and other forms of power abuses had also grown, causing widespread disaffection with the party leadership. The problems amounted to a socio-economic crisis in 1979-1980 and pushed the party leadership to begin some reforms which lifted some of the state-imposed economic constrains and the socialist regimentation of everyday life. In foreign relations, the Đunnel-Thọ partnership, reversing its 1960s policy to discredit the Soviet Union in favour of China, hec by 1979 created a strategic alliance between Vietnam and the Soviet Union and fought a bloody border war with China. Vietnamese who had lived through the ideological climate described in the XLCĐ affair saw old certainties being revised or discredited by the regime’s own action. All these political and economic developments accumulated into a mood ripe for more vigorous reforms within Vietnam by 1986.

1 The Đunnel-Thọ partnership had its share of tension, particularly in the last years of Lê Dầu, but too few details are available and so the issue will have to be placed aside for the moment.
2 Another top member of that generation was Phạm Văn Đặng who had ranked immediately behind Lê Dầu and Trương Chinh in the Politburo since 1960. But all the accounts I have read and heard portray Đặng as a person who preferred to stay above the fray of the competitive politics of his colleagues.
3 Those who felt they were vilified for alleged Soviet connections during the XLCĐ affair probably saw in the strategic reversal an opportunity to seek vindication. In 1981 and 1982, a few of them or their family members petitioned the party leadership to have their cases reviewed (Nguyễn Thi Ngoc Lan 1981; Hoàng Minh Chinh 1993:12; Nguyễn Thị Mật n.d.; and Trí Thi 1996:111). At the same time, throughout the early 1980s, Lê Dầu Thọ sent out peace feelers by restarting the lost salaries and pensions of those who were incarcerated. He also personally met some of them to bury the hatchets (Vũ Thu Hạnh 1997:339). Two of the petitioners, Hoàng Minh Chinh and Đồng Kim Giang, were re-arrested for their efforts, but the exact details need not be recorded here.
When 1986 began, Lê Duẩn was ailing, believed to be suffering from cancer. He died on 10 July that year. The question of a successor became a top priority for the impending Sixth Congress. Two people were eyeing the vacant top party position at the Congress: Trương Chinh and Lê Đức Thọ.

Trương Chinh’s politburo ranking had always been second only to the deceased Lê Duẩn, and was Chairman of the Council of State (equivalent to Head of State). These positions gave him sufficient seniority to claim the General Secretary position which was once his. Even before Lê Duẩn’s death, Trương Chinh was already strengthening his position by riding a rising momentum of support for reforms to make the party more accountable for its many shortcomings. He was increasingly criticizing Lê Duẩn in meetings. The contest was not only over the General Secretary position; it was also a scramble to have supporters fill positions within the CC.

Lê Đức Thọ had long been using his Organization Commission to manipulate CC membership to his advantage. Thọ headed that commission until 1982 and was succeeded by a supporter, Nguyễn Đức Tâm, allowing Thọ to retain control of personnel appointments. Through the years, Thọ and Tám had placed supporters in key party-government positions while getting rid of, or marginalizing, those they did not trust. Thọ’s arrangement gave Thọ an inordinate share of power that was not evident from his fifth Politburo ranking (as of the 1982 Fifth Party Congress) (Source 9 Interview 3; and Source 12 Interview 2).

Hà Trọng Hòa was one such supporter whom Lê Đức Thọ had promoted (Source 9 Interview 3; and Source 10). Hòa rose from being Deputy Party Secretary to become the Party Secretary of Thanh Hóa province in 1982 (ND 13/4/88:1). That year he also became an alternate CC member. He enjoyed a reputation for having raised the province’s agricultural production, but that achievement was really due to policy reforms at the national level in the early 1980s which allowed some private incentive in the rural economy. That innovation, however, soon lost its momentum and agricultural production stagnated again. Nevertheless, Hòa continued to promote an image as a capable technocrat by pushing up production targets and squeezing what he could out of peasants, leaving them with very little or even indebted to the state (Phương Gia Lộc 1988; and Lao Động 16/6/88:5). Hòa, a consummate political animal, cultivated a wide network of relationships with central party-government bureaucrats in Hanoi (Dinh Văn Nam 1988, Source 10; and Source 11). These political connections stood him in good stead for a promotion to full membership of the CC at the Sixth Congress.

Under these circumstances, only a brave editor would antagonize Hà Trọng Hòa when an internal power struggle was being played out at the top of the party, not to mention restrictions the media regulatory system would impose on such an editor. I asked a reporter who was involved in that media campaign what emboldened his newspaper to take on such a sensitive target. His answer was: "Trương Chinh gave the green light (bát đèn xanh)." (Source 10). He told of how it began at the National Assembly in the final week of December 1985. Trương Chinh waved over two journalists to see him. They were from the country’s two largest news organizations: the VNA and the party daily ND. Trương Chinh told the two reporters he was not happy with the efforts of the press in the "struggle against negativism". He said newspapers were exposing officials who were too junior. He wanted them to hit bigger targets.

Getting the media to step up criticism against official shortcomings harked back to the 13 March 1972 Politburo Order 197 (Chủ tịch 197 CT/TW về phê bình và tự phê bình trong báo chí; see Người Làm Báo 4/1986:3&18) which called on the press to do just that as well as set down guiding principles. Since then a string of party and government decrees – Secretariat Order: 81 (Chủ tịch 81 CT/TW) on 10 November 1979, Prime Minister’s Office Order 363 (Chủ tịch 363/TGQ) on 13 November 1979, Secretariat Decision 36 (Quyết 36/QĐ/TW) on 24 February 1981 – had reiterated the need to increase criticism and self-criticism throughout the party-government hierarchy, the state’s desire to combat corruption, and the contributing role of the press.

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* See Chapter Three for an account of how Trương Chinh lost the Party General Secretary position in 1956 for the mistakes of the land redistribution campaign.

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* Two other journalistic sources provided corroborative information about Trương Chinh’s role and other details related to the Hà Trọng Hòa affair (Source 9 Interview 1; and Source 11).
leaders were well aware of Gorbachev's message. In the 1980s, whatever the ideological orientation of individual leaders, all of them would have to recognize the reality that the Soviet Union was Vietnam's security guarantor against Chinese hostility and also a provider of critical aid to keep Vietnam from economic collapse. This combination of external and domestic imperatives helps to explain why Vietnam's leaders would want to affirm their support for Gorbachev's liberal programme. Under those circumstances, Vietnamese newspapers regularly republished articles from the Soviet press supportive of glasnost. (For two typical examples, see the Pravda articles about the problems faced by the Soviet press in exposing official misconduct carried in TT 5/6/86:1&7, and ND 25/9/86:3.) This was reminiscent of what NV and GP did vis à vis Khrushchev's call for liberalization in 1956. The ideological line of an important foreign ally which Vietnam's leadership would not dare to criticize openly was being appropriated as justification for the domestic struggle.

On 11 March 1986, the VCP issued Order 79 (Chi Thủy 79) to promote criticism and self-criticism within the party in preparation for the upcoming Sixth Party Congress (ND 15/3/86:1). A party directive of this nature before a Party Congress was routine, but the growing public discontent injected greater urgency. In some places like HCM City, the party authority issued a notice on 18 April 1986 that all its branches should allow the press to cover their criticism and self-criticism sessions (TT 22/4/86:1). The way delegates deftly used criticism and self-criticism tactics at the 27th Soviet Party Congress to force a mood of political openness in their country strengthened the campaign in Vietnam (Source 1).

After his conversation with the VNA and ND reporters at the National Assembly, Trương Chinh arranged for them to be briefed by the Party Investigation Commission (Ban Kiểm Tra) on two cases which had been submitted by the

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4 A significant example is Lê Đức Thọ telling a conference of all Heads of Ideology Commission at the provincial and city levels that Vietnam should emulate the Soviet 27th Party Congress where criticism and self-criticism were "forthright" (thanh thô) and "respect the truth" (đề ra ngay sự thật). No exact date was given for this conference in Hanoi, but the proceedings were published in the April issue of Giáo Dục Lý luận (Theoretical Education) (4/1986:4-9, 21). This was the issue that immediately followed the Soviet Congress.
Procurator's Office (Viên Kiểm Sát). But at the last minute, the Investigation Commission chose not to do so without citing any reason. Because this particular party organization would not oblige Trương Chinh, the journalists had to search for information through other channels.

At least one newspaper, the party daily ND, also chose to turn its back on Trương Chinh's call. Even though Trương Chinh had approached a ND reporter in December 1985, ND was never part of the 18-month media effort against Hà Trọng Hào. Neither did it carry exposés of any other significant personality in that period. Altogether, ND carried but three reports related to the Hà Trọng Hào affair. Two were short VNA despatches that did not mention Hào by name.18 The third was a two-part article that set down the official outcome of the VCP investigation on the issue (ND 1/8/87:4; 15/2/88:1; 13&14/4/88:1&4). ND, apparently, had chosen not to get involved in this struggle and limited its reporting to printing the official conclusion. Bùi Tin, then Deputy Chief Editor of the paper, confirmed this when he said the editorial board chose to avoid the matter because it "did not know how things were going to turn out" (chua biết nghĩa nghĩa ra sao) (Interview 25/2/98). All these developments suggesting the apprehension and caution of party organs like the Investigation Commission and ND illustrate the insiders' awareness of the risks involved in a media struggle and the linkage between media struggles and internal struggles of the party.

The Struggle Begins

Trương Chinh's "green light", however, was sufficient for the Ministry of Justice to be helpful to journalists looking for information to attack a bigger target (Source 10). On 8 April 1986, the Ministry of Justice (Bộ Tư Pháp) arranged a meeting with the Procurator's Office of Thanh Hóa province and invited some journalists to sit in on the

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18 For Vietnam's media, a VNA despatch is always safe to carry because it is the official news agency and its products represent news that the state wants to disseminate. In the event that a VNA story breaches censorship limits, it is VNA which takes the responsibility.

session. Among the journalists were representatives from VNA and the radio service Voice of Vietnam (TTT 27/6/87:8-9, 14-15). For a provincial-level Procurator's Office to brief the Ministry of Justice was nothing out of the ordinary. The presence of journalists was also not considered as an oddity because media practitioners were not really outsiders in this system. If they came under the aegis of a central-level ministry, their official credentials would be even less likely to be questioned. It was also possible that the growing mood throughout the country that was encouraging criticism and self-criticism helped to make provincial bureaucrats feel more at ease with the presence of the media. On the other hand, it would not be correct to think that the Thanh Hóa Procurator's Office was totally oblivious of the sensitive nature of what it was doing. It would know that what it was handing over would cause problems for its cấp ủy, the Provincial Party Executive Committee (Tỉnh Ủy) of Thanh Hóa (see Chapter Two for explanation of cấp ủy). As a rule, an institution is careful not to threaten the interests of its cấp ủy, even when obliging the Party Central. That this was happening underlined the unusual circumstances that produced the Hà Trọng Hào affair.

The case released that day concerned the corrupt behaviour of Đặng Đình Tâm, the director of a big state-owned enterprise belonging to Thanh Hóa province. Tâm had bribed 13 provincial investigation teams to conclude in his favour. His mentor Hà Trọng Hào also protected him. The local official who gave the briefing that day was Vũ Bá Viên, Deputy Director of the Thanh Hóa Procurator's Office. He had been assigned to head the 14th investigation team. Through sheer determination he had collected sufficient evidence to prosecute Đặng Đình Tâm. After the briefing, the Procurator's Office handed to Ministry of Justice officials a copy of its findings which formed the gist of the first press report to be published in TTT in September 1986 (TTT 27/6/87:8-9,14-15).

Meanwhile, the youth paper, TP, was also tracking a story concerning Lê Huy Chung, a Physics student at Hanoi University, who was being harassed by Lê Văn, Head of Thanh Hóa's Party Education and Vocational Training Commission (Ban Giáo Dục Chuyên Ngành). Chung had been admitted to the university in October 1985, but a month later Lê Văn had sent an official letter to the principal asking that Chung be sent
Dũng was the main target of criticism. When the vote was taken to elect Congress delegates, Dũng and a few other senior military officers, who had all risen in their careers with Lê Đức Tho’s patronage, could not make it into the list of 72 delegates. By the conventions of stringent top-down party control in personnel selection, the unthinkable had happened. That was not all. The highest votes went to two generals, Võ Nguyên Giáp and his close associate Lê Trọng Tấn. Despite more than 20 years of the Đuồn-Thọ partnership’s determined efforts to curb Giáp’s influence in the armed forces, his popularity had survived. The talk then was that Giáp could return to the centre-stage of politics after losing his Politburo position in 1982. His supporters, many of them in the armed forces, reportedly wanted him to replace long-time incumbent Phạm Văn Đồng as Prime Minister and the latter elevated to Head of State. This groundswell indicated that resentment against Thọ had never gone away, even though he wielded considerable control through the party appointment mechanism and the security apparatus. It also signalled that party rank-and-file could not now be easily ordered or manipulated out of the way (Bùi Tín 1995:80, 137-139; and Vũ Thanh Hiền 1997:293).

Against this background, the media campaign against Hà Trọng Hào, a Provincial Party Secretary closely identified with Thọ, evolved. It was a small but important part of a larger, complex struggle among top VCP politicians.

The first press report on Hà Trọng Hào-related corruption in Thanh Hóa came out in TTT on 13 September 1986 (TTT 13/9/86:10-11). It was the story of Dũng Đình Tấn, the case that featured in the April briefing by the Thanh Hóa Procurator’s Office. By September, Tấn had already been arrested and charged, thus providing TTT with a stronger justification to publish the story. Tấn’s misdeeds included sending one of his staff with 1,000,000 đồng of company funds to open a bank account in HCM City in 1981 so that he could spend freely whenever he went to that city on business.11 Many of the company staff ran rackets such as buying things at artificially-inflated prices and

11 According to a Vietnamese friend, in the early 1980s, a gold bar which the Vietnamese called a cây (37.59 grams) cost 5,000 đồng. One million đồng at that time would buy 200 gold bars. The cost of a gold bar at the end of 1998 was about US$360. Two hundred gold bars at that price would be worth US$72,000.
pocketing the illegal takings, a portion of which went to Tám. Many in the town of Thanh Hóa called him Emperor Tám because of his conspicuous opulent lifestyle, which included living alone in a two-storey, six-room house. He forced himself on female members of his staff, offering to reward them with promotion or money. The newspaper article alleged that he had sexual relationships with 40 of them. After decades of reading insipid general reports on official misconduct, Vietnamese readers had an article that verged on tabloid sensationalism. Referring to the failure to find incriminating evidence against him till the 14th investigation team, TTT remarked that people in Thanh Hóa were asking who was protecting Tám all this while. The paper was drawing attention to patronage from a higher level but did not implicate Hà Trọng Hào by name. In this first step of the struggle, TTT was not being rash.

The story met with swift reactions from various sectors in Thanh Hóa. The provincial authorities sent a delegation to see the TTT’s supervisory organ, VNA, and also the central Procurator’s Office that oversaw the investigation of the case through its provincial office. At these places, the provincial authorities handed over a formal demand to see the press evidence for alleging there were 13 investigation teams and widespread corruption in the company. Meanwhile, the Women’s Association of the province wrote demanding to know who were the 40 women sexually involved with Đặng Đình Tám because the charge had cast a shadow over the reputation of all the female staff working for Tám. Letters asking to see evidence came from soldiers defending the country’s frontier who said they could not concentrate on their duties at the battle front when the rear was in such a mess (Lê Đình 1988:8; and Trần Mai Hạnh 1994:67). Such expressions of readers’ indignation were similar to letters in the official press against NV and GP in 1956. The differences are that the volume of anti-NVGP letters were on a much larger scale and the party’s Ideology Commission was coordinating a campaign against the two magazines that the authorities wanted closed down. The Ideology Commission in 1986 was not fomenting any such campaign on behalf of Hà Trọng Hào. Hào had a motive to engineer such a slate of letters and, as a senior cadre in charge of a province, might have had the means to do so. But this is not enough evidence to say he was behind them. Whether the letters were a spontaneous reaction from members of the public or organized by Hào, they generated psychological pressure against the editorial board of TTT.

In September 1986, TP tried once more to run its story on the student Lê Huy Chung, but was stopped again (Dịnh Văn Nam 1988:4). In the second half of October, TP resorted to an indirect method to publicize Chung’s case. It ran, as a short three-column story, a summary of readers’ letters asking for justice on behalf of Chung. Just as we cannot discount the possibility of pro-Hà Trọng Hào letters being engineered, we should also recognize the motive and means of a newspaper to arrange for letters that correspond with its editorial intention. Publishing sensitive issues in the form of readers’ complaints had its justification because the state had been encouraging newspapers to run readers’ correspondence wherever possible. All these point to the kind of tactics that might be used in connection with a media struggle. TP’s belated attempt could have been emboldened by TTT’s initiative. In that report, TP also made clear that the university, the Youth League and the Ministry of Education had all come forward to defend Chung’s qualification for university admission (TP 21-28/10/86:3).

Then, in the following week, Phụ Nữ Việt Nam took the press campaign a significant step forward by naming Hà Trọng Hào. (Phụ Nữ Việt Nam 29/10-4/11/86:3). The magazine came in with the angle of Lê Huy Chung’s mother asking for help from the newspaper. While Vietnam’s newspapers today are given considerably more leeway to cover a wide spectrum of news, in 1986 newspapers still had to be careful about the parameters of their assigned coverage, particularly if it was a delicate topic. Consequently, a woman’s publication should be concerned primarily with women’s issues. Given the controversy brewing over Chung’s case, Phụ Nữ Việt Nam, like TP, was being careful. The article alleged that the official Lê Văn harasses Chung because the latter’s father, who was in the construction industry, once turned down a

11 Lê Đình’s (1988) account was written for the professional journal of the VNA. Trần Mai Hạnh was Executive Deputy Chief Editor (Phó Tổng Biên Tập Thường Trị) of TTT, which meant he was in charge most of the time at the newspaper when the Chief Editor was preoccupied with other official duties.
12 Dinh Văn Nam did not say who stopped him the second time. I suspect it was TP’s supervisory organ, the Youth League, again.
personal request from Lê Văn. Furthermore, since October 1985, a series of party-government organs in Thanh Hóa, including the Party Executive Committee, the People’s Committee (Uỷ Ban Nhân Dân) and the Education Office (Sở Giáo Dục) had all written to relevant departments in Hanoi asking that Chung be sent back from his Hanoi university to the province. Among those official documents was one sent by Provincial Party Secretary Hào to the Party CC.

The central media did not necessarily intend to bring down Hà Trọng Hào. All it had wanted was for him to accept the criticism, a procedure known in Vietnamese as "tiếp thu phê bình" (Đỗ Phương’s interview 24/10/96). This required a target of criticism to admit his errors, thank the newspaper for the criticism and promise to set things right. The paper making the criticism then publishes the admission. Hào, instead, chose to be combative. The struggle picked up momentum.

In this context, political events in November 1986 are important. That month, all the provincial party branches, including that in Thanh Hóa, were meeting to select delegates for the Sixth Congress. The 11th Plenum (Fifth Congress), which would deliberate on the important question of personnel selection for the new leadership line-up at the Congress, was scheduled for 17 November 1986. This was an inconvenient time for a politician with CC membership ambitions to admit to errors publicly because he could not risk political rivals making use of such shortcomings (for details of the CC selection process, see Porter 1993:102-103). Hào chose, instead, to use his provincial party paper on 8 and 12 November 1986 to launch a counter-attack on the central press, calling them "lackeys of the class enemy and Beijing expansionists" (Đại Đoàn Kết 2/4:88:5). He was accusing his critics of being "against" the state. He also sent these Thanh Hóa publications to the other provincial authorities.

At that juncture, TP made a third bid to run its investigative piece on Lê Huy Chung. It announced in its 11 November 1986 edition that the story would be carried in its next issue, on 18 November 1986, which would be on the second day of the 11th Party Plenum (Fifth Congress). That brought a concerted response from the Thanh Hóa leadership. On the following day, Hà Trọng Hào sent a subordinate to TP to request that the newspaper delay publishing the story. According to TP’s Chief Editor, Đinh Văn Nam, the Thanh Hóa official made a subtle attempt to bribe him (Đinh Văn Nam 1988:4). On 13 November 1986, the province’s leadership sent a delegation to TP to make the same request. When the delegation was turned down, Hào himself visited TP as well as the paper’s supervisory organ, the Youth League. At that time, he had seven delegations in Hanoi lobbying various central organs to put pressure on TP to hold back the story. TP rejected his request.

On the morning of 15 November 1986, according to Đinh Văn Nam (1988:4), at the “regular weekly meeting with those in charge of newspapers” (cục hток với phụ trách các báo chỉ thường lệ hàng tuần), “the comrade who was in charge of ideological work” (đồng chí phụ trách công tác tư tưởng) said that Hà Trọng Hào had gone to see him earlier in the morning and had also petitioned the Politburo, the Secretariat and the Cabinet to have the story held back. Although Nam had shied away from naming names, his allusion to their official duties suggested that the organization was the Ideology Commission and the “comrade” was likely to have been Đào Duy Tùng, then Head of the Ideology Commission and a CC member. That the chief control organ of media had to get involved indicated that TP’s supervisory organ, the Youth League, was no longer weighing in to stop its paper from participating in the struggle against the Thanh Hóa leader. Nam argued at the meeting that TP should go ahead with the story because the paper had already announced it and failure to do so would only invite public speculation. If the published article turned out to be inaccurate or caused any harm, Nam said he and his colleagues responsible for the story were prepared to be

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14 Phu NgVi Nam did not provide any detail of Lê Văn’s personal request but added that it was something the authority should investigate.
15 Đỗ Phương, Director of VNA, was interviewed in his office in Hanoi. In 1986, as Deputy Director of VNA, he was in charge of day-to-day operations in the agency.
16 Since the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese border war over the Cambodian conflict, Vietnam had called China "expansionists". By 1986, the propaganda name-calling had abated, but Hà Trọng Hào probably found it a convenient term to label his political foes.
17 Đào Duy Tùng was elevated to alternate Politburo member status at the impending Sixth Party Congress. In 1988, he was identified as the Secretariat member tasked with taking charge of ideological matters (Tiến Đạo Báo Cậy 1998:71). Bùi Tiến (1995:61-64) characterized him as a rigid doctrinaire person who played a leading role in retaining the growing momentum of liberal reforms in 1959. Up till
sack. The "comrade" ended the matter, however, by saying: "My decision is to stop it!" (Cái quyết định của tôi là đừng lại). Thus TP had no choice but to do as it was told by the foremost control organ of the nation's media. The exact wording of the announcement to hold back the story was even drafted there and then at the meeting. It informed readers that the article was postponed at the request of the Thanh Hóa Party Executive Committee. This in itself pointed a finger at the Thanh Hóa authority and was a sign that, even with protection from powerful supporters, Hòa could not get his way without some detriment to his reputation. Such a compromise would seem to reflect a situation where policies and power configurations within the elite were being negotiated day-by-day and nobody was in a position to have everything his own way.

TP had enough resolve to get around the injunction by making use of loopholes. Under instructions not to run the story on Lê Huy Chung, TP, nevertheless, exposed two other Thanh Hóa students who were genuinely guilty of what Lê Huy Chung was accused of. The official who helped them falsify their records to qualify for university was none other than the same official, Lê Văn Chung's tormentor (TP 25/11-1/12/63; 7-8/12/86:3). By now, the Sixth Congress was getting too close for the unresolved media struggle to drag on. On 3 December 1986, the Secretariat issued Decision 88 (Quyết định 88QĐ/TU) banning all media coverage on negativism in Thanh Hóa. At the same time, the decision made clear that Lê Huy Chung was entitled to go on studying at university and that the Thanh Hóa provincial authority must review the case and answer publicly the questions raised by the media. Given that this Secretariat decision awarded concessions to both Hà Trong Hào and the media, it intimated that political forces on both sides were more-or-less matched. With that, the issue subsided but was far from being settled.

In the wrangling over the General Secretary position leading up to the Sixth Party Congress, Lê Đức Thọ proposed that Trương Chinh, Phạm Văn Đồng and himself should retire and make way for a change at the top. Many believed he did this to avert the possibility of losing a fight for the position to Trương Chinh who might turn out to

be the more popular choice. Under these circumstances, Nguyễn Văn Linh was accepted as the compromise candidate for the General Secretary position (Bùi Tin 1995:139).

Thus began a new phase in Vietnamese politics where the new party leader, Linh, actively lent his name to the VCP's liberal reform programme of đổi mới, a development well-documented by the international press. A hallmark of Linh's effort was how he used the media to project an image of himself as a leader who was removing many old restrictions and leading reforms forcefully. In that process, space for journalism grew.

However, Lê Đức Thọ's compromise did not mean he lost total control of the personnel appointment process. Bùi Tin (1995:139-44) said many party members considered the Sixth Party Congress to be manipulated by Thọ; at the end of which Thọ managed to ensure a retinue of supporters or associates remained on or moved into the list of Politburo members.14 This uncertain outcome of the internal struggle contributed to the protracted nature of the media struggle against Hà Trong Hào with no assurance that the newspapers involved would win.

Since Lê Đức Thọ was still able to influence congress appointments to a considerable extent, it was not surprising that Hà Trong Hào got his anticipated promotion to full CC membership despite the whiff of public scandal attached to his name. This could have put him in no mood to back down from his conflict with the media. Within Thanh Hóa, he started a purge against those he suspected of being disloyal to him and collaborating with the central media. In particular, he sacked or disciplined members of the 14th investigation team that had dared to bring Đặng Đình Tâm to book. That led to the newspapers resuming their campaign against him. On 11 April 1987, TTT reported on the trial of Tâm, who received a seven-year prison term (TTT 11/4/87:8&15). Through the months of May and June 1987, the press campaign

14 Bùi Tin (1995:123, 141-44, 157, 160) identifies a few names in the Sixth Party Congress Politburo who were closely associated with Lê Đức Thọ or were brought in to strengthen the latter's influence at the apex of the party: Lê Đức Anh, Nguyễn Cơ Thạch, Thành Xuân Bích and Đỗ Khương, Mai Chí Thọ, who was Lê Đức Thọ's brother, and Nguyễn Đức Tâm, who was Lê Đức Thọ's close supporter, were also among the Politburo members. This list does not exhaust the possibilities of Lê Đức Thọ's supporters being found among the rest of the Politburo members.
involved with more major papers like Lao Động of the General Federation of Trade Unions (Tổng Liên Đoàn Lao Động) and QĐND, the armed forces daily, joining in. The press effort was aided by Nguyễn Văn Linh’s frequent newspaper column “Things Which Must Be Done Immediately” (Những Việc Cần Làm Ngay), which he signed with the initials NVL, beginning in ND on 25 May 1987. With the new General Secretary leading the way to criticize “negativism” openly in the press, those trying to obstruct media activism had to be more restrained. Furthermore, newspapers throughout the whole country were organized to launch a mass campaign called “In Response To Things Which Must Be Done Immediately” (Hướng Ứng Những Việc Cần Làm Ngay), which resulted in a stream of media criticisms against bureaucratic corruption and incompetence. Some of the stories written about official misconduct in Thanh Hóa were published as part of this campaign. Press exposure of the unfair punishment meted out to the 14th investigation team in the Cận vệ viên Tầm case resulted in the Party Investigation Commission sending a delegation to the province to set right some of the errors (Lê Đình 1988:8).

To write their Thanh Hóa stories, Hanoi journalists risked personal danger when they worked in the province. Hà Trọng Hóa had deployed his local security apparatus to check traffic coming in from Hanoi. It would have been safer if Hanoi journalists had travelled in a group to Thanh Hóa, but that also meant they would not be able to research their stories because Hóa could watch them easily. There was a rumour then that Hóa managed to detain a TTT journalist, but in fact he had arrested the wrong person. Local people, both citizens and officials who were unhappy with their eggregious Party Secretary, also helped the journalists from Hanoi by providing information and safe hiding from Hóa’s surveillance (Source 9 Interview 3; Source 10 and Source 11). A report published in the magazine of the VJA said the investigation had required editors and journalists to abandon old ways of working; they had to be pro-active and alert, and sometimes work round the clock to get the information they wanted (Lê Đình 1988:8). Although the report did not say it, the journalistic pursuit of wrongdoing in Thanh Hóa fundamentally violated the principle of “trust in the cấp ủy” taught to Vietnamese journalists (see Chapter Two). This principle would require that they go to the cấp ủy

first for a briefing on any local problem they want to investigate. In the event that an investigation uncovered anything incompatible with what the cấp ủy said, the latter should be told (Giáo Trí Nghĩa Việt Báo Chí Tập 1. 1978:9-10). If the Hanoi reporters had abided by this rule, they would have needed to call on the Thanh Hóa Party Executive Committee on arrival in the province. This basic tenet had to be violated to make the newspaper reports against Hà Trọng Hóa possible. That such violations occurred was a measure of the changes taking place in the Vietnamese media.

Hà Trọng Hóa complained again to the Party Secretariat in Hanoi, which called in Lê Xuân Đông, Deputy Head of the Ideology Commission, to discuss the matter. On their part, the editors involved lobbied the Ideology Commission to present three requests to the Secretariat. First, they wanted to know to what extent Hóa had complied with Secretariat Decision 88 that required him to answer the questions raised by the press. Second, they sought an explanation from the Thanh Hóa authority for accusing them of working for class enemies and the Beijing expansionists. Third, they wanted a face-to-face dialogue with Hóa. The Thanh Hóa delegates who were then in Hanoi lobbying against the central media agreed to the dialogue but asked to be given time to go back to their province to do some preparation. During this interim, they wanted the newspapers concerned to stop running articles attacking the province’s leadership (Lê Đình 1988:9).

The dialogue took place on 27 July 1987 and was chaired by Lê Xuân Đông. Eleven representatives came from the media. Relevant government departments that had been involved in the investigation of official misconduct in Thanh Hóa were also present. Đông’s opening remarks indicated that the Ideology Commission was playing a very different role from what it had on 15 November 1986 when it stopped TP from publishing the story on Lê Huy Chung. In this instance, it was less inclined to be seen

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to muzzle the media on Hà Trọng Hòa’s behalf, saying that it was interested to ensure an objective and constructive exchange of views in order to clarify those issues that remained unclear. This was reflective of how much the political environment had changed in a matter of months. The Sixth Congress had endorsed the reformist line and the new Party General Secretary, Nguyễn Văn Linh, was publicly leading a media campaign to broaden criticism of all manner of systemic shortcomings. Linh also headed the Secretariat that had instructed the Ideology Commission to organize the dialogue. The session represented one feature of state-media dynamics in Vietnam: use of internal mediation to avoid a media controversy from getting out of hand. The Ideology Commission can do this at the behest of powerful interests within the party elite or an individual member of the Communist Party itself if it is not in its interest to see the media controversy prolonged.24 This provides one more depiction of a struggle’s “within-system” characteristic. State organs and members of the elite are bound by conventions to try and keep controversy within the confines of the system.

At the dialogue session, Hà Trọng Hòa maintained his innocence in the two cases of Lê Huy Chung and Đặng Đình Tạm, but admitted to some faults, such as being slow in disciplining Lê Văn and rashly using his provincial paper to attack the central media. Representatives of the central newspapers involved also owned up to a measure of sensationalism in their reporting as well as some inaccuracies. But no reconciliation occurred. Hòa continued to accuse the central media of colluding against him and lacking balance in their reporting. He again put pressure on TTTT to name the 40 women who were sexually harassed by Tạm and to name Tạm’s protector. The central papers, on their part, were also not satisfied because Hòa did not accept adequate responsibility for the scandals in Thanh Hóa. At the end of the session, Hòa asked that the proceedings of the session should be regarded as an internal meeting and not be reported in the press. The Ideology Commission also declared that the issues of Đặng Đình Tạm and Lê Huy Chung were henceforth banned from coverage. Thus, Hòa went everywhere declaring that he had managed to silence the central press (Hội Nhà Báo Việt Nam 1987:11; Dinh Văn Nam 1988:5; Lê Đình 1988:8&16; TTT 23/6/88:2; and Trần Mai Hạnh 1994:68). Under the circumstances, the struggle between them had to enter another round.

Once again, the political atmosphere at the time was important. The media campaign promoted by Nguyễn Văn Linh had meant that, at many levels of the party-government machinery, officials had to bear the brunt of media investigation and criticism. It was not just the central press; many provincial and city level officials also witnessed their own local newspapers getting more aggressive. At a VIA meeting from 23-25 August 1987, called to review the degree to which the press had responded to the party reformist agenda, Trần Trọng Tân, Head of the Ideology Commission, sounded the restraining note when he pointed out that every cấp ủy should strengthen its leadership of the press (ND 25/8/87:1). The Party Executive Committee of HCM City was planning to do just that, no doubt a reaction to the behaviour of the city’s own assertive press. In September 1987, the city’s newspapers received a draft of an order (chì thi) which served notice that a more stringent press regulatory regime was being planned. While the draft affirmed the party line of độ mõi, it also set down several limits with which many newspapers did not agree. For instance, there was a proposed ban on direct criticisms against decisions, policies and guidelines of party-government authorities at both the central and provincial or city levels; the press should only publish constructive suggestions (Source 1). But the momentum of reforms sweeping the country overtook this.

A VIA meeting on 17 September 1987, attended by more than 70 media representatives from across the country, called for removal of taboo areas in the media campaign to fight negativity. Voices were raised at the meeting against the practice of not exposing corruption beyond a certain rank. The mood of the meeting was marked by a clamour for priority to be placed on how to raise public opinion against serious social problems. The terminology used was about “struggling” against corruption, a
campaign that the state itself was promoting. But like the media discourse of the NVGP period, Vietnam's journalists were once more looking hard at editorial constraints and how these were intimately related to the lack of democracy in their society. They believed the lack of democracy was the root cause of the many social problems which the media was exposing. At the meeting, some journalists did not shy away from saying that the leeway to expose indiscretion in high places was, in essence, a demand for greater press freedom (Hội Nhà Báo Việt Nam 1987:6-8). Participants at the meeting also voiced their interest in forming a front to act in unison, give each other timely assistance and share experiences. If that restiveness had worried officials of the media regulating machinery, Lê Xuân Đông, speaking on behalf of the Ideology Commission, betrayed no such concern. Instead, he made clear it that the media campaign against negativism continued to have the total support of the Secretariat, which was about to issue a new order to give the media more prerogatives (TT 19/9/87:1-2).

This new document was Order 15 (Chỉ thị 15), issued on 21 September 1987. It set down the party's desire to see the media step up its struggle against negativism and made it the duty of each cấp ủy to promote the trend. Realizing that cấp ủy and supervisory organs had been blocking some newspapers in the struggle against negativism, the order increased the means of an editor to resist or appeal against such obstructions (see Chapter Two for an explanation of an editor's relationship with various regulatory bodies). That order from the Party Central had the effect of preempting regional authorities planning to rein in their press, such as HCM City was contemplating. This was a further sign that within the internal struggle of the party, forces which sought a more forceful pace of liberal reforms were prevailing. Another indication was given on 12 October 1987 by Trần Trọng Tấn, Head of the Ideology Commission, at a meeting with the HCM City press. Only a month before, Tấn had been urging cấp ủy to exercise more effective control on their press. But with Order 15 setting down the new liberal line of the party, he was lamenting at the meeting that only about 30 out of Vietnam's 253 newspapers had joined the struggle against negativism. He added that cấp ủy at all levels should make sure their newspapers took part in the struggle in the spirit of Order 15 (Trần Trọng Tấn 1995:196-99). In other words, there should not be any more fence sitting by newspaper editors, nervous about how the internal struggle of the party was going to shake out.

In the beginning, Order 15 did cause nervousness among the journalistic community, as Trần Trọng Tấn acknowledged in his interview with Giáo Dục Lý Lập (12/1987:10-14). From the way the questions were asked of Tấn, journalists were conditioned by experience to suspect party decrees bearing the title of "strengthening party leadership". Even as the decree asked for media struggle to be stepped up, it also warned media that criticisms should be constructive and not "provoke public opinion" (kích động dư luận) or "strike at the system" (đánh vào hệ thống). The insider's instinct of media practitioners would warn them that with such qualified vocabulary, the internal consensus behind the Order 15 should not be taken for granted. The most acute reading of Order 15 came from Hồng Đăng, Deputy Chief Editor of the HCM City paper, TT (TT 11/2/88:1&7). Drawing out its implications, he reminded his journalist peers that the order was "an instrument to achieve transparecy; the order itself was not the final objective of the democratization process". He regretted that many media organizations would not understand this. They would regard the order as just another attempt by the leadership to pay lip service to the need for more media criticism while trying to control the criticism at the same time.

Hồng Đăng's newspaper, TT, was well-known for testing censorship limits in those early years of đổi mới. The background of Hồng Đăng, also known as Tam Đăng, would also give us another perspective on the significance of his enthusiasm for Order 15. He had been Nguyễn Văn Linh's personal secretary before he was sent to join the editorial staff of TT (Source 3, Source 4 Interview 4; and Source 5 Interview 3). Order 15 was one of a series of party decrees issued in the initial years of Linh's tenure that helped to hasten and broaden his liberalization agenda. As noted, an official party line sets the parameters within which public discourse or action on a policy can take place. But a party decree takes effect only up to a point; political resources within the party have to be mustered to put it into motion or it will risk being neglected as no more than.
bureaucratic routine. This provided a measure of the power of those behind a party decree, or the ripeness of the public mood for the kind of change which the decree seeks. Hồng Định was reminding his journalistic peers that Order 15 was an opportunity for, rather than a constraint against, activism; but it requires that they put in an effort to take it to its full force. He was articulating the symbiotic relationship between media struggle and the internal struggle of the party. His analysis of Order 15 also clarifies the active role media practitioners could play to shape an ideological climate.

As both TP and TTT were major central papers, their leaders were probably very aware of growing momentum within the party leadership to widen rather than constrict the media campaign. This must have strengthened the two papers’ confidence. From August to October 1987, they continued to publish scandals implicating Hà Trọng Hào. These were new cases which therefore did not violate the Ideology Commission’s July instruction to terminate press reporting on the cases of Đặng Đình Tâm and Lê Huy Chung. Beginning on 11 August 1987, TP publicized a case of Thanh Hóa police neglecting due process of the law to detain three girls under 14 years old for up to 15 months. The cause of the detention was a scuffle between three juveniles and a woman over a minor traffic incident in October 1984. The woman died 19 days later, after a brief illness. Police investigation and the autopsy report could not conclude beyond reasonable doubt that the girls were guilty. They should have been released but for the insistence of the provincial Party Internal Affairs Commission (Ban Nội Chính).20 Hào’s culpability, in this instance, was for ignoring the pleas of the father of one of the girls and a letter of a National Assembly representative on behalf of the girls. As an indictment against Hào’s lack of probity, it did not go any further than what was already exposed in the two previous scandals (TP 11-17/8/87:1, 2&3, 18-24/8/87:3, 1-7/9/87:8, 29/9/87:10/87:2, and 20-26/10/87:2). In the midst of TP’s series of articles, however, enough pressure had built up within the party to force the Secretariat to issue Decision 18 (Quyết Định 18QĐ/TU) on 16 September 1987 to investigate the cases raised by the media against Hào (Hồng Chung 1988:13). This was a step to resolve, one way or another, the differences within the party leadership over the issue (Bài Đồng Kết 24/8/87:5). Until this investigation reached a conclusion, the struggle was not over.

Under the circumstances, the press took a further step. TTT, on 19 September 1987, came out with an account that went beyond just accusing Hà Trọng Hào of being cavalier about abuse of power by his subordinates. The new story accused him of direct involvement with criminal elements. The story was about Cao Thị Lan, a Thanh Hóa woman notorious for running a gold smuggling racket. People in the town called her Swindler Lan. She, her husband and her brothers all had criminal records. The news report was focused on an incident in Thanh Hóa only the month before. The police had surrounded Lan’s house to search for smuggled gold, but Lan had slipped through the cordon and returned soon after with the wife of Hào. Mrs. Hào’s presence forced the police to call off the search. The article also narrated an incident which happened in Hanoi on 3 April 1987, when Lan and her husband dined at a restaurant and left behind a bag containing 34,000 đồng, some gold, the identity card of a policeman and five reports written by Hào on the food situation in Thanh Hóa. That very evening, Hào personally met police officers in charge of that district to request help to find Lan’s misplaced bag. The police finally found it for her (TTT 19/9/87:16&7).

The sensitive nature of this last story was emphasized by Trần Mai Hạnh’s account of the day he sent it to his editorial board for clearance. Hạnh was Deputy Chief Editor at TTT and the one who had represented his paper at the Ideology Commission-sponsored dialogue with Hà Trọng Hào in July 1987. The meeting had left a deep impression and he said he would never forget how Hào had put pressure on him to divulge the paper’s sources for its stories on Đặng Đình Tâm. Thus, the even more sensitive story on Cao Thị Lan weighed heavily on him and he deliberated in his office from 9 a.m. to mid-day before submitting it. He reasoned to himself that the campaign against Hào had started by his paper and had dragged on for a year. He felt TTT had to finish what it began. To him, the struggle was at the point where “the glass was filled to the brim and needed just an extra drop to flow over” (Cốc nước đầy, chỉ nhỏ

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18. "nước cống ở đề thực hành ngạo minh thái biếu thân chính chi tiêu sửa chiều phi là mức tiêu cực củ qua thái độ dân chủ hóa."
19. For every government ministry, there is a corresponding commission within the Communist Party which guides and oversees the activities in that sector. The Party Internal Affairs Commission of a province has that prerogative over the provincial government’s Office of Internal Affairs (Sở Nội Vụ) and police force.
thème một giọt nước là trắng) (Trần Mai Hạnh 1994:67-68). The sense of wanting to bring things to a close, for better or for worse, did not just rest with Hạnh. His senior editor, Đỗ Phương, Deputy Director of VNA, rang Nguyễn Văn Lân... evening before that issue of TTT went into circulation. Đỗ Phương told the General Secretary that this was the last story TTT would run on any issue concerning Hòa. He said the press could only do so much and it was now up to the party leadership to decide whether to discipline Hòa or the newspapers (Đỗ Phương’s interview 24/10/96). Although he did not say it in so many words, Đỗ Phương was referring to the internal party struggle over the case of Hà Trọng Hòa, which had yet to be resolved. The Secretariat may have issued a decision to investigate the press charges against the Thanh Hòa authority, but there were still party members defending Hòa stoutly. The Cao Thì Lan article did start another round of debate within the party leadership. Some would not believe that a senior cadre like Hòa was capable of such misconduct and argued that it was a vindictive press out to victimize him (Đại Đoàn Kết 2/4/88:5).

Under the circumstances, it became a matter of greater urgency to commence the Secretariat investigation of the Thanh Hòa Party Secretary. On 29 September 1987, Hà Trọng Hòa was summoned to Hanoi by the Secretariat, just as the investigation team was sent out to the province. It was essential to remove Hòa physically from the province so that the investigation could proceed without obstruction (Đại Đoàn Kết 2/4/88:5). The team took three months to finish its work. In January 1988, Nguyễn Hoàng, Deputy Head of the Ideology Commission, was able to brief editors of the central media that the party investigation team had concluded that all four cases published by the newspapers were true (Lê Điền 1988:8). But that was not the end of party deliberation.

One other press effort had a catalytic effect on the effort to bring the matter to a close. This was a diary piece published in a January 1988 issue of VN, the popular literary weekly of the VWA. VN was then under a new editor, Nguyễn Ngọc, who was determined to use his paper to struggle for more intellectual and political freedom. (This is the case study in the next chapter.) Nguyễn Ngọc said he knew the article was going to ruffle a few feathers, but he also calculated that the chances of winning this battle were 80 to 90 per cent (SH 37(tháng 4-5/1989):83). So he went ahead. The article entitled "The night of that 3:45... what kind of a night" (Cái đêm hôm ấy... đêm gì) (Phương Giải 12/1988) has since been remembered as one of the outstanding pieces of mới writings. The writer narrated what happened in his village in Thanh Hòa in the wee hours of 26 November 1983. The provincial authority had imposed an increasing grain levy on farmers to meet its unrealistic production targets, and then sent teams of vigilantes to the middle of the night to terrorize families who fell short of their contribution. Those households would have their belongings confiscated or face other disciplinary measures. The plight of the writer’s family was especially poignant. In a desperate situation that was already desperate, the family had been putting up with pangs of hunger in order to accumulate a small amount of rice to prepare for the funeral service of the writer’s dying mother. The vigilantes found the rice and forced the writer to hand it in.

The story had emotional impact. Apart from the fact that its writer had captured the terror of the midnight raid rather vividly, the subtext of filial piety addressed a cultural value which Vietnamese society understood and respected. The story also cut to the core of the myth that Hà Trọng Hòa was a capable technocrat who had improved the province’s agricultural production. This was an attack on the Provincial Party Secretary from another viewpoint that the other papers had not attempted. The VN piece also stood out in relief against an overwhelming image presented by other newspapers at that time that Thanh Hòa was enjoying great success in agriculture. Throughout the months of November and December 1987, the party daily, ND, ran stories on farmers in Thanh Hòa using money earned from the sale of their successful crops to buy government bonds (ND 14/11/87:1; and 4/12/87:1). Vietnam’s leading agricultural magazine Nông Nghiệp Việt Nam, in its 15 November 1987 issue, announced in a banner headline on page one: "Bộn bề harvest in Thanh Hòa". In fact, by December 1987 and possibly even earlier, Thanh Hòa, together with several other provinces of central Vietnam, was fast sliding into a famine, a disaster which the international media started to report in May 1988. Thái.Day, a senior journalist writing

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24 The title of this short story should end with a question or exclamation mark, but its writer had chosen not to.
for the paper *Đài Đoàn Kết*, said the "IN story made a number of comrades sit up and take notice (Đài Đoàn Kết 2/4/88:5). He was referring to the leadership's dithering over this drawn-out scandal, pointing out also that a huge bureaucracy had separated the leaders from the grassroots for too long and had caused them to be cocooned in a belief that "such heartrending misery just could not happen in our system" (có nơi cẩydăng xét xả tương như chồng bạo cố thể xảy ra ở chế độ ta).

The Struggle's Outcome

Two Politburo members, Đỗ Mười and Nguyễn Đức Tâm, were sent to Thanh Hóa to verify for themselves the report of the party investigation team. This was another indication that the inner struggle over this issue was a difficult and fragmented one. As mentioned earlier, Tâm was the close supporter of Lê Đức Thọ who took over the latter's powerful position as Head of the Party Organization Commission. Since Hà Trọng Hóa owed his political rise to Thọ, Tâm's inclusion in the Politburo investigation team was probably to ensure that Thọ's man get a fair hearing and also to commit that faction to the conclusion. Even after that final round of investigation by the party's topmost body, Tâm went again to meet with the provincial party leadership on 13 and 14 February 1988, before the official conclusion was issued as Announcement 74 (Thông báo 74) on 8 March 1988. It stated clearly that Hà Trọng Hóa was responsible for the cases of negativism exposed by the press and that the Politburo had decided to remove him from his Provincial Party Secretary position (ND 15/2/88:1; Đại Đoàn Kết 2/4/88:5; and TT 23/6/88:2). However, Hóa was never expelled from the party (Source 10).

This narrative may leave readers with an unintended impression of "heroes versus villains", the "heroes" being those newspapers and their supporters who struggled bravely to publish the truth, and the "villains" being the corrupt Provincial Secretary and his supporters trying to obstruct the press. But was Hà Trọng Hóa all the bad things that the newspapers made him out to be? Were the newspapers only trying to defend truth and justice as they made out their quest to be?

I want to emphasize that it is not my purpose, nor is it within my capacity, to rule on the probity of either the Provincial Secretary or his critics. What this case study elucidates are the political forces that triggered off the media struggle and the tactics and resources both sides used. My emphasis has been to analyse the dynamics rather than judge the outcome. A few things can be said, however, about the merits of the charges against Thanh Hóa officials. I believe that there were bureaucratic abuses in Thanh Hóa of the sort described by the newspapers, although the possibilities of inaccuracies and editorial liberties should not be discounted. Some newspapers, indeed, owed up to inaccuracies and rash reporting. My belief in the overall veracity of the stories is based on the perception of Hanoi friends who lived through that period. As readers of newspapers, they had their reasons for believing the gist of these reports, if not in every detail. Some had friends and relatives in Thanh Hóa who had told them of these and other scandals in the province over the years. Those with no connections to Thanh Hóa said they were aware, from personal experience, that such abuses were the larger reality of Vietnam, hence there was no reason to be surprised that these incidents would happen in Thanh Hóa or any other province. We should also take note of the party's decision to proclaim Hóa guilty as charged after long deliberation and despite Hóa's powerful supporters. Thanh Hóa did have a famine requiring international aid and that verified, up to a point, both the mismanagement of the provincial authority and the bogus image that it projected of agricultural success.

But these observations also beg their own questions. If such abuses were not unique to Thanh Hóa, why did the medias pick on that province? Did Trường Chinh specify Hà Trọng Hóa as a target? Did Lê Đức Thọ personally intervene to protect Hóa? If so, how? We do not have answers to such questions. Journalists who worked on the Thanh Hóa stories, or were familiar with them, said that Thanh Hóa had not been singled out. Thanh Hóa was one of the earlier cases of press exposé. But by 1987, with the đổi mới of the press picking up momentum, newspapers uncovered scandals in other provinces as well. If the case of Thanh Hóa had gained a higher profile than others, it was because the abuses of power in Thanh Hóa were relatively more severe too. Hóa's pugnacity also played a part in matters being pushed to the hilt. As far as it could be apparent to journalists, Trường Chinh did not specify Hóa as a target, but they were not privy to communications between the party leader and their editors. Trường Chinh's
blessing, however, did help journalists gain access to information from the Ministry of Justice and that information happened to be about a case in Thanh Hóa. I did not hear any account of Thọ’s direct interference to protect Hòa, but Đỗ Phương’s account of vacillation within the Politburo and Nguyễn Đức Tâm’s close involvement with the final stage of the party investigation suggest that the case was attended to by conflicting interests at the apex of the party. I have drawn attention to the competitive politics of the Trường Chinh–Lê Đức Thọ generation spawning the anti-Hà Trọng Hòa media struggle. But as the case evolved after the Sixth Party Congress, new intra-elite dynamics entered the picture. Both top leaders were by then retired from the Politburo. A new General Secretary, Nguyễn Văn Linh, was pushing his doi mới agenda. Another generation of Politburo leaders—e.g., Bào Duy Tùng and Trần Xuân Bách—were forging a new configuration of elite politics. These too fed into the media struggles of the time and the Hà Trọng Hòa affair must also be viewed against the shifting politics of top leadership in transition.

Three reports were prepared at the close of the Hà Trọng Hòa affair under the aegis of the VJA: a summary of the whole campaign published in the association journal Nghiệp Lâm Báo (Lê Đêm 1988); and two speeches—one by TP’s Chief Editor, Dinh Văn Nam, and the other by association’s Chairman, Hồng Chướng—made at a 28 April 1988 VJA conference to discuss this whole affair (Dinh Văn Nam 1988; and Hồng Chướng 1988).

All three presented the media effort primarily as a struggle against negativism, but the motives of media practitioners should not be taken as being so single-minded and simply good. The way systemic politics fed into the controversy would caution against such a straightforward reading of the reasons why; some newspapers would push the censorship boundaries harder than others. Journalists connected to the Hà Trọng Hòa controversy and other media exposés during that period gave the impression that those experiences were exhilarating for them (Source 4 Interviews 3, 5; Source 9 Interviews 2, 3; and Source 10). They felt that after years of being severely constrained, they could make a difference both to help achieve a broad objective of moving towards a more democratic political system in the long run, and the more immediate goal of protecting somebody or a group of ordinary citizens from bullying local authorities. As described in Chapter Two, this was a period when media practitioners were asking themselves searching questions about the role of the press and its credibility in a system where information had to serve the propaganda objectives of the state. Journalists were aware of elite patronage in the background, and mindful that they and their editors had to weigh the odds when taking part in a media struggle to fight negativism.

The linkage between media exposés and competitive interests in the party elite varies from case to case. When media practitioners do run into something so sensitive, there are a variety of responses depending on the individual. Most will choose not to buy into a power struggle at the top if they can help it. Some will pick sides according to their calculation of the relative strengths of the contending forces. Personal connections between editors and the contending elite forces also play a part. Finally, the choice can also be based on the individual’s sense of who or what will be beneficial for Vietnamese society. These motives are hard to isolate, because most people are not at liberty to talk about internal struggle, nor will they admit readily that their editorial efforts are for other than the honest professional objective of wanting to serve their readers and society. It is essential to recognize this possible jumble of motives that can lie behind a media struggle. It is also necessary to avoid a skewed perspective that sees all media struggles as honest well-meaning crusades against the powerful and the corrupt.

Whatever their motives, media practitioners have to engage a media regulatory system that comes with certain conventions and limiting parameters. Speaking in broader terms of the dynamics involved in a struggle, Dinh Văn Nam (1988:5) identified the type of obstructions that media practitioners encounter within such a system:

a) Targets who were criticized would go through the motion of promptly acknowledging the criticism in order to stop the harmful publicity, but thereafter nothing would be done to correct the errors.

b) Targets could also make a big issue out of minor inaccuracies in press exposés in order to intimidate the newspaper.
c) Targets could refer the issue upwards to be investigated by a more senior level within the party bureaucracy. An investigation process could sometimes be dragged out for more than a year, which would cause the criticism to lose force as well as reduce the credibility of the newspaper with its readers.

d) The leadership could be divided over an issue, thus leading to varied instructions being handed out to the press. Symptomatic of this was the incoherent signals of "green light, red light or amber light" (đèn xanh, đèn đỏ, đèn vàng) emanating from the Ideology Commission.

e) The entire press culture was born of a system that relied on state subsidy and had vested interests to protect.

f) There was still an old way of thinking in Vietnam about the role of the press. Media custodians wanted newspapers to "highlight the positive" (tô hồng) and saw nothing wrong with "unidirectional information" (Thông tin một chiều). This meant that newspapers told readers what the authorities wanted them to know.

g) On the whole, too many restrictions were still placed on the dissemination of information to readers. This was not readily evident in the official documents issued on the press, which would not expressly prohibit newspapers from writing anything, yet the reality was often very different.

At the end of his speech, Đinh Văn Nam argued a polemical case that the Vietnamese press was placed in a difficult situation where state practice had not lived up to or had even obstructed the state’s own proclaimed principles. Referring to the hallmark slogans of đổi mới, such as “Let the people know, discuss, do and inspect” (Đặng biết, đứng bàn, đứng làm, đứng kiểm tra) and “Tell it straight, tell it true, tell it openly”, he queried whether these in-principle requirements for more openness were met when the press tried to put the case of Hà Trọng Hòa to the public. Furthermore, he observed that while the state called on the press to struggle against negativism, newspapers could at the same time be accused of “inciting the masses” (kích động quần chúng) for doing just that. He was referring to the risk element in the struggle paradigm. Clearly, Nam was raising issues related to the freedom of the press in a political environment that was still hostile to this very notion. He had couched his views in a practised manner, using an ideologically sound framework about how to fulfil party edicts better. It was the double-edged tactic of the struggle paradigm.

Conclusion

What we have witnessed in this chapter is a major revival of media activism 30 years after the NVGP affair. The renewed opportunities for such an activism were of far greater scope given the dramatic change in the international and domestic situations. Once again, a group of Vietnam’s media practitioners had seized the opportunities and demonstrated a propensity to struggle.

The media struggle against Hà Trọng Hòa has marked differences from those during the NVGP and XLCD affairs. The media practitioners who agitated against Hòa succeeded in what they were doing; their counterparts in the two earlier periods came to grief. This is a measure of đổi mới’s impact on the media. During the XLCD affair, the climate of censorship was so patently restrictive and draconian that it was unthinkable for the kind of media combative ness of 1986 to take place then. Even with NV and GP, editorial assertiveness was more like an intellectual debate with the authority and did not carry the pointed belligerence of a campaign against a Provincial Secretary backed by powerful mentors. That kind of investigative journalism was not seen in the pages of NV or GP even though 1956, like 1986, had an ideological climate that promoted a liberal democratic line in public discourse. The editorial boldness of the NVGP years had to operate within the confines of private publishing because the state-owned media gave in to official pressure quickly and attacked NV and GP. In the Hà Trọng Hòa affair, state-owned papers were at the forefront – for private publishing had since disappeared – and the Ideology Commission never directed other papers to attack them. The Ideology Commission curbed the press significantly less in the Hà Trọng Hòa affair than it did in the NVGP and XLCD affairs. Occasionally it did call a halt to press reports on the Thanh Hóa scandals, but the action was never totally to the disadvantage of the press. Leadership contention marked all three affairs, but how different the outcomes were in each case! The media of 1986 and after benefited from but there was no such equivalent figure in the political landscapes of the NVGP and XLCD periods.
In the NVGP affair, Trương Chính promoted public criticisms in keeping with a party line, but also directed the attack on NV and GP from behind the scenes. After he goaded the press into a more critical stance at the end of 1985, there was no repetition of the tactic of running with the hare and hunting with the hounds.

With so much change, the media appeared in the late 1980s to be breaking free from state control, or at least pulling away from it. But such a view neglects a reality that all these changes had proceeded along a familiar path of "struggle". Once more there was the double-edged nature of a struggle, the risks involved and system insiders using their skills and resources to make a success of their struggle. Media and internal party struggles continued to have a symbiotic relationship. State and media separation continued to be ill-defined, even though there was a palpable sense of tension between the media practitioners working on the Thanh Hóa stories and media regulatory organs representing the state. The press stories against the Thanh Hóa leader were a significant step forward for the Vietnamese media, but they could only have taken place through the dynamics described in this chapter. It was not a free press standing independent of the state and railing against it.

Nevertheless, at the end of it all, the press struggle had put into the public sphere for discussion what was grievously wrong with the state and the issue of press independence. Most significantly, the outcome of this press campaign has demonstrated the power of the press, a new phenomenon to a generation of Vietnamese who have known only the socialist media imposed by the DRV. The final dismissal of a senior cadre after a bout of intense publicity held a strong implicit message: press publicity of an issue can bring about political change, even if the change affected the interests of powerful state forces. For the thesis I am arguing, I have not deemed it necessary to examine in any detail the dynamics behind this new-found power of the press. It is linked to other major issues such as the role of public opinion and would make a major research topic in its own right. For the time being, I want to note that the media struggles in the initial years of đổi mới, like this one that toppled a Provincial Party Secretary, brought into fruition the power of the press in a place where it had been debilitated for many years.

CHAPTER SIX

The Văn Nghệ Affair

Nguyễn Ngọc, the Chief Editor of VN, the influential weekly magazine of the VWA, was sacked in the last quarter of 1988 because he used the magazine to struggle for a liberal political agenda. The incident was a cause célèbre among the writers and journalists of its time. At its most visible level, this account of an editor's fight with his supervisory organ for editorial independence presents a picture of supervisory organ-media dynamics, giving us a better understanding of how a key facet of the media regulatory system works. However, this incident also sheds light on the nexus of competitive elite interests and ideological contention that binds a media struggle to an internal party struggle. The struggle paradigm is once more a useful template to interpret state-media dynamics. It provides a deeper analytical thrust that highlights the "within-system" characteristic of Nguyễn Ngọc's struggle, alerting us to a situation where the press is contending with the state but yet it is also part of the state.

Cast of Characters

Nguyễn Ngọc, the threatened Chief Editor of VN, may have been the centre of this controversy, but perhaps the more important personality was General Trần Độ, the CC member who assumed leadership of the Party Culture and Arts Commission (Ban Văn Hóa Văn Nghệ; henceforth Culture Commission for short) in the wake of the December 1986 Sixth Party Congress. In his official capacity, Trần Độ exercised great influence in the realm of literature, the arena in which the fight over VN took place. Trần Độ's connection to the controversy indicated that it was not just the removal of one errant editor by a supervisory organ; it was related to the intra-elite politics of the times.
The controversial potential of Trần Đạo’s term in office was indicated barely two months after the Sixth Party Congress, when he set down what he intended to do in a February article in PV (Trần Đạo 1987):

a) Review the old ideological priority given to the collective over the personal. Policies should serve the individual and not just exhort people to give of themselves totally to national objectives. Together with that must be a rejection of mobilizational rhetoric as a substitute for the lack of real policy.

b) Socialism is not the only basis for building a new culture. Culture should also tap into the traditions of Vietnam, particularly those that are closely related to democracy, humanitarian values and heroism.

c) Cultural work is not trumpet blowing for officialdom. It should produce real social results going beyond material gratification to fulfill aesthetic and psychological needs.

d) Reject the old ideological notion that cultural work is not as worthy as physical labour and work towards institutionalizing a policy of creative freedom.

e) Stop the old doctrinaire jargon about strengthening party leadership of cultural work. Work instead on raising the standards of cadres so that they are able to deal with more complex and sophisticated forms of artistic expression.

f) If reform calls for it, stop affirming old conventions. That, however, should not be mistaken as opposing conventions.

He distilled these daring initiatives from the discursive mentions of culture scattered throughout the official documents of the Sixth Congress. Further confirming his pro-active character, Trần Đạo expanded on and propagated these ideas in the months that followed and PV provided him with an important channel to disseminate his views among the literary community. He called for a re-examination of the relationship between literature and a whole host of social, economic and political issues. Predominant in his arguments was the line that the merits and demerits of literature should no longer be resolved by political struggle, and were best left to literature to take care of in its own way. Literature also had to take a stand on conflicts between good and evil, truth and falsehood, and beauty and ugliness (PV 11/7/87:1&7; 24/10/87:2&3).

The name Trần Đạo is familiar to Vietnam watchers today because he has since become one of the country’s most prominent dissidents. This international profile was launched in February 1998 when the foreign media covered extensively his petition calling on the Communist Party to divest itself of its monopoly of power. But from very early in his career, Trần Đạo was already somebody who made an impression on those around him. In his recollection of media work at the 1954 battle of Điện Biên Phủ, Trần Kinh, then the Editorial Secretary of the military paper, QĐND, singled out Trần Đạo’s frequent newspaper columns for praise. He noted that Trần Đạo was always timely in his choice of topics and did not neglect to draw attention to the important work being done behind the front-line, such as treating wounded soldiers and training new recruits (Trần Kinh: 1994:149). Those early impressions suggested a competent professional, capable of camaraderie with the rank-and-file. At the Third Party Congress in 1960, Trần Đạo became an alternate CC member. Next came his deployment to the war in the south when the DRV stepped up its military involvement from 1963. During that war, his position was identified as either that of deputy or chief political commissar of the DRV troops deployed in the south (Professor Carlyle Thayer’s database). Once again, Trần Đạo, by then holding a general’s rank, attracted attention with his writings, this time on military strategy. Western analysts such as McGarvey (1969:15, 92-113), Latimer (1972:281-88) and Wirtz (1991:39-40, 47-48) considered some of these articles to be arguing direct and urgent positions from those of General Nguyễn Thị Thanh, the most senior leader taking charge of the southern theatre (see Chapter Four for details of Nguyễn Chí Thanh).1

After the war, Trần Đạo rose to full CC status at the Fourth Party Congress in 1976 and also headed the new Commission of Culture in the VCP which was to take

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1 Trần Đạo wrote these wartime assessments using the pen-name Chu Long, but some foreign analysts were unaware of this. The reasons are not clear as to why he was allowed to disagree with somebody so powerful as Nguyễn Chí Thanh, and there is no need to speculate. The point I want to make is the status of Trần Đạo as a strategist whose writings caught the attention of foreign analysts.
charge of cultural affairs, a task previously delegated to the Ideology Commission. Georges Boudarel (1991:107-108) provides a rare personal description of Trần Đổ, a politician and his politics, and some indications of his political fortunes in the 1970s. According to Boudarel, Trần Đổ had the capacity to grasp situations in their entirety and to pick out original points and details, investing in them a fresh perspective. He was often unpredictable. By the end of the 1970s he was advancing arguments during internal debates that challenged conventional ideological practices. He fought the widespread bureaucratic habit of spouting meaningless rhetoric. Once at a meeting of propaganda cadres, he depublished official programmes which always sounded so formalistic and failed to live up to the spirit of party decisions or to be of any relevance to ordinary people in their everyday lives. Then he restricted each speaker who took the floor to less than 10 minutes. Trần Đổ's tenure at the helm of culture would have been encouraging to a handful of writers who were starting to challenge some well-established dogmas in the late 1970s. But that would also have provided political adversaries with cause to say that Trần Đổ contributed to the disquieting mood then. Thus Hà Xuân Trương, a man well-known for his doctrinaire views, replaced him as Head of the Culture Commission at the Fifth Party Congress in 1982.

This portrait of Trần Đổ has gaps. Little is known about where his sympathies lay in the media controversies of the previous chapters. Of the accounts I have read on the NVGP affair, only Boudarel (1991:104-106) makes an attempt to speculate that Trần Đổ would have been with the protesting writers in spirit and tried to distance himself from the attack against them. From 1960, when the Dưn-Thổ partnership began to dominate politics in Vietnam, Trần Đổ's career had its ups and downs but, in the whole, he was far from being marginalized. That meant he was acceptable to the Dưn-Thổ partnership, or might even have belonged nominally to either of their retinues. Yet he retained an unmistakable independence of action, such as debating military strategy with Nguyễn Chí Thành (a man favoured by the Dưn-Thổ partnership; see Chapter Four for details). His relationship with other top leaders like Trương Chinh and và Nguyễn Giáp remain matters for conjecture. What we know with greater certainty is his intensive effort to help the new Party General Secretary, Nguyễn Văn Linh, step up reforms in literature after December 1986. For such a man, the rising demand for change during đồ mới put him in his element. When the Sixth Party Congress made him once again the Head of the Culture Commission, he was well-placed to foster liberal changes to literature in general, and VNF in particular. It was this that put him on a collision course with those in the party who felt the threat of liberalization.

Nguyễn Ngọc's early claim to fame as one of Vietnam's leading writers was his war novels, the most famous of which was Mây Country Stood Up (Đất Nước Dưng Lên), published in 1956. In a sense, he was an establishment writer, a long-time party member who took part in the war against the French and, by 1979, held the influential post of Party Group Secretary (Bí thư Đảng đoàn) of the VWA, the association's most senior position with powers exceeding that of its General Secretary (Tổng thư ký). But as a writer, Nguyễn Ngọc also had his share of ideological problems with medin

2 Boul points out that the NVGP writer Trần Đổ based a character in his famous novel The Human Waves (Người Vượt Lớp Lớp) affectionately on Trần Đổ. Although Trần Đổ wrote a critique against that novel, he avoided the ad hominem attacks that others were heaping on Trần Đổ at that time.
3 I do not have an exact date for when Nguyễn Ngọc became Party Group Secretary of the VWA except that it happened no earlier than 1975 when the war in the south ended (Nhật Tấn 1990:118). The following explanation of "party group" and how it related to other office bearers in an organization is culled from general press coverage of the VWA's congresses, Nguyễn Hùng Quê (1996:26) and Chapter Nine of the Party By-laws (Đinh & Dăng) issued at the 1996 Eighteenth Party Congress (Tập Chì Cộng Sản 7/1996:26-37). Association members elect an Executive Committee and the latter then elect a Secretariat headed by a General Secretary. These appointments are publicly announced and, technically, speaking, they are the office bearers who administer the association. There is, however, a Party group headed by the Party Group Secretary appointed by the Party Central. These appointments are not announced. Membership of the Secretariat and Party Group can overlap. The Party Group's function is to guide the association in its implementation of party policies which really means it is more powerful than the association's Secretariat. Technically, Secretariat members need not belong to the party. Having a Party Group ensures party pre-eminence when it is politic to have non-party members share the leadership positions within an organization. A Party Group should not be confused with a Party Committee (Đảng ấp) within an organization. The latter only takes charge of all the party members within the organization, and does not really run the organization, confining itself to problems related to welfare, ideological education and discipline of party members. However, some organizations have no Party Group and the Party Committee "performs that function. It is not certain whether "party group" at an institutional feature continues to be dominant today. It is still identified in the party by-laws, but the Vietnamese I asked either said they did not know anything about party groups or felt they were no longer that important. In the VNF controversy of 1988, the Party Group of the VWA was never mentioned once.
custodians. During the tense ideological climate of the early 1960s (see Chapter Four), then Head of the Ideology Commission, "Đỗ Hữu, acc. Đ. Nguyễn Ngọc as one of those writers harbouring revisionist tendencies (Vũ Thư Hiến 1997:187)." But it was in June 1979 that Nguyễn Ngọc made, what was up to then, his most controversial statement on literature. He was addressing a VWA meeting on creative writing limited only to party members, and for which he had prepared the working report as Party Group Secretary. He argued forcefully that strict ideological requirements had robbed literature of its élan, and writers their creative confidence (Thấn Trọng Mân 1990:33-36). Nguyễn Ngọc's status as Party Group Secretary made what he said even more provocative. Several senior literary figures representing party authority criticized the report (Thấn Trọng Mân 1990:36), including again Tổ Hữu (Vũ Thư Hiến 1997:424), by then an alternate Politburo member and still one of the most powerful custodians in cultural matters. Through these events, an image emerges of Nguyễn Ngọc as a writer with an independent streak and no stranger to controversy.

Nguyễn Đinh Thi, General Secretary of the VWA, was another protagonist in this affair, seen by the public as the main opponent of Nguyễn Ngọc and instrumental in the latter's dismissal. In Chapters Three and Four, Thi has emerged as a person of contradictions, caught in a dilemma of wanting to impose party hegemony on writers because of his leading position in the literary establishment, and yet producing a piece of work which tested the limits of censorship. In confidences that he shared with Vũ Thư Hiến (1997:419-20) during the early 1960s, when censorship was getting progressively tighter, Thi intimated that he understood only too well how mediocrity could go a long way in Vietnam's literary world so long as one espoused the right political line; and he was painfully aware that he himself was producing such ideologically-driven mediocrity in betrayal of his own considerable talents. The hint of clamour for reforms that emerged in the late 1970s must have affected Thi too. In 1980, he tried to publish and produce his play Nguyễn Trãi ở Đông Quan (Nguyễn Trãi at Đông Quan). But it was stopped mid-way on grounds that the play used the life and times of the 15th century national hero Nguyễn Trãi to make a veiled indictment of the Vietnamese present, with an allusion to ageing leaders who clung on to power (Nguyễn Hưng Quốc 1996:212-13). On the surface, Thi's role in the PV affair seemed to be that of a conservative media custodian wanting to rein in an editor with a liberal agenda, but a more complex set of personality factors was functioning at a deeper level. Powerful mentors may have backed Thi's bid to remove an editor who had the support of Trần Đỗ, the Head of the Culture Commission. There is no clear verifiable evidence but it is plain that Thi was too junior to be able to counter the influence of Trần Đỗ under his own steam. This alerts us to the need to view the PV controversy in the context of a struggle at the core of the party, involving a cast of more powerful players.

One such player was the party's General Secretary, Nguyễn Văn Linh, who started by wanting to implement a liberal agenda for change (which Trần Đỗ rode on) but began to lose his nerve because of the political instability similar reforms were causing in China and Eastern Europe. Another player was Politburo member and reputed ideologue Đại Duy Tùng, whose power was in the ascendancy. Traditionally, his preoccupation was with the ideology sector, and culture as an adjunct to it. Tùng had a hand in Trần Đỗ's eventual political eclipse but his concern was not just with the magazine PV. He was involved in a struggle at the core of the party over the correct line on đổi mới (see Chapter Five for basic information on Linh and Tùng's role in đổi mới). Other Politburo members involved in this larger struggle included Trần Xuân Bách whose insistence on liberal political reforms, even though the party line was then veering towards caution, led to his dismissal from the Politburo and the CC. These characters and others will be introduced as the chapter develops. Although this case study does not have details of their direct role in protecting or sacking Nguyễn Ngọc, it portrays how the party elite's internal struggle had a bearing on the PV controversy.

*Tổ Hữu criticized Nguyễn Ngọc's short story "Current Beneath The Ground" (Mạch Nước Nằm) in a collection of the same name published in 1960. Nguyễn Ngọc had likened the popular will of a people to an underground current of water: it is not visible but it could sweep away a great human construction. Tổ Hữu considered that an allegorical attack on the party.
The Malaise in Literature

Under Nguyễn Ngọc, the magazine VΝ successfully promoted a new generation of writers and their challenging works. But the literary phenomenon was not just the result of an editor's effort. The changes wrought by the magazine were also possible because there was a long festering malaise in the world of letters. It strengthened a yeaming to see change in literature and with that came the will and energy to make use of the new liberties provided by dở mới and the forum provided by VΝ.

The malaise dates back to the NVGP and the XLCD affairs (covered in Chapters Three and Four respectively) when the DRV literati chafed at the growing restrictions on what they could write. The XLCD affair describes a society in the early 1960s where some leaders were whipping up an ideological fervour against any sign of revisionism. It meant an intimidating environment for writers because censorship standards became increasingly stringent to the point that nobody could be sure what might get a piece of work into trouble. That mood continued as the DRV moved into total mobilization to fight a war in the south. From 1965, both journalism and creative writing were placed on a war footing (Hội Nhà Báo Hà Nội 1995:87-156; and Nguyễn Hưng Quóc 1996:180-96). This basically required journalists and writers to raise the fighting will and public morale in the DRV. To perform that duty, they had to stick closely to themes that celebrated heroism and selfless sacrifice, and avoid anything that suggested introspection, ambiguity or paradox.

But now and then the artist and his feelings of doubt and pain about life in a time of war seeped through the official formula (Nguyen Hung Quoc 1996:191-92). The officially decreed form of heroism and celebratory socialist realism invited cynicism, and a telling revelation emerged in a small volume of satirical poems, Open Door (Cửa Mở) by Việt Phương, published in September 1970. Some were mildly naughty but a few were distinct for their irreverent gibes at the DRV's socialist political culture (Việt Phương 1970). This section from one of its poems "Oh! A life we love as dearly as our wives" (Cuộc đời yêu như vợ của ta oai) may help convey a sense of what I am describing:

We thought that once a comrade a person could no longer be bad
Among our ranks there was only place for love
Having chosen our course nobody was stopping in his tracks
Moscow was better than all of paradise

We believed staunchly that Soviet watches were better than Swiss watches
Confidence, determination and pride all rolled into one
Fancying the moon in China to be rounder than the moon in America
What exquisite innocence and what lack of guile

(Việt Phương 1970:58)

What made this collection of poems more significant was that the poet was Personal Secretary of then Prime Minister Phạm Văn Đồng. This was a high ranking official working in one of the country's top political offices, not somebody neglected or ill-treated by the system. The collection was a telltale sign of malaise brewing in the system and seeking an opportunity to express itself whenever possible.²

² Ta cãi nghĩ đồng chí cô thi không ai nữa
Trong hàng ngày ta chỉ có chữ của yêu thương
Dĩ cho đã mưu, chẳng ai dám ngồi giữa
Mặc ra khoa con hơn cả thiên đường

Ta nhất quyết chăng bể Linh anh với đồng bể Thọ sỹ
Huhu như dấy là nòi sm chỉ vể tự bảo
Mọi những rằng trong Trung-qức trên trống ngự nước Mỹ
Su the nghệ dep tuyệt vời và ngô nghênh lâm sao

³ Many unanswered questions hang over this incident. How did such a volume get past the tight vetting process? Did Việt Phương's status in the party-government bureaucracy facilitate its publication? Did the rigid control of the 1960s begin to thaw around that time? If that were the case, was it connected to Hà Nội's slide towards a favourable re-appraisal of Moscow after the submerged animosity against the Soviets as revisionists? Ilya V. Gaiduk (1996:66, 216, 219-20, 287n79), using Soviet documents declassified after 1991, identified such a benchmark change in USSR-DRV relations around 1969-1970. These issues shall have to be addressed in a more thorough study of intellectual history of the DRV. My purpose in citing Open Door is only to illustrate the malaise brewing within the intelligentsia beneath the heroic rhetoric. The volume was condemned and Việt Phương came close to being sentenced to death (Bộ Tín 1995:78). But Việt Phương was alive and well when I met him in Hanoi on 27 December 1996.
The end of war in 1975 brought new challenges to the state-imposed formula for literature. For many writers, after more than a decade of fulfilling their duty to a collective mission to win the war, there was a yearning to retreat into a personal inner realm, to explore feelings and ideas so long proscribed as detrimental to the public fighting spirit. I have mentioned how Nguyễn Ngọc challenged this orthodoxy in literature in 1979. He was not alone. Two other writers, Nguyễn Minh Chú and Hoàng Ngọc Hiền, also said the same thing. Chú was a colonel in the army; Hiền was the principal of Nguyễn Du Writers College, the country’s only school in creative writing. What the three said about the shortcomings of literature was once more an indication of malaise growing within the system. Nevertheless, the overall political climate then was not ready for these protests to take off and become a bigger force.

The malaise was more or less confirmed by the VWA Third Congress in 1983 when the official report noted that, since 1975, a sense of bewilderment, loss of confidence in oneself and one’s peers, and rejection of the years spent with the revolution had affected writers’ commitment to their ideals and how they perceived things (Nguyễn Hưng Quốc 1996:225). When Nguyễn Ngọc was appointed as Chief Editor of VN in 1987, this was the situation he had to address. The situation in literature bears some comparison with that in journalism, which was described in the Hà Trọng Hạo affair of the previous century. Beginning in 1986, journalists took up the cudgel for a new kind of investigative journalism that had more meaning for themselves and their readers. For writers in 1987, there was a similar urge to write up a storm. Of course other motivations lurked behind these developments, but what happened was also a professional quest for better journalism and literature.

Pre-dismissal Developments

By Nguyễn Ngọc’s own account, the Culture Commission proposed his appointment as VN’s Chief Editor to the VWA, the magazine’s supervisory organ. Because Trần Đỗ headed the Culture Commission, it is a fair conjecture that he had a hand in the initiative, a connection which became clearer as events unfolded. Nguyễn Ngọc came with his 1979 reputation of questioning the ideologically-driven status quo in literature. Whoever initiated his appointment must have realized the potential for controversy with such a person at the helm of the country’s leading literary magazine. But it was also the right time for a controversial appointment in the press. This was the moment in history when Party General Secretary, Nguyễn Văn Linh, was fomenting a popular media campaign against bureaucratic shortcomings. Under the circumstances, it was hard for the proposal to be turned down by the WAS (Writers Association Secretariat or Ban Thu Kỳ Hội Nhà Văn).²

The proposal for Nguyễn Ngọc’s appointment then went to the Ideology Commission in late April 1987, after it had to approve all Chief Editor appointments. The approval was granted in July 1987. According to Nguyễn Ngọc, before the appointment was confirmed, his predecessor, Đào Vũ, went away, leaving the task of running VN to the magazine’s party cell. This was unusual because, in the absence of the Chief Editor, a senior member of the editorial board would normally cover for him. Suspicions of an irregular situation at VN were strengthened by the fact that three issues of June 1987 had to be merged into one (TTCHN 30/4/89:14). These events hinted that the new editorial appointment met with some resistance from the incumbent.

Another incident pointed to the changes afoot in VN, beginning in April 1987. Apart from planning to replace the Chief Editor of its magazine, at an association plenum from 27-29 April 1987, the WAEC added a second Deputy Secretary to the old arrangement of Nguyễn Đình Thi as Secretary and Chín Hạo as his deputy. The new Deputy Secretary was writer Nguyễn Khải (Nguyễn Hưng Quốc 1996:27), whose appointment was significant for two reasons.

Variety of Footnotes:
³ Accept footnote 3 on page 181, every VWA Congress, (nowadays held at five-yearly intervals but they had been postponed for political exigencies) elects a WAEC (Writers Association Executive Committee or Ban Chủ Hỗp Nhà Văn). WAEC members elect from among themselves a smaller body called the WAS and its president, the General Secretary. WAEC members attend the periodic plenums in between congresses to discuss and endorse major decisions of the association. The WAS meets more frequently than the WAEC to deliberate on issues as and when they arise. The sizes of these bodies vary with each congress. In the latter half of 1987, the WAEC had 44 and the WAS had 10 members (Nguyễn Hưng Quốc 1996:26-34).
Firstly, Nguyễn Ngọc described him in the following way (TTVN 30/4/89:14):

After I read "A General Retires", I was elated and quickly brought it to show to Nguyễn Khải. He and I often do this, whenever we come across something new and interesting, we immediately and enthusiastically share it with each other. That evening, above the office of Văn Nghệ, Quân Đội on Lý Nam Đế (where Nguyễn Khải always stays when he comes to Hanoi), the two of us sat talking till very late into the night, discussing the staggering effect that the story had on us.1

Therefore, Nguyễn Khải was a close friend and kindred spirit of the new Chief Editor where literary taste was concerned.

Secondly, Deputy Secretary Nguyễn Khải appeared to be the WAS official whom VVN consulted when a sensitive story had to be cleared with the supervisory organ. According to Nguyễn Ngọc, when he wanted to run the sensitive piece "The night of that day...what kind of a night", which exposed Hà Trọng Hoa's repressive agricultural policy in Thanh Hóa province (see Chapter Five), he first asked Nguyễn Khải to countersign the decision (SH 37 (tháng 4-5/1989) :83). Given these connections, the timing of the two new appointments—a Deputy Secretary and a Chief Editor—suggests a pattern of deliberation rather than just mere happenstance to give VVN more editorial prerogative.

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1 See footnote 7 above for an explanation of WAEC and association's plenum.

2 "A General Retires" (Tuồng Về Hưu) was a short story by the writer Nguyễn Huy Thiep, whom Nguyễn Ngọc promoted. Thiep became one of the most controversial writers to emerge from the đổi mới period. His provocative works were one of the reasons used to remove Nguyễn Ngọc from his Chief Editor position. "A General Retires" was first published in VVN on 20/6/87. Nguyễn Ngọc formally took over as Chief Editor in July. However, reading between the lines of what Nguyễn Ngọc said in the rest of the TTTN (20/4/89:14) article, one suspects that he was responsible for the June issue as well. He said that June issue of VVN was produced without his predecessor being present at the magazine.

something off the cuff. Compared to the objectives of newspapers in the Hà Trọng Hào affair, which were kept within a framework of fighting corruption, Trần Độ’s plan incorporated a far more politically-sensitive set of demands. Thus it had a greater potential to put writers and the state on a collision course. From the forthright way with which Nguyễn Ngọc announced these plans to TT, he intended his magazine, VN, to live up to this quest.

The growing liberal agenda at the top and Nguyễn Ngọc’s editorial plans for VN were mutually reinforcing. The new Chief Editor was not a person who shied away from talking or writing about his plans to give the paper a new sense of direction, and the following were some of his key observations:

a) He saw the power of the press as a new development in Vietnamese society, barely a year old, and which was an integral part of a larger democratization process empowering people to demand greater order and justice in society. To this end, some old constraints must continue to be challenged, such as the ideological imposition that the press had to praise more than it criticized (see Chapter Two and Appendix One for basic working tenets of the press). He stated this clearly in a column shortly after he became Chief Editor. (VN 18/7/87:2).

b) Considering VN as late and restrained in joining the call for đổi mới, he wanted to correct that (TT 24/10/87:5; and SH 31 (tháng 5-6/1988):88).

c) Regarding (b), he wanted to concentrate on three major areas. The first was to review ideological doctrine and question their domination over literature for so long; (SH 31 (tháng 5-6/1988):88; and VN 10/10/87:3; 21/11/87:2-3; 19/12/87:10-11). He was not against literature being political, only against literature being politically controlled. Indeed, his second objective was to raise the political content in VN because, in his opinion, Vietnam’s writers did not have the habit of using their writings to participate directly in political issues that concerned everybody. To provide ideological protection for himself, he alluded to the increasing recognition which Soviet writers were gaining in their country by scrutinizing official policies that were disastrous for the public (TT 24/10/87:5). The third was to do more investigative journalism using the genre of “reportage” (see Introduction for definition). He also stressed that exposure of negativism was to arrive at a clearer understanding of systemic failings and not just the individual minutiae involved in each case (SH 31 (tháng 5-6/1988):88).

Nguyễn Ngọc expected opposition to his editorial plans and, being a senior cadre within the literary establishment, he had a keen appreciation of the magnitude of the problem he was confronting. He said that on the surface, hindrance to the press usually appeared to be particularistic, such as when a provincial cấp ủy stopped a provincial paper under it from running a certain report. However, at its most profound level, the obstruction was still quite narrowly directed; it was embedded in the whole system. He realized that what VN was going to do would strike at the interests of many big organs within the party-government hierarchies (SH 37 (tháng 4-5/1989):82).

The reformist momentum, which would propel VN through the second half of 1987, was also experienced in other parts of the country. Events in Dalat, the provincial seat of Lâm Đồng in the upland region of central Vietnam, provide an example of how developments far from Hanoi were moving in tandem with what was happening in the capital. There, after long years of the provincial cấp ủy dragging its feet, permission was finally given for local writers and artists to form their professional association and to publish a magazine, Langbian (Tiêu Đạo Báo Cây 1998:133). In view of a progressively clearer reformist line emerging from the Party Central, any reluctant provincial authority would find it prudent to give in at such a time. But the local party authority was still driven by entrenched habits to control mass organizations under its charge. It sought to direct the election of office-holders when the Lâm Đồng ALA (Arts
and Literature Association or Hội Văn Nghệ; was formally set up on 22 January 1988. But this was resisted by association members who were in an unusually independent mood in the wake of Politburo Resolution 05. They elected Bì Minh Quốc as the association’s Chairman and entrusted him with the job of editing Langbian (Tiểu Đạo Báo Cự 1998:133-34). Assisting Quốc as Deputy Chief Editor was Tiểu Đạo Báo Cự, a member of the association’s Standing Committee (Ứy viên thường trực). Under their leadership, Langbian started to exert an aggressive independence in its relationship with the provincial party authority (Tiểu Đạo Báo Cự 1998:134-35). It resisted censorship by the province’s Ideology Commission and exposed the latter’s censorship attempts. It carried articles critical of the quality of party leadership in the literary sector. Then it tested a taboo by carrying poems of NVGP writers like Hữu Loan, Trần Dân and Văn Cao. What Langbian did happened to coincide with Trần Đạo’s plan to rehabilitate the NVGP writers. Hữu Loan, in fact, was the formal launching of the Lâm Đồng ALA in January 1988, after years of living in oblivion. His personal involvement in the Langbian protest was to grow in ensuing months. In its third and final issue in May 1988, Langbian published a segment of Nguyễn Ngọc’s controversial 1979 critique of literature, which had never been publicly disseminated. The magazine could not secure a permit for its next issue.

Another politically-challenging development was the vigorous networking among various provincial ALAs to support each other and make their voices heard more clearly. Some of the networking came within an official framework that formally clustered provinces into regions. For instance, TT (5/87:5) reported a meeting in Phú Khánh province of 24 writers from seven central Vietnam provinces, at which they questioned the mandate of current office-bearers in the VWA, because the election process at the latter’s 1983 congress was not democratic. In view of that, they wanted a comprehensive re-organization of the VWA with a thorough review of all personnel. They also asked for a regional association with its own publication and publishing house to be set up for the provinces in central Vietnam, which would then be subordinated directly to the Party Central in Hanoi. They wanted this done no later than the fourth quarter of 1987. Had they succeeded, it would have resulted in another major literary magazine under the protective patronage of the Culture Commission in Hanoi, and which local authorities would find difficult to control. There was also informal but vigorous networking among a cluster of eight provinces immediately south of the 17th Parallel that divided pre-1975 Vietnam into northern and southern halves. On 11-12 March 1988, editors of literary magazines in these eight provinces met for the first time, petitioning the Party Central to remove obstacles that writers continued to face in their creative work. Riding on the provisions of Politburo Resolution 05, they demanded less bureaucracy when applying for a publishing permit and the right to publish for profit since the state was not giving them enough subsidy (Tiểu Đạo Báo Cự 1998:132-33,148-51).

Such a display of political energy and independent grassroots activism would have raised the anxiety level of those party leaders who were reform-cautious. In an article published in party daily ND (19/3/88:3), Trần Đạo admitted as much when he said there were comrades who complained that his reform objectives were too broad and flexible, and were no different from giving up on regulating literature altogether. Others complained that literature was violating the party line because writers were producing too many negative characters in their plots and had neglected the duty to create models for emulation. Trần Đạo also acknowledged the reality in the provinces where local authorities were finding it difficult to adjust to the reform policy of the Party Central. His deputy, Nguyễn Văn Hanh, alluded more explicitly to internal struggle over the

12 Bì Minh Quốc is a poet born in the northern province of Hà Tay. In the 1960s, he and his wife took part in the war in the south. She was killed in action in 1969. In the political culture of Vietnam he had earned his revolutionary spurs. After the war, he lived and worked in Đà Nẵng. Before transferring to work in Đà Lạt, he was Deputy Chairman of the ALA in Quảng Nam-Dông Ngạc province and Chief Editor of its magazine, Đà Lạt. Today, he lives as a dissident in Vietnam, frequently under state surveillance (Tiểu Đạo Báo Cự 1998:331-37; Free Vietnam Alliance website http://www.fva.org/)

13 Tiểu Đạo Báo Cự grew up in the pre-1975 ROV in the south and was active in the student peace movement from 1963 to 1975. He joined the Communist Party in 1974 (CV provided on back cover of Tiểu Đạo Báo Cự 1968).

14 The eight provinces were Bình Trị Thiên, Quảng Nam-Dông Ngạc, Nghệ An, Gia Lai-Kontum, Đắc Lắc, Phú Khênh, Lâm Đồng and Thừa Thiên. Their names and boundaries have since changed.
In the field of arts and literature, power is really in the hands of newspapers and publishing. You comrades who are working in the newspapers or publishing are those who hold the power in literature. You comrades decide the fate of a piece of writing, lead public opinion or take a social movement in a certain direction.17

He called upon the editorial board to review its work in order to remove shortcomings and rough corners and raise its sense of responsibility. These were blunt words to be spoken in public and they foreshadowed the confrontation between Thi and Nguyen Ngoc during and after the Seventh VWA Plenum in September 1988.

Nguyen Dinh Thi's grudge is easier to understand if we see it in the context of a power dissonance between him and Nguyen Ngoc arising out of VN's particular situation. Technically speaking, the Chief Editor of a publication is subordinate to the leadership of the publication's supervisory organ. In reality, the hierarchical order is complicated by Tran Do's support for Nguyen Ngoc. As a CC member and Head of the Culture Commission, Tran Do was more senior than Thi, making it difficult for the latter to restrain the headstrong Chief Editor. Furthermore, Nguyen Ngoc himself probably had a party ranking no lower than that of Thi because the former once held the influential VWA's Party Group Secretary position (see footnote 3 on page 175). Personality clashes were also part of the contretemps and a war of words between Thi and Nguyen Ngoc surfaced in the press as the drama unfolded: VN 6/5/89:3&7; 20/5/89:2; 20/5/89:3).

However, before the showdown at the Seventh VWA Plenum, the VC's Fifth Plenum (Sixth Congress) on 14-20 June 1988 saw reform-cautious views taking a stronger grip on the party line (Source 1). It signalled the start of a growing conservative counter-initiative against the reform-driven measures of people like Tran Do. With the party plenum scheduled to tackle the question of party organization, it became a convenient forum for those partial to tighter party control to draw attention to

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17 Trong’éANC vi’n cây hoc nghe thuat thuyu quyen luc thi nay la trong tuy cac co quan bo ch, xuat ban. Cac dong ch nam cong viec bo ch xuat ban la nhung quyen trong van nghe va chinh cac
the organizational disorder and declining discipline which liberal reforms had fostered. Nevertheless, anti reform sentiments were not very conspicuous in the text of the Fifth Plenum (Sixth Congress) Resolution and any conclusion along that line has to be based on a nuanced reading of a very long document which basically continued to affirm the đổi mới line (daily serialization in Nồ from 26/7/88-1/8/88:1&4). But the plenum outcome set the stage for a series of manoeuvres in the months ahead, leading to a few major decisions and a Politburo Conclusion on the Immediate Ideological Task (Bàn kết luận về công tác tư tưởng trước mặt) signed by Nguyễn Văn Linh on 26 November 1988 (Source 1; and Bộ Văn Hóa 1989:3-12). The decisions included specific instructions to hold organizers responsible for what was said and disseminated at conferences, to stop granting new publication permits until a review was made of the entire press and publication sector, and to have the Ideology Commission absorb the Culture Commission.18 In gist, the Politburo Conclusion affirmed the need to continue with the democratization experiment, but more so than at any time since the Sixth Party Congress of December 1986, it also stressed the need to manage the political reforms closer. Another significant event at the Fifth Plenum (Sixth Congress) which would have an impact on the situation in VN was the elevation of Đào Duy Tùng from alternate to full Politburo member status (TT 23/6/88:1). This promotion put him in a stronger position to obstruct liberal reforms.

With the Fifth Plenum (Sixth Congress) signaling a need to reinstate tighter discipline, the WAS's move to censure Nguyễn Ngọc did not come as a surprise. Sometime in August 1988, the WAS sent to the Party Secretariat and the Culture Commission a report concerning Nguyễn Ngọc's professional misconduct.19 The report was part of a longer document to inform higher party authorities about the agenda for the Seventh VWA Plenum scheduled for 5-9 September 1988. The report has never been published, but an official WAS statement of the proceedings at the Seventh VWA Plenum (NDCHN 2/10/88:2) and the extensive press reporting on the debate during and after that plenum provide an account of the complaints by the Chief Editor's critics. These criticisms can be summarized as:

a) Over-promotion of writer Nguyễn Huy Thiệp — Several of Thiệp's controversial short stories were first carried in VN and had invariably brought about a heated debate in the magazine's pages. The one, which aroused the greatest ire, was "Chastity" (Phạm Tiến) (VN 16/7/88:4-5). Critics charged that the story vilified folk hero Quang Trung and made crude sexual references.20 A critic, Mai Quốc Liên, alleged that both Đào Duy Tùng and Trần Trọng Tân, the Head of the Ideology Commission, had advised Nguyễn Ngọc against running the story, yet it got published nonetheless because the latter was just too headstrong (VNTHCM 28/10/88:3 in multi-part article beginning in VNTHCM 21/10/88:3 &11).

b) Inappropriate editorial selection — Critics cited other articles that should not have been published. For example, a diary piece "Tiếng Dạt" was said to be too incendiary; a short story "Năm Ngày" degraded human beings; a collection of poems on one page all directed against a member of the police force made it appear like a collective declaration; and some cartoons were too provocative.

c) Editorial bias — The charge was that Nguyễn Ngọc had turned the magazine into his own forum and restricted views he did not like. A specific example raised concerned a reader who wrote in to disagree with the article "The night of that day...What kind of a night" (see Chapter Five for details of the story.

18 In 1989, the Culture Commission was absorbed into the Ideology Commission to become what is known today as the Ideology and Culture Commission. As I have explained in the Introduction and Chapter Two, I use "Ideology Commission" as a generic term to refer to this party organ in charge of ideology and the media in order to avoid confusing the reader with its variety of names.
19 All but two of the 10 WAS members agreed to the report. The two were out of town and one of them agreed subsequently (VNTHCM 14/10/88:3; Văn Nghệ Thân Phá Pho Chi Minh or Literature and the Arts of HCM City). The eventual position of the other could not be ascertained. This was according to the poet Diệp Minh Túyên (VNTHCM, 28/10/88:10 in the multi-part article beginning in VNTHCM 21/10/88:3&11). Túyên was speaking at a meeting called by the HCM City Writers Association on 6-7

October 1988 to discuss the WAS criticism of Nguyễn Ngọc. He said he had heard of the report two months earlier, which would place its earliest known existence to be in August 1988.
20 Emperor Quang Trung defeated the occupying forces of China's Qing Dynasty in 1788-1789. Nguyễn Huy Thiệp wove his fiction around historical figures, injecting into it elements of fantasy and allegory. It was a formula that was apt to arouse the suspicion of ideological watchdogs. Some of them saw in the story a subtext arguing for something which could not be reconciled between aesthetics and political authority.

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exposing the tiuggish behaviour of the Thanh Hoa provincial authority). VN ran a great number of letters exclusively to attack that reader. Critics branded this an intimidatory tactic against those who disagreed with the paper's perspective on public issues. VN also presented a distorted view of the literary struggle in the Soviet Union by ignoring Soviet writers who were warning that those who spied for the reformist platform were selfish, factional and extremist. VN allegedly ignored the WAS reminder to be more even-handed.21

d) Antagonism to VN's supervisory organ – Nguyễn Ngọc ran articles which dismissed the VWA as irrelevant to writers because it had not done anything significant to promote literature, thus compounding a malaise within the writing community. Without naming names, his criticisms hinted at his connection with Trần Đỗ and alleged that this "umbrella" (ô dù, which is Vietnamese slang for protection provided by powerful mentors) accounted for the magazine's defiance against its supervisory organ.

e) Political motives – Some critics accused Nguyễn Ngọc of using the magazine to electorner for the next VWA Congress, as if it were "a race to the White House" (chạy đua vào Nhà trang) (NDCN) 10/88:2). Hints were dropped during the debate that Nguyễn Ngọc wanted to replace General Secretary Nguyễn Đình Thi, either with himself or somebody he preferred. There was an indication of this when SH (pages 87 and 89 in SH 31 (tháng 5-6/1988): 84-89) interviewed both men. Nguyễn Ngọc said he would prefer the old way of having the association's General Secretary appointed by its 44-member Executive Committee dropped in favour of the 500 or so association members electing the General Secretary directly. Thi, while not rejecting the merits of a broadly-based election, wanted the status quo preserved.

Probably some time before the confrontational Seventh Writers Plenum, Trần Đỗ knew his tenure as Head of the Culture Commission was going to end. The clue to

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21 Such attacks were accusing Nguyễn Ngọc of doing what party leaders elsewhere had done far more vigorously in previous decades. The point to consider here is not the veracity or fairness of these charges. We should view this as a situation where writers-bureaucrats were sensing the winds of change blowing through the party and adjusting their positions to accommodate it.
the problem of VN. Touching on the lack of unity, his advice was for everybody to stop making allegations that caused misunderstanding. He wanted the WAEC to come out with a decision on the VN contentions, thus putting the prerogative entirely in the hands of WAEC members.

The association’s General Secretary, Nguyễn Đình Thi, then read out the WAS report on Nguyễn Ngọc to the plenum and a heated debate followed along the lines already described. The debate was not so much a dispute over the details of the charges as a difference in the interpretation of their severity. Nguyễn Ngọc’s defenders argued that, whatever editorial indiscretions he had committed, on balance he had done a good job of raising the status and the circulation of the magazine.

Nguyễn Ngọc’s friend, Deputy Secretary Nguyễn Khải, was conspicuous by his absence at this plenum. In August, Nguyễn Khải had been among members of the WAS who agreed to send the complaints about Nguyễn Ngọc to the Party Secretary. In the one year since Nguyễn Ngọc had begun running VN, a rift had emerged between the two friends, providing one example of how personal entanglements were also part of this contention between VN and its supervisory organ. They disagreed over the forthcoming Writers Congress (according to WAEC member Nguyễn Quang Sáng in TT 13/10/88:4). In a debate held in HCM City over the controversial charges against Nguyễn Ngọc, Nguyễn Khải intimated that he disapproved of writers using literature as a cover for their direct participation in politics (VNTPHCM 14/10/88:3). For him, the best way for a writer to be politically involved was through his writing. This allusion complemented those accusations that Nguyễn Ngọc was using VN as an electioneering vehicle for the Writers Congress. Nguyễn Khải also stated unequivocally that VN was an organ of the VWA and not of the Culture Commission. Therefore whatever the magazine wanted to do, it should first win the WAS over to its side. His words were too clear a criticism of Nguyễn Ngọc’s dependence on Trần Đ燃油’s patronage to be missed. If Nguyễn Khải’s appointment as Deputy Secretary a year earlier had been part of Trần Đ燃油’s plan to push his reform agenda, it would seem the enterprise was coming apart. The problem was also complicated by minor personal misunderstandings between Nguyễn Ngọc and Nguyễn Khải. For example, earlier in the year, what the latter had said at a conference organized by VN was run verbatim in the magazine without first seeking his clearance (VN 12/3/88:3). In other words, the brush Chief Editor was sometimes too indiscreet for the Deputy Secretary’s liking. Although he was not at the writers’ plenum, Nguyễn Khải sent a letter. Instead of urging disciplinary action specifically against Nguyễn Ngọc, he asked that the WAEC decide who was in the wrong and then strip that person of his official position. Under the circumstances, it seemed the best possible way for him to refrain from a direct attack on Nguyễn Ngọc.24

Nguyễn Đình Thi took up Nguyễn Khải’s challenge and wanted to call for a vote of confidence on every member of the WAS, but the WAEC decided against going that far. Despite the intense differences in opinion at the VWA plenum, the WAEC still unanimously endorsed a decision which put on the record that VN had shortcomings, including a “serious bias” (thế lạch nghiêm trọng). The WAEC also delegated the WAS to resolve the problems within the magazine. The unanimous endorsement, despite the heated debate, suggested an element of pressure on plenum delegates. A WAEC member, Giang Nam, Chairman of Phú Khánh province’s ALA (Hội Văn Nghệ Phú Khánh), admitted as much when he said that the atmosphere at the meeting gave nobody any choice but to raise a hand in agreement when a vote was called. But those who had spoken up against the WAS complaints managed at least to ameliorate the original wording in the decision, from accusing the magazine of “serious mistakes” (sai lầm nghiêm trọng) to “serious bias”. That, Giang Nam said, was already a victory of sorts. Even Nguyễn Ngọc voted with everybody to condemn himself (Tòa Đạo Bạo_CRE 1998:35), an act which enabled his opponents to argue that no evidence could be more compelling than a man admitting to his own guilt (VN 6/5/89:3&7). Nguyễn Ngọc gave in because he knew he did not have the majority in the WAEC (Source 6 Interview 3; and Source 13). For him and his supporters to hold out as a minority would force the

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23 The quote that Nguyễn Khải was worried about was “if religion did not exist, human beings would be animals.” (đòi khoá c6 tổ giáo thì con người lề con vật) (VN 27/2/88:2-3). This is a vocative statement given the communist ideology’s antipathy to religion. Senior cadres like Nguyễn Khải could get away with saying this orally, but having it published was impolitic.

24 When the WAS finally removed Nguyễn Ngọc as Chief Editor in late November 1988, Nguyễn Khải protested the action (SGGP 6/12/88:2). If taken entirely at face value, there was some discomfort on the part of Nguyễn Khải with the dismissal.
struggle to escalate into a more serious mode with an incalculable outcome (e.g., expulsion from the party or even detention by the security apparatus). Most were loath to risk that.

It is wrong to think of VWA members as either for or against Nguyễn Ngọc. For example, the dissident writer Dương Thu Hương was ambivalent about Nguyễn Ngọc, even as she came out unequivocally against the WAS action.25 In an interview with a women's newspaper in HCM city, Phụ Nữ Thanh Phố Hồ Chí Minh, she warned that the matter also involved a clash of individual egos and there was a danger of idolizing Nguyễn Ngọc. For her, the VN's Chief Editor had also acted abrasively at times and thereby hurt the overall struggle for greater freedom of expression. It was this concern for the larger struggle for freedom which prompted her and others to oppose the WAS, not because of any personal admiration for Nguyễn Ngọc. In fact, she was scathing about Nguyễn Ngọc joining in the vote to condemn himself, saying, "If the sun is round, even if burning in fire, we cannot concede it is square." (page 37 in JPRS-SEA-89-018 10/5/89:57-38; JPRS-SEA is Joint Publications Research Service-Southeast Asia).

Whatever the individual reservations about Nguyễn Ngọc, the WAEC's decision roused an unprecedented level of public controversy beyond the VWA plenum. In a departure from the convention of keeping internal struggle out of public discourse, the VWA issued an account of the controversial plenum in VN (1/10/88:3) and the Sunday edition of the party daily, NDCCN (2/10/88:2). Provincial ALAs and their magazines debated the issue heatedly and expressed their concern to the WAS. Intellectuals outside literary circles and readers added their voices to the protest.26

The WAEC's decision did not ask for Nguyễn Ngọc to be removed as Chief Editor. There was room for negotiation. The manoeuvres started immediately after the VWA plenum. Nguyễn Ngọc had to leave for a three-week assignment in the south and,
during his absence, the WAS sent Xuân Thiệu, Head of Administration in the VWA, to work in VN. According to Nguyễn Ngọc, "Xuân Thiệu's brief was to... and decide on every article before publication (VN 20/5/89:2). Nguyễn Đình Thìn gave a more reasonable version of the WAS action (VN 6/5/89:3 & 7; 20/5/89:3). He said the starting point of the WAS was to avoid personnel changes in the editorial board. He had hoped Nguyễn Ngọc would co-operate to that end. On his first day at VN, Xuân Thiệu declared that he was only a liaison officer between the magazine and the WAS, and had no prerogative to direct editorial work. His job was to advise that sensitive articles be referred to the WAS. On his return, Nguyễn Ngọc protested and Thiệu was withdrawn.

The different kinds of relationship between a supervisory organ and its newspaper, discussed in Chapter Two, tell us that some institutions gave the Chief Editor of their publication considerable independence, relying on him to avoid unwise editorial content or to consult when uncertain. For a period, such a working arrangement existed between VN and the VWA, when Nguyễn Ngọc would consult Nguyễn Khái on sensitive articles, but that had come apart. More importantly, the ideological climate and the arraignment of power within the party elite seemed to be changing. What had recently been acceptable or sufferable to the supervisory organ might no longer be the case as apex politics shifted. In a nutshell, by the second half of 1988, one year after Nguyễn Ngọc had taken charge of VN, some VWA leaders felt they had to rein in the publication and a Chief Editor who had shown himself to be too independent.

The approaching Fourth VWA Congress also increased the anxiety of conservatives in the party leadership to have VN's supervisory organ strengthen its control over the magazine. The preparations for the Sixth Party Congress had witnessed bottom-up rejection of party-endorsed candidates (see Chapter Five). The case of the Làm Đồng ALA also illustrated such growing grassroots yearning for independence within the sector of literature. Đoi mới had fostered such restive politics and made the party authority realize it was getting harder to manipulate its rank-and-file or impose personnel preferences on them. A VN Chief Editor willing and able to stir up even more defiance among writers throughout the country threatened party control over the

25 Dương Thu Hương is known for her unflinching criticism of the Communist Party with her novels such as The Other Side of Illusion (Bên Kịch Ý Ẩo Vô Quốc) and Paradise of the B. d. (Những Thời Dương Mê). She was detained in 1991 for seven months, stripped of her party membership and today has an international reputation as one of Vietnam's better-known dissident writers.
26 Representative samples of public reaction can be found in the following: (TTCCN 13/12/88:9; 1/1/89:10; TT 22/10/88:4; multi-part article beginning in PNNPHCM 21/10/88:3 & 11; Thanh Nien 21/28/11/88:9-10; and S6 33 (tháng 9-10/1988):211-12; 36 (tháng 3-4/1989):87-86).
election of office-bearers at the impending VWA Congress. In <i>his</i> course we shall see how some top leaders tried to enforce party discipline and influence voting behaviour at the congress.

Despite their setback at the Seventh Writers Plenum, both Trần Đơ and Nguyễn Ngọc continued to be pugnacious. An example was reprinting in <i>NV</i> (12/11/83:2-3) a speech by Trần Đơ that defended his reform-driven policy as well as the magazine <i>NV</i>. He warned against opportunists exploiting conservative sentiments within the party to oppose đổi mới in order to advance their own selfish political ambitions. These were combative words, even though Trần Đơ did not name anybody in particular, and the published speech ended with the provocative line that it had also been sent to the party daily <i>ND</i>.27

The question of editorial balance continued to generate tension between Nguyễn Ngọc and the WAS after the Seventh Writers Plenum. For example, Nguyễn Đình Thi charged that Nguyễn Ngọc had used the magazine to attack the plenum and had turned down pieces by WAEC members defending the plenum (<i>NV</i> 6/5/89:3). Nguyễn Ngọc denied this flatly and instead criticized the WAS for its unprofessional way of communicating with <i>NV</i>. Sometimes a short hand-scribbled note would be sent, or Deputy Secretary Chinh Hữu would call on the phone to ask for articles to be published or withdrawn. Nguyễn Ngọc rejected such approaches and demanded that all WAS editorial instructions be properly issued as official memoranda (<i>NV</i> 20/5/89:2). The behaviour suggests Nguyễn Ngọc’s intention to continue running <i>NV</i> according to his own agenda despite being chastised at the Seventh Writers Plenum.

The controversy generated by the <i>NV</i> affair was heightened by a daring effort of the Lâm Đông ALA to rally popular support for Nguyễn Ngọc among writers. Led by Bùi Minh Quốc and Tiểu Dao Bào Cự, on 4 November 1988, a small team of six people set out in a car for neighbouring provinces (Tiểu Dao Bào Cự 1998:13). They were on their way to Hanoi to renew the publishing permit for their magazine <i>Langbian</i> with the ideology commission or the Ministry of Information (before it became today’s MCI) since the province’s OCI had said it must obey a new injunction from the ministry against issuing new publication permits.28 On their way, they stopped to seek the views of the ALAs in seven neighbouring provinces with which they had been networking, and that produced the idea of collecting signatures for a petition to protest the WAS treatment of Nguyễn Ngọc. At the end of their cross-country rally, they had collected 118 signatures. Some signed spontaneously without even bothering to read the draft. Some considered it carefully before signing. Others spoke in favour but did not want to sign. There were those who were goaded by their friends yet still did not sign. Others signed and then asked to back out, while some backed out but came back later to sign (Tiểu Dao Bào Cự 1998:25-28). Such caution and vacillation tell us the extent to which writers were troubled by this issue. If they were not, there would have been no need for them to agonize over signing or not signing. If conscience were not engaged, it would have been easy to ignore the petition. Cautious engagement by many writers also suggests their hopeful reading of the political situation, that it was not yet so grim at to require them to retreat into silence. It was also a measure of their propensity to struggle. Besides the petition, the Lâm Đông team also signed joint statements with individual ALAs of various provinces, calling on the party leadership to rectify policy shortcomings in literature such as restrictions on freedom of speech, unwieldy bureaucracy in the publication process and the paucity of official resources devoted to promoting writers and their works.

The controversial profile of the travelling team from Lâm Đông ALA was raised by the participation of the poet Hữu Loan with his <i>NVGP</i> reputation. Hữu Loan had arrived earlier in the province to attend the official inauguration of the Lâm Đông ALA.29

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27 The speech was not published in <i>ND</i> but this does not mean the party daily had put a blanket ban on material from Trần Đơ. Reflecting the spirit of đổi mới, <i>ND</i> continued to publish occasional articles by

28 The reasons for the provincial culture office not renewing Langbian’s permit were more complex than just a new regulation from the central government. Many provincial authorities were prepared to ignore the central-level instruction and exercised discretion (Tiểu Dao Bào Cự 1998:269). Another key factor was the fact that senior officials of the Lâm Đông Culture Office were being officially investigated for their injudicious meddling of publishing permits for profit. The Lâm Đông ALA played a role in exposing them (TR 18/8/88:1&6) It also did not help Langbian’s case that its first three issues had all generated disc 2ed with the provincial authority.
itself an indication of the association’s determination to push Trần Đổ’s agenda of rehabilitating writers wrongly punished by the party in the past. When travelling with the Lâm Đông team, Hữu Loan participated in literary discussions at various provincial centres, reading his poems and talking about the NVC-P affair and its relevance for the literary struggle of 1988 (Tiêu Dào Bảo Cự 1998:32-33, 43-45, 58-60, 61, 68-69, 77-80). Neither he nor the Lâm Đông team was concerned about projecting such a high profile. Such activities promoted association and enhanced political community, which were a more intense form of engagement than sending letters or articles to the press. They were habits, which the regime discouraged as a rule, unless they came under the aegis of the party. Bùi Minh Quốc conceded that the Lâm Đông team could be accused of “mobilization” (vận động) but argued that there was no rule prohibiting party members from mobilizing support for party policy, which was what his team had been doing (Tiêu Dào Bảo Cự 1998:71).

Members of the Lâm Đông team were not the only ones mobilizing during that unsettling second half of 1988. As much as the state was growing increasingly cautious, there was also a sense of impatience at the societal level. Both probably fed on each other. In HCM City, farmers and fishermen from its neighbouring provinces had turned up in large numbers to demonstrate publicly against unfair treatment by local cadres where they lived. They called at offices of the city’s press to publicize their grievances. Students in the city had also demonstrated to demand improved educational facilities and a reduction in emphasis on ideological instruction (TT 17/9/88:1&6; 12/11/88:1&6; and 6/12/88:1). The city’s press had reported these events much to the unhappiness of the central-level Ideology Commission and the city’s Party Executive Committee, both of which took action to prohibit further reporting in some instances (TT 22/9/88:1&7). These were developments that the VCP had not had to deal with for many years. For those in the party who were inclined to take a reform-cautious line, such incidents vindicated their calls to go slow. On the other hand, some who were reform-driven were impatient to ride on this wave of popular pressure to push for more and faster reforms.

The media was very much a part of this mood of discontent. For some journalists, there was frustration with not being able to affirm the protests in the streets and be free to provide supporting press coverage. At a 19 September 1988 meeting of media practitioners in HCM City to discuss progress after one year of implementing the Secretariat Order 15 that gave editors greater independence (see Chapter Five), the popular view was that the press campaign against negativism was stalled by systemic obstructions and was not having much effect (TT 22/9/88:1&7 and SGP 22/9/88:1&2). This contrasted with a TT report on a similar meeting a year earlier. Then, riding on Nguyễn Văn Linh’s influential columns and the expectation that the Party Secretariat would soon be issuing Order 15 to empower editors, the optimism and confidence was palpable, as TT declared in bold type on page one: PUBLIC OPINION IS NOT IMPOTENT IN THE FACE OF NEGATIVISM (CÔNG LUẬN KHÔNG BẤT LỰC TRƯỚC TIÊU CỤ) (TT 29/9/88:1&8).

Bùi Minh Quốc and Tiêu Dào Bảo Cự of Lâm Đông were two such impatient media practitioners. The discussion they had with literary colleagues in Hue on 26 November 1988 gives us a deeper understanding of how writers and journalists were weighing their course of action for the future. Hue, with its famous literary magazine SH, was also widely recognised as a major centre of đổi mới literature.29 Tô Như Vỹ, Chief Editor of SH at that time, was later described by Inna Zisman of Radio Moscow as a “disciple” (đệ tử) of Trần Đổ (Zisman 1992:32). The Hue literati, however, cautioned the Lâm Đông team that courage alone was not enough to win their struggle and made the following arguments. Hue was not short of courageous writers but courageous writers must know how to survive. Of the three most outspoken literary magazines in Vietnam then, one (Langbian) had been terminated; another (PN) was facing a great threat to its editorial independence, thus leaving only SH to bear the brunt. Therefore, the Hue writers argued, SH must try to survive at all cost. Losing a publication was to lose a weapon of struggle. There must also be strategy and tactics in struggle and part of the leadership should remain concealed. There was a need for tactical compliance with the rules, but that should not get to the point where the

29 SH was suspended for half a year after June 1990 when the đổi mới policy was reinstated. It re-opened under more circumspect management.

30 Zisman said she knew Tô Như Vỹ from the time he was undergoing training in Moscow and had contributed articles to each other’s media. Zisman also knew Nguyễn Đình Thi and of the feud that the latter had with writers such as Nguyễn Ngọc and Vỹ. She herself fell out with Thi after criticizing him for his role in the VN affair.
compliance immobilized the will to struggle. Regarding internal struggle, Hoàng Phú Ngọc Tường warned that "to struggle through organizational channels was bound to meet with defeat because Hanoi (meaning officialdom at the central level) was a master at playing the game using organizational rules." That particular discussion in Hue reiterates the struggle paradigm of this dissertation. It had been a basis of activism for the writers of the NPGP affair; 30 years later it continued to guide another generation of Vietnam's restive literati. But that discussion in Hue also betrayed a certain sense of the limits of media activism when it is channelled through the struggle paradigm. Some frontier of activism had been reached which media practitioners crossed at their own peril. On the other hand, if they continued to operate within the struggle paradigm, they would not be getting any further. Nobody was sure what to do next.

Tiểu Đạo Bảo Cự felt the time had come for writers to take a combative approach, just like the farmers in the Mekong Delta who had dared to stage public demonstrations against unreasonable local authorities (Tiểu Đạo Bảo Cự 1998:70-71). This was a radical move that would have meant moving beyond waging media and internal struggles to take struggle into the streets. This last option is just what had come to be known in the international press as "people power." "People power" had hastened the collapse of many authoritarian regimes, including Hanoi's Eastern European allies. Ultimately, "people power" did not occur in Vietnam in the 1980s, but the idea was there and so were the forces pushing for it, not least among a section of its intelligentsia.

This mélange of views, while reflecting differences in approach, also showed that there was a shared sense of struggle for a common cause within this community of writers. Many of them were looking for an effective balance between opposing excessive state control of literature and staying within its rules. But it was not easy. The times were unusual and it required of those who wanted to engage this challenging situation to make difficult individual (and small group) choices.

Just as that 26 November 1988 discussion was going on, a phone call came from Hanoi at 10 a.m. It was the poet Huy Cận, Chairman of the Vietnam Federation of Literature and the Arts (the umbrella body comprising the separate associations for literature and the other arts). Apparently, the provincial authorities of Đà Nẵng and Quảng Bình, places which the Lạm Đông team had called upon on their way to Hue, had reported to the Party Central in Hanoi the details of the team's visit. Huy Cận said he was conveying the instructions of the Party Secretariat as well as the views of Đà Nẵng and Quảng Bình (but made no mention of Trà Vinh). He warned all provincial ALAs not to do anything with the Lạm Đông team which would complicate the political situation, reminding them that the legitimate way for raising problems was to write to the press in a personal capacity (i.e., media struggle) or bring it up within one's organization (i.e., internal struggle). (Tiểu Đạo Bảo Cự 1998:71-72). Huy Cận's reminder of what was legitimate behaviour was an indication that the tactics—networking, petition and joint statements—used by the Lạm Đông team were considered beyond the pale.

Nevertheless, Huy Cận's phone call did not deter the signing of a joint statement between the Lạm Đông visitors and their hosts in Hue—the ALA of Bình Trị Thiên province (Hội Văn Nghệ Bình Trị Thiên) and SH magazine. The statement called on the state to live up to its own official agenda as represented in the following decrees: the Sixth Party Congress Resolution, Politburo Resolution 05 and Memorandum 312 (Công Văn 312/VHVN) of the Culture Commission. The statement indicated that a recent spate of decisions by the state had gone against the spirit of these decrees, precipitating a situation where a majority of the provincial ALAs were in financial difficulties and denied permission to have their own publication. It called on the Party Central to take the lead in solving these problems in the provinces (Tiểu Đạo Bảo Cự 1998:186-187). The language used in this joint statement was temperate. It upheld major party decrees and recognized the supremacy of the Party Central. The right to publish was requested.

11 "cơn đau trash bừng to chức thê ta sẽ thua vì Hà Nội là "tay tổ" về chiến chối bừng to chức." Hoàng Phú Ngọc Tường was then the General Secretary of the Writers Association in Trà Vinh province.
12 According to 77 (12/11/88:1), farmers from the Mekong Delta carried out their street protest in Ho Chi Minh City on 10 November 1988.
within the framework of having more, not less, state-owned publications. As much as these provincial writers were boldly testing the limits of struggle with their networking activities, the text of their draft was still symptomatic of the struggle paradigm.

The real problem came on 28 November 1988, the morning of the visitors’ departure from Hue. At the insistence of their hosts, they lingered for coffee and were thus waylaid by an official message from the Lâm Đông Party Executive Committee which ordered Bảo Minh Quốc and Tiểu Đạo Báo Cự to return home immediately. By now the Party Secretariat had also notified every provincial cấp ủy of its strong disapproval of the Lâm Đông group. Both men had to make a choice between compliance or defiance vis-à-vis their cấp ủy, whose authority over them was a fundamental tenet of the system. They chose defiance and pressed on to Hanoi (Tiểu Đạo Báo Cự 1998:45, 80-81)

In Hanoi, the NV issue was also moving into a tense climate in the latter half of November 1988. On the afternoons of 21 and 22 November, the party chapter of the magazine organized a criticism and self-criticism session involving all staff members. It was internal struggle tactics to put pressure on Nguyễn Ngọc. Nguyễn Duy, the cadre in charge of the NV office in HCM City, went to Hanoi to attend the session and provided a public account of what happened (TTCN 18/12/88:9). Nguyễn Ngọc criticized himself very seriously. The overwhelming consensus at both meetings was that while he had shortcomings, they were not as severe as the charges presented to the Seventh Writers Plenum. All felt that Nguyễn Ngọc should not carry the blame alone and were against replacing him, save for one person who said cryptically that if the Chief Editor had to be replaced, there was no point dragging out the whole issue. If Nguyễn Ngọc’s detractors were counting on popular opinion within NV to turn against him, it had not emerged. The non-result of this in-house criticism session and the heated debate at the Seventh VWA Plenum showed how internal struggle could no longer be planned with the same vigour, nor expect the same acquiescence, as had been the case in the NVGP affair. The move to dismiss Nguyễn Ngọc would now have to be enforced directly from the top.

According to Nguyễn Ngọc, he went to meet the WAS twice in the week following the internal criticism sessions. He did not specify the dates but an account of the meetings can be assembled by putting together what was said by both Nguyễn Đình Thi and himself (NV 6/5/89:3&7, 20/5/89:2; 20/5/89:3; and TT 15/12/88:4). At both meetings, Thi sought to lessen Nguyễn Ngọc’s involvement in NV by co-opting him into the preparatory work for the approaching Fourth Writers Congress. Nguyễn Ngọc could still retain a role in the NV editorial process by one of two alternatives. First, he remained as Chief Editor but had to be guided by an editorial council (hội đồng biên tập) comprising a few eminent writers from outside the magazine and him. Second, he should let his deputy act as Chief Editor while he himself become a permanent member (thường trực) of the editorial council which would allow him to work closely with the editorial board, i.e., an eminence grise of sorts. Whatever the formulation, the crucial point, Thi insisted, was that the editorial council’s decision was supreme. When any difference arose with the magazine, Nguyễn Ngọc must abide by the majority decision within the council. Nguyễn Ngọc rejected both proposals. He considered that co-optation into the preparation work for the congress was dismissal by another name. He also maintained that a Chief Editor must always have the final say on editorial content.

The disagreement had larger implications than just an editor and his supervisory organ being at odds over what constituted editorial independence. Through the years, Vietnam’s political system had been able to impose a high level of control over its media because media practitioners had an inculcated sense of the written rules and unwritten standards of self-censorship sufficient to minimize editorial indiscretions. A regulatory regime of supervisory organs and control organs complemented the self-censorship. But much of that regimen seemed to be losing effect, given the near defiance of Nguyễn Ngọc and the Lâm Đông group. If this issue was inserted into the larger ideological debate on how far and fast reforms should be allowed, some would see in it a worrying sign that reforms were slipping out of control and should be managed more stringently. At the very least, they could make political capital out of it.

This provided the context of realpolitik within which the WAS now took determined steps to remove Nguyễn Ngọc as Chief Editor. At a time when the party line
was wavering over reforms, and amidst signs that a more doctrinaire point of view was gaining ascendancy within the party elite, many of the WAS members would deem it politic to pull VN back in line, and firmly under the supervision of the WAS. How many of them were actually beholden to conservative leaders such as Đạo Duy Tân cannot be ascertained. However, it is unnecessary to think that Tân actually directed every step of this campaign against Nguyễn Ngọc. The dynamics of the system operated in a way whereby participants in a media struggle would have an acute insider's sense of what was shaping the struggle at the core of the party and how it was turning out. That would then shape their behaviour. This was how media struggle was so intrinsically linked to the party's internal struggle.

The solution that the WAS wanted to impose on VN involved sending a WAS member to work closely with the editorial board. The board would retain all its original members except Nguyễn Ngọc, and the First Deputy Chief Editor would take charge. An editorial council would be set up comprising young writers and people with different points of view to ensure a more balanced editorial policy. No mention was made of Nguyễn Ngọc being a member of this editorial council under the imposed solution. According to Nguyễn Đình Thi, it was a majority decision by the WAS and the proposal was endorsed by the Ideology Commission, the Culture Commission and the Ministry of Information.  

Nguyễn Ngọc got wind of this final move by the WAS. At this stage, there was really very little he could do except try to rouse public opinion against it. He sent an appeal to the journalists attending the Fifth Plenum of the VJA, which opened on 28 November 1988. In this note, he warned them that what was happening was not just a case concerning VN alone; it had important implications for all of the media as well as for democratization and the đổi mới policy in general (SGGP 6/12/88:2). Such a choice of words politicized the issue of media discourse far more than the measured approach taken by the TP Chief Editor, Đình Văn Nam, when the latter drew the lessons for the press at the end of the Hà Trọng Hào affair (see Chapter Five). For Nguyễn Ngọc, the media fight for less editorial restriction was not just to help fulfill the party's anti-negativism programme. It was part of the larger struggle for a more open and pluralistic political system.

On the afternoon of 28 November 1988, the first day of the VJA plenum, the Head of Ideology Commission, Trần Trọng Tân, came to present the Politburo Conclusion on the Immediate Ideological Task (see above) which Nguyễn Văn Linh had just endorsed two days earlier (SGGP 6/12/88:2). This particular decree set the stage for Trần Dĩ's Culture Commission to be absorbed into the Ideology Commission (Source 1). The document capped the attempt made by conservative voices within the Politburo since the June Fifth Party Plenum (Sixth Congress) to review the reform policy. Tân's authoritative interpretation of this content (published in ND 23/12/88:3&4) made clear that democratization showed signs of getting out of hand and descending into anarchy. He warned that there were people waiting for this to happen to be able to fish in troubled waters (độc nước thã câu). At this point, Tân also made a stern attack on the Lâm Đrc team (Tíen Đào Bảo Cự 1998:94-95). He read out the Party Secretariat's classified telegram to all provincial authorities making known that it strongly disapproved of the Lâm Đrc team. The Secretariat also ordered the Lâm Đrc Party Executive Committee to take the necessary disciplinary action. NộbĐrc, however, was allowed to report any of this publicly.

Despite the autocratic tone set on the first day, a vigorous attempt was made on the second to inscribe the VN issue on the plenum's draft report that was supposed to look at important media events in the year past. Its omission from the original draft indicated that office bearers who prepared the document had preferred to steer clear of the matter. Probably owing to the level of agitation from the floor, plenum organizers read out Nguyễn Ngọc's letter at the end of the second day. That was followed the next morning by Trần Trọng Tân taking the floor for a second time to read the WAS proposal to transfer Nguyễn Ngọc, and his Ideology Commission's agreement with it. More debate ensued, with SGGP (6/12/88:2) calling it the most democratic VJA plenum ever. Of 41 participants, 38 spoke and 20 among them raised the issue of VN. A vast majority spoke in support of Nguyễn Ngọc and finally passed a motion asking the
VNA Secretariat to express the concern of the journalists’ plenum to the Ideology Commission and the WAS.

Bùi Minh Quốc and Tiểu Đào Bảo Cự arrived in Hanoi when the VJA’s Fifth Plenum was still on.²⁸ By then, the Hanoi press community had heard Trần Trọng Trần’s harsh admonition of the Lâm Đồng team, casting the cross-country rally as a form of “factionalism” (cổ tình bể phải) in support of Nguyễn Ngọc. Given that top party institutions like the Secretariat and the Ideology Commission took such stern attitudes, many people were worried for the Lâm Đồng duo. In order not to aggravate the situation, the two men also did not continue collecting signatures for their petition in support of Nguyễn Ngọc. Their time in Hanoi was spent calling on officials and colleagues in the media and culture sectors and mass organizations to put across their point of view. The petition and agreements they collected on the way were presented to both Bảo Duy Tăng’s office and the Ideology Commission. Reflecting Trần Đỗ’s affinity for writers pushing the liberal agenda, his Culture Commission was most helpful to the Lâm Đồng visitors, arranging their accommodation and facilitating their meetings with official institutions. Trần Đỗ and his staff were also very understanding of what the Lâm Đồng team had done. On their part, the Lâm Đồng visitors could sense that the Culture Commission was facing a great problem. With the political mood as it was, Politburo Resolution 05 had run its course and the Culture Commission was not even allowed to do a review of what had been achieved with the resolution, a routine practice for all major party decrees (Tiểu Đào Bảo Cự 1998:89-95). That should not be surprising; it was an institution that was already slated for absorption into the Ideology Commission.

The moral support of the VJA did not prevent or even postpone Nguyễn Ngọc’s demise from VN. On 2 December 1988, the day after the Fifth VJA Plenum ended, the WAS abruptly called a meeting of VN staff. Nguyễn Đình Thị then announced that the Chief Editor had to be changed, following which his deputy, Chính Hữu, repeated the two transfer alternatives which had earlier been offered to Nguyễn Ngọc. When Nguyễn Ngọc turned them down again, Chính Hữu took out a third document which announced that Nguyễn Ngọc would cease to be Chief Editor with immediate effect and had to wait for another assignment from the WAS (TT 15/12/88:4).²⁹

Epilogue to the Dismissal

The dismissal of Nguyễn Ngọc was a setback for advocates of press activism but a propensity to struggle continued within the literary community. There was the unfinished business of the Fourth VWA Congress which was one major source of contention during Nguyễn Ngọc’s editorship. The congress was scheduled for the latter half of 1988 but had to be postponed because of the VN controversy. Although the opponents of Trần Đỗ and Nguyễn Ngọc successfully appropriated party authority to get rid of them, popular opinion within the writing community was still contested territory. Reflecting the liberal progress made under đội mới, a level of debate on the VN issue continued in the press. For instance, Nguyễn Ngọc and Nguyễn Đình Thị went on to have a war of words in VN (6/5/89:3&7; 20/5/89:2; and 20/5/89:3). Opinions in support of Nguyễn Ngọc continued to be carried in some publications, samples of which can be found in TTCN (1/1/89:10), SH 36 (thang 3-4/1989):87-88, and Lao Động 18/5/89:5).

Such forthright press reporting on the internal differences in the VWA violated the old injunction against airing internal struggles in public and strained hard at the leash of democratic centralism that forbade dissenting voices after an official decision had been reached. Despite the failure of Nguyễn Ngọc’s struggle, the mood and feel of its aftermath were still a world removed from what we saw in the tight control of the NQGP and XLCD periods. This was the difference which đội mới had made to state-media relations.

²⁸ They did not give the exact date of their arrival, but since they left Huế on the morning of 28 November 1988 and lingered in a few places on the way, it is likely that they reached Hanoi on 30 November 1988 at the earliest. That was also the last day of the VJA plenum. By that time, the rest of the Lâm Đồng team had dispersed, leaving only the two men with their driver.

²⁹ Nguyễn Ngọc has not been in any public controversy after the VN affair. Since then, his only claim on public attention was when his famous novel, My Country Stood Up, was made into a film, for which he wrote the script. He no longer holds any influential position in the VWA.
Trần Đỗ continued to canvass his liberal views and some of these were published in the party daily, ND, no less. A piece in ND (21/1/89:3) argued for reliance on proper legislation to manage cultural activities rather than on the discretionary regime of party leadership. Another in ND (4&6/3/89:3) welcomed a new phenomenon in a Vietnam of đổi mới where many different kinds of civic groups were set up to meet many socio-cultural needs. But such a public profile did not stop the inexorable march of events to end Trần Đỗ’s political career. After his Culture Commission was absorbed into the Ideology Commission, Trần Đỗ was effectively marginalized from the party culture apparatus.37 According to Trần Đỗ, his now defunct commission was charged with “fomenting disunity” (gây mâu thuẫn) by those with “archaic and intellectually-limited minds” (những đầu óc vừa cố kỳ và vừa thô tòng mình) (Trần Đỗ 1990:2).

Another key event which affected media activism profoundly was the August 1989 Seventh Party Plenum (Sixth Congress) convened to discuss urgent ideological issues in view of the dramatic developments in the socialist world (i.e., the 4 June 1989 bloody clash between students and soldiers in Beijing’s Tiananmen Square and mounting political turbulence in the Soviet bloc as their citizens agitated for more freedom). These were unsettling times for socialist regimes. The theme of the August plenum reflected the official anxiety. When assessing these international developments, the plenum resolution used old doctrinaire jargon that continued to see the world in terms of a struggle between socialist states on the one hand and “reactionary”, “imperialist” and “capitalist” states on the other. It warned that one of the six factors underlying the crisis faced by socialist regimes in 1989 was “their failure to exercise tight leadership over their mass media, leading to a situation where the press and the broadcast media reported news in a heedless manner, disseminated fallacious views and caused ideological confusion”.38 Where the domestic situation was concerned, the resolution criticized trends that belittled the achievements of revolutionary literature,
denigrate Bạch and eventually evict him from the CC. Two of these CC members, Nông Đức Mạnh and Nguyễn Đức Bình, were elevated to Politburo status at the Seventh Party Congress in June 1991. Bạch’s ally in the Politburo was then Foreign Minister Nguyễn Cơ Thạch (Bùi Tín 1995:160). But Thạch lost his CC membership at the Seventh Party Congress. This sequence underlines the high leadership stakes involved in the struggle over how to implement reforms. It made and broke political careers at the apex of the party. During this sensitive period of high level internal struggle, Bạch continued to try to promote his point of view through the media (Bùi Tín 1995:159). It was suggestive of how the political elite viewed the media as an important instrument in their contention with each other. By then, Bạch’s influence within the system was tenuous. The Ideology Commission cautioned the media against spreading the views of individuals opposed to the party, an oblique warning that they should not publish anything sensitive said by Bạch.

The elite politics of 1988-1989 also illustrates how the dynamics at the top were being reconfigured by a new generation of leaders. The Trường Chinh-Lê Đức Thọ contest that drove the politics of the Sixth Party Congress was running its last lap. Trường Chinh died in September 1988. In late 1989, Thọ was ailing and died of cancer in October 1990. The members of Thọ’s retinue in the Politburo (see Chapter Five) were striding in different directions, according to where the forces of đổi mới took them. Two of them, Trần Xuân Bạch and Nguyễn Cơ Thạch, were identified with pushing for more rather than fewer liberal reforms. Bạch was in turn attacked by other associates of Thọ, such as Lê Đức Anh and Đoàn Khuré. The exact motives and reasons operating under this intricate nexus of personal differences and alliances are matters for conjecture, and need not concern us here. Suffice to say that not everybody beholden to Thọ would be united as a bloc. It was clear that as the older generation passed on, personality politics were shaking out into new alignments that were difficult to predict.

A change in the behaviour of General Secretary Nguyễn Văn Linh contributed to the marginalization of liberal voices within the party leadership. Both in his published speeches at the August 1989 plenum and after (ND 29/8/89:1&4; and TT 21/9/89:1&2), as well as in unreported statements (Bùi Tín 1995:153), Linh staunchly criticized pluralism, the imperialist plot against the socialist world and the foolishness of Gorbachev’s glasnost policy in the Soviet Union. For those who had looked up to Linh as the leader who did so much to open up public discourse in Vietnam with his newspaper column and his encouragement of writers, this was a stark reversal of his earlier liberal pronouncements. Why Linh shied away from vigorous advocacy of political reforms is not a question that can be answered satisfactorily here. Bùi Tín’s explanation is that Linh, despite his initial contributions to reforms, was no more than an apparatchik who did not have the ability to think for himself nor the education to understand the changing world to which Vietnam must adjust. Given the crisis of survival confronting the socialist world in the closing months of 1989, Linh and many other Vietnamese leaders instinctively moved to defend the socialist system.

Thus the equivocation over reforms at the Fifth Party Plenum (Sixth Congress) had coalesced into a more reform-cautious mood after the Seventh Party Plenum (Sixth Congress). Despite such a disadvantageous political climate, the Fourth Writers Congress (28–31 October 1989) saw a determined effort to thwart party attempts at influencing the election of office-bearers. Discontent over electoral procedure and the legitimacy of those who led the VWA had been festering for quite a while. In the heated debate over the WAS criticism of Nguyễn Ngọc, writers openly questioned the mandate of the WAS and WAEC to do what they had done, given that their election during the 1983 Third Writers Congress was fraught with irregularities.41 Prior to the controversy, some two years before the 1989 Writers Congress, TT already reported the issue being raised at a meeting of ALAs from the central provinces, indicating that the concern about the abuse of representative politics was already brewing within writing circles (TT 5/9/87:5; also see above). Nguyễn Ngọc’s proscription by a unanimous vote in the WAEC further dramatized how membership of the committee was the outcome of a flawed electoral system that favoured compliant individuals whom the party could easily influence.

Against a background of heightened interest in proper electoral procedure, the question was raised at a 11 October 1989 pre-congress press conference as to whether

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41 Examples would include Dương Thanh Hùng in TCN (9/10/88:8); Nguyễn Duy in VNTPHCM (4/11/88:2&3); and Y Nhi in VNTPHCM (11/11/88:3).
the WAS would issue a list of preferred candidates. Deputy Secretary Chính Hữu’s
formulistic reply was that association members would decide the choice of leaders (TT
24/10/89:1). Prior to the VWA Congress proper, a few days were set aside, beginning
on 23 October 1989, for participants to study the recent resolution from the Seventh
Party Plenum (Sixth Congress). While those with liberal views had many misgivings
about the plenum resolution, they mainly kept quiet, reserving their agitation for the
VWA congress itself (TTĐHNVVN 1989:2). When that was over, VWA Congress
delegates then deliberated on the rules for conducting the meeting. That was when the
contention began. Specific issues like the VN affair were raised alongside some
perennial big questions, such as how much should literature serve the political
objectives of the socialist state.

But the focus of the struggle was on the procedure that had always produced
congress outcomes according to the wishes of the party regulatory authority, rather than
necessarily reflecting popular choice among writers. The challenge surfaced on three
electoral fronts:

a) The Chairing Committee – The conventional practice was for the incumbent
WAEC to propose a chairing committee that would be rubber-stamped by a
round of applause from the floor. For this congress, the floor accepted only
four of the seven proposed candidates and elected three of its own (TT
4/11/89:4). Ideological balance within the chairing committee and its
independence helped to give liberal views a fair hearing at this congress.

b) The General Secretary position – Echoing the earlier debate between Nguyễn
Đình Thịnh and Nguyễn Ngọc, some wanted to retain the existing practice of

4 TTĐHNVVN or Tờ Tức vè Đại Hội Nhà Văn Viet Nam was a newsletter prepared by the Club of
Former Resistance Fighters. (The Club of Former Resistance Fighters is the subject of Chapter Seven). It
described, in far greater detail than any press reports, the struggle at the Fourth VWA Congress. Besides
culling information from various newspapers, it incorporated the first-hand accounts of three writers
present at the congress. However, this was clearly a perspective by those advocating a liberal agenda and
close to interpret events at the congress in terms highly critical of those they regarded as supporters of
the conservative perspective. This newsletter was produced by the club as and when there was a topical
issue. It was meant for circulation among club members but, in reality, was disseminated more widely.
The club was an association of army veterans based in HCM City and more details will be provided in
the next chapter. My copy of TTĐHNVVN comes from Professor David Marr of The Australian National
University.

leaving the WAEC appoint the association’s General Secretary, but liberal
voices from the floor agitated to have the position elected by all congress
delegates.4 This issue was settled by a popular vote, which went in favour of
electing the General Secretary (TT 4/11/89:4).

c) The WAEC – As per normal practice, there was a list of officially-preferred
candidates for this committee, but an unprecedented groundswell of
independence resisted such manipulations.

By the time the congress formally opened on 28 October 1989, there was a
combative mood on the floor. The custodial response to the liberal challenge took
several forms. General Dương Thống, Head of the Bureau of Security (Tổng Cục An
Nhin) of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, arrived at the conference to announce that
an unnamed writer had accepted foreign money for improper purposes. The security
apparatus wanted congress delegates to know that errant behaviour risked being
branded as a foreign plot. But it failed to deter writer Hoàng Châu Kỳ from revealing
that he had received a list of 30 party-preferred candidates for the WAEC. The cat was
thus out of the bag. Many delegates called for abandoning the congress if they must
abide by that official list. At that juncture, Deputy Secretary Nguyễn Khái stood up to
dissociate the VWA from the attempt to influence the election, stating that the
association had not issued the list (TTĐHNVVN 1989:2).

The following day was a Sunday, but the original plan for a day of rest was
hastily replaced by a closed-door meeting to impress on delegates who were party
members their duty to help produce a congress outcome at the party would find
amenable. Party members made up three-quarters of the congress delegates. Three
figures of authority came to speak to the writers: two Politburo members, Nguyễn Đức
Tâm and Đào Duy Tòng, and Head of the Ideology Commission, Trần Trọng Tấn. Tâm
who was the most senior party leader in charge of personnel matters, presided (TT
4/11/89:4). But these top leaders did not get the compliance they sought.

43 According to TTĐHNVVN (1989:2), the three elected from the floor were considered to hold liberal
views.
In one of the most intensely contested elections in the association’s history, a high number of 116 candidates was finally nominated by their peers, or themselves, to contest the 30 seats sought for the WAEC. The voting that took place on 31 October 1989 returned only six WAEC members. The conference had to be extended for a second round of voting on 1 November 1989 and that produced another three more names, falling far short of the 30 sought. The congress then decided there was no point having another round of votes. Nguyễn Ngọc was one of those who got elected in the first round, thus winning a symbolic victory against those opponents who had engineered his dismissal. Some key candidates preferred by the party could not get elected. TT (4/11/89:4) observed that among the nine who were elected were a mixture of talented and productive individuals respected by their peers, those who showed strong support for liberal reforms and those who were not identified strongly with any ideological position. The clear message from the election was that the acquiescent voting culture which the authority had been relying on all these years had collapsed (if only temporarily).46

Apart from the election, a raucous mood also pervaded the debate on other professional issues raised during the congress. With so many wanting to have their say, the opportunity to speak was fiercely contested. Those who expressed conservative views were shouted down. Controversial issues were raised, as in Báo Tiết’s speech which was representative of the liberal zeitgeist at the congress. He decreed the constriction of freedom of expression just as it was showing signs of gaining strength. Next, he questioned the legitimacy of the party’s policy on intellectuals by stating clearly that it was even more restrictive than that of the French colonial regime. Finally, he called for redressing the injustices of the past suffered by writers, and referred specifically to the NVGP and XLCM affairs (TTDN89:12-14). The dissenting ethos at that congress was therefore not just focused on the issues of the late 1980s. It embraced the whole period that the Communist Party was in power, and attempted to review the party’s entire record.

As for the two defiant writers from Lâm Đồng province, Bùi Minh Quốc and Tú Do Bảo Cự, they got back to Dalat from Hanoi on 17 December 1988. Despite the popular support of Lâm Đồng ALA members, they knew that expulsion from the party was imminent for their earlier defiance against the provincial cấp ủy (TTDĐ89:102,141-43,293-297,301). Bảo Cự wanted to resign from the party in protest, but Quốc counselled against it in the following way (TTDĐ89:279):

“We should do so only if necessary but I do not think it is time yet. We need to gather all forces, not only the liberals in and outside the party but also the neutrals within the party. When a majority of members are still identified with the party, declaring a resignation will only turn them against us. When the party is in power, whether we like it or not, we have to speak and act in its name to change opinions from within and not to stand in opposition to it. I believe the good party members will support us. It is possible that we may be expelled, but if I had done nothing wrong and the party expels me, then it proves the party is wrong. And the expulsion will provide another opportunity to struggle within the party organization.”

Bùi Minh Quốc was reiterating the importance of keeping a struggle within the system; and that this was the most effective way to move forward given the dynamics.

46 The General Secretary election did not see a contest between Nguyễn Đình Thư and Nguyễn Ngọc because the former no longer wanted to run. It is uncertain whether Nguyễn Ngọc had any real prospects of winning, although he was elected to the WAEC.

47 The Party Central would have liked the association to elect a full committee of 30 members but would settle for 21-25 (TTDN89:3). Every voter indicated the candidates he preferred on the name list and each candidate was required to poll more than half the 352 total votes available to qualify for a WAEC seat (TTDN89:4).

48 They also happened to be individuals whom party custodians wanted the Writers Congress to reject. On the other hand, some key party-preferred candidates like Anh Đức, Trần Bạch Đằng, and Bằng Việt failed to get elected. Đức was also the officially-preferred person to take over as the association’s General Secretary. But the popular choice of the congress was Sàng, who did not want the job. So the congress finally settled for a compromise candidate in Vũ Tú Nân (TTDN89:4).
of the system. To stand outside the party and oppose it was impolitic and dangerous. Staying inside the party allows one the double-edged facility of "speaking in its name" to rally opinion from inside against it. Quốc’s words have succinctly described what the struggle paradigm is about.

On 10 June 1989, Lâm Đồng’s Party Executive Committee formally issued orders to expel Bùi Minh Quốc and Tiểu Dao Bảo Cự from the VCP. Both men did not take this amicably. The struggle continued within the Lâm Đồng ALA, where their supporters resisted pressure from the provincial cấp ủy to remove both men as office-bearers. Quốc and Bảo Cự also enlisted sympathetic newspapers in other provinces to publicize their grievances. Similar to what was done at the Fourth VWA Congress in Hanoi, the tacit of the cấp ủy was to install new office-bearers at the Lâm Đồng ALA who were more amenable to party control. When the cấp ủy insisted on having its choice of office-bearers in 1990, members chose to let the association go moribund. It was not until 1993 that the provincial cấp ủy could revive the Lâm Đồng ALA (Tiểu Dao Bảo Cự 1998:140-43, 293-97, 301, 308-10, 314-15). In all these, we are reminded once again of the propensity to struggle among Vietnam’s intelligentsia.

Conclusion

Once again, we have seen press activism functioning from within the bowels of the system, expressing itself through the struggle paradigm. The vocabulary of struggle is very much in evidence. At various points, we have seen its protagonists actually articulate the dynamics involved that cohere to what I have posited with the struggle paradigm. The activism we have witnessed has made use of the doubled-edged possibility of a press struggle. The activists traded on their insiders’ prerogatives and were careful to retain that insider’s status when it was threatened. The challenge posed by VN and the Lâm Đồng group to party authority was clearly not just a matter of two magazines agitating against a tight censorship regime. The politics of their struggle were an adjunct of the internal struggle of the party, in this case, leading finally to the closure of a major party organ.

If the Hà Trọng Hỏa affair in Chapter Five celebrates the success of press activism in the climate of đổi mới, the VN affair is about how that activism can also fail. The two opposite outcomes happened within nine months of each other in 1988 (i.e., the period between the Politbureau’s decision in favour of the press struggle against Hà Trọng Hỏa and the sacking of Nguyễn Ngọc). The newspapers exposing Hà Trọng Hỏa took advantage of an ascendant trend in liberal reforms. Nguyễn Ngọc also rode on this rising wave, but shortly after that, had to negotiate a downside into a more doctrinaire and reform-cautious mood within the party. To be sure, other factors also account for the different endings of the two struggles. For example, the press campaign against Hà Trọng Hỏa had a limited objective (i.e., the disciplining of an errant political leader) that was less threatening to the authorities than the broad political agenda of Nguyễn Ngọc and Trần Độ. Generally speaking, these contrasting developments point once more to the importance of ideological climate and the opportunity it offers for struggle.

The VN affair depicts, with greater detail and depth than previous case studies, how participants involved in a press struggle engaged the larger political objectives of đổi mới. We saw this in how Trần Độ played a key role in drafting and then promoting, with Nguyễn Ngọc’s help, Politbureau Resolution 05. We saw this again when the Lâm Đồng team, with other provincial colleagues, tried to strategize a response to the growing trend within the party to rein in the đổi mới policy. Their activities provide another perspective to the issue of “opportunity” for struggle. A struggle may be well-served by anticipating the right time and circumstances, but it is not only a matter of waiting passively for a top-down political process to bring about that opportunity. Trần Độ, Nguyễn Ngọc, Bùi Minh Quốc and Tiểu Dao Bảo Cự had demonstrated the active role media practitioners could play to shape an evolving ideological climate.

This suggestion of dynamism and initiative dovetails with the other constant factor raised in the previous chapters: the propensity to struggle among Vietnam’s intelligentsia. Once more we have seen a tenacity to test and push political limits, and even instances of defiance such as when the Lâm Đồng duo disobeyed its provincial cấp ủy. The activism in this case study may have failed in the final analysis but the sum
effects of these efforts mean a change in state-media dynamics. The struggles seen in this case study represent an attrition of state authority over media. Even if they had ended with a curbing of the activism, the very fact that the activism has taken place signals a debilitation of state legitimacy in its effort to control the media.

This may invite a view that press activism is purely about courageous intellectuals struggling against a despotic state or nasty apparatchiks. But that would be too incomplete a perspective. The events in this case study have also raised the need to be aware that a press struggle can be inextricably mixed with the party’s internal struggle over the distribution of power. In that is the possibility that among those who want to free literature may be those who think that freeing literature is their route to power. Some of Nguyễn Ngọc’s critics have implied this of him. We do not have enough evidence to say one way or the other nor to identify who else may fit the charge. This point, however, should be acknowledged if we want to understand the politics of the struggle paradigm better.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Truyền Thông Kháng Chiến Affair

In the last quarter of 1988, the CFRF (shortened abbreviation for HCM City Club of Former Resistance Fighters or Câu lạc bộ Những Người Kháng Chiến Cũ Thành Phố Hồ Chí Minh) published a magazine, TTKC (Truyền Thông Kháng Chiến or Tradition of Resistance). The CFRF was an organization for those who participated in the Communist Party-led resistance against the French and the Americans. Among those organizing the club or lending it moral support were cadres and military men who had long or eminent records of service to the party. Journalists and researchers have provided general accounts of the controversy caused by the club and its eventual demise (Far Eastern Economic Review 1/9/89:30; 5/10/89:248-256; and 29/3/90:18&20; Thayer 1992:45-46; Elliot 1993:78-81; Thành Tin 1993:171-72 and Wurfel 1993:36-37). This case study, besides providing a more detailed description, will also draw on material that has since been made available by those who were involved with the club. What got the club into trouble with the authorities was its forceful demand for greater and faster political liberalization. This chapter examines how club activists disseminated their message through TTKC. That and other forms of political activism set them on a collision course with reform-cautious forces in the party who sought a reduction in the pace and scope of liberal reforms. At the height of their struggle, the CFRF activists showed a bold disregard for official instructions by taking TTKC underground. Party authorities finally proscribed both the club and its paper. This whole affair, besides being a key development in đổi mới politics, also illustrates an instance of tension-ridden state-media dynamics.

The Supervisory Organ

The initiators of the CFRF first made their application to register an organization called the HCM City Association of Resistance Tradition (Hội Truyền Thông Kháng Chiến Thành Phố Hồ Chí Minh) in July 1983 (Nguyễn Văn Trân
commander who played a key role in planning the campaign in the south which gave the Communist Party its decisive military victory in 1975. In 1982, Trà published his account of the 1975 military offensive entitled *Ending a 30-year War* (**Kết Thúc Chiến Tranh 30 Năm**) which was controversial for its contradiction of the *Great Spring Victory* (**The Victory at the End of Winter**), another account of that military campaign bearing the authorship of Politburo member and Chief of General Staff, General Văn Tiến Dũng. The latter had claimed a large measure of personal credit for the 1975 victory. Shortly after being published in 1982, Trà's book was banned by the military's General Political Directorate and strongly criticized by party strongman Lê Đức Thọ (Bùi Tin 1995:80-81).

In line with the regulations governing mass organizations, the application to establish the HCM City Association of Resistance Tradition went first to the city’s chapter of the VFF, which sought Nguyễn Văn Linh’s - then HCM City’s Party Secretary - advice (Nguyễn Văn Trân 1995:373-74). Linh supported the application, recommending that it be approved “as soon as possible” (càng sớm càng tốt). But the city’s bureaucracy - Phan Văn Khải, then the Chairman of the city’s People’s Committee (Ủy Ban Nhân Dân), and the party’s Organization Commission and Mass Mobilization Commission (Ban Dân Văn) – still dared not approve the club’s registration (Nguyễn Văn Trân 1995:374-75; and Đỗ Trung Hiếu 1995:9-10). Party strongman, Lê Đức Thọ, in Hanoi had to give his approval in May 1986 before the HCM City municipal authority accepted the registration. Thọ, however, set down the condition that the group must not call itself an “association”. It must instead be a club to be called the CFRF (Nguyễn Văn Trân 1995:375-77). Club membership was restricted

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1 Although *End of a 30-year War* is the fifth of Trà’s five-volume autobiography *Phases of the History of Fortress B2* (i.e., *Bổng Chợt Dưới Lính Sài Gòn*; *B2 Thanh Đệ*) it was published ahead of the other four parts (Trần Văn Trân 1995:485, 401).

2 Among those connected to the club either as members or supporters were influential and well-known personalities in southern political-military circles, e.g., retired generals Trần Văn Trà, Đào Duy Khẩm, Tô Kỳ and Nam Long; and establishment intellectuals Trần Văn Giáu and Trần Bạch Đằng (Thayer 1992:45).

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1 Nguyễn Văn Trân’s account is based on his personal involvement in the CFRF. Although he said he was not a member, he took charge of producing the stillborn fourth issue of *TTKC* (Nguyễn Văn Trân 1995:385, 401).

2 Among those connected to the club either as members or supporters were influential and well-known personalities in southern political-military circles, e.g., retired generals Trần Văn Trà, Đào Duy Khẩm, Tô Kỳ and Nam Long; and establishment intellectuals Trần Văn Giáu and Trần Bạch Đằng (Thayer 1992:45).
to those who had joined the resistance against the French and the Americans and are living or working in HCM City.

Although the process of registration had taken three years, the fact that the application was not rejected outright was a sign of the more liberal times compared to previous decades. Pressure for social-economic-political change was gaining momentum in the 1980s (see Chapter Five). Furthermore, the group was too well-connected for its application to be turned down perfunctorily. Senior political leaders were prepared to endorse the club. As a result, honorary members listed at its inauguration included Nguyễn Văn Linh, the soon-to-be Party General Secretary; Võ Văn Kiệt, then Deputy Prime Minister; and Nguyễn Hữu Thọ, then Chairman of the National Assembly (Nguyễn Văn Trần 1995:378). General Trà was one of the club’s two advisers; the other was a senior establishment intellectual, Trần Bạch Đằng, rumoured to be Linh’s close associate and adviser.

The man taking the lead to form the club was Nguyễn Hồ, who became its Chairman (Chủ nhiệm). Although he was not in the party’s CC, he had long years of active military struggle against the French and the Americans, having joined the Communist Party as early as 1937. His peace-time political career was mainly the running of mass organizations, like trade unions, and taking charge of mass mobilization programs in HCM City. In 1987, he retired at the age of 71. That was when he became Chairman of the CFRF (Nguyễn Hồ 1994:8). His revolutionary pedigree gave Nguyễn Hồ political cachet and provided him with the confidence necessary for pushing a political agenda that cast the CFRF in a sensitive watch-dog role against official misdeemour. Nguyễn Hồ and a small group of like-minded supporters ran the CFRF. They organized the club’s crowd-drawing public meetings and produced TTKC. A complete list of the members of this group is unavailable. This case study will focus on the involvement of Nguyễn Hồ, Tạ Bá Tông, Deputy Chairman of the CFRF; and Đỗ Trung Hiếu, who wrote for TTKC.6

6 Nguyễn Hồ, Tạ Bá Tông and Đỗ Trung Hiếu’s accounts of their CFRF experience provide many of the details in this chapter.

From 16 May 1986 to 3 April 1988, the CFRF was mainly engaged in setting up its organization network. It had not yet entered an activist phase (Đỗ Trung Hiếu 1995:12-14, 69). At the top of the club was an Executive Board (Ban Chủ Nhiệm) headed by the club’s Chairman, Nguyễn Hồ. Only half the board members played an active role in the club’s affairs. Other board members were just lending their names to the cause. The actual running of the club was in the hands of a smaller body, the Standing Committee (Ban Thường Trực), led by Nguyễn Hồ. According to the terms of its registration, the CFRF was not supposed to organize at the district level within the city. But, in a de facto sense, the club had district-level chapters throughout HCM City. It did this by having members and supporters network with each other in their individual capacities in almost all of the city’s 18 districts. City authorities were prepared to close one eye about the matter because CFRF members were well-connected to the party-government hierarchies at many levels. The CFRF network also spread to other provinces and cities in the south, thus breaching the terms of its registration which limited it to HCM City. The club also attempted to develop contacts with or find supporters across different professional or social sectors such as the intelligentsia, trade unions, women’s organizations and government bodies. Sectors that the club was unable to penetrate in this first phase of operation were the peasants, youth and the ethnic Chinese. This emerging pattern of the CFRF’s activities suggests it had an ambitious organizational reach. Hiếu estimated that by the first quarter of 1988, the movement had 20,000 supporters although the CFRF had issued only 1,527 membership cards as of August 1988. Ninety per cent of card holders were VCP members; 30 per cent were state cadres still in active service. The CFRF also had economic resources. On 16 December 1986, the club was given permission to have its own business. By end of the March 1989, the CFRF had timber factories, forest clearing equipment, a joint venture to produce high quality packaging paper and investment in a road-construction project.7 This string of economic enterprises provided the club with the financial wherewithal to carry out some welfare and commemorative

7 The source of CFRF’s capital to engage in these ventures is not known. Being a bona fide mass organization, it received some state allotment of funds and other resources through the VFF (Đỗ Trung Hiếu 1995:10). The influence of its prominent members and supporters probably helped to facilitate the club’s business activities.
programmes for veterans. If political strength was measured by organizational reach and grassroots support, the CFRF had the potential to be a powerful political movement, at least in the south.

At the end of 1987, the CFRF asked the HCM City Party Executive Committee for permission to start a Communist Party chapter within the club. It noted the reason that many of its members belonged to the VCP and having a party chapter, similar to the arrangement in other mass organizations, would strengthen the organizational linkage between the party and the CFRF. The city's Party Executive Committee appointed a research team to look into the matter. The delay could have been a routine, but it is more likely that the party authority was being cautious. The research team, with representatives from both the city's Party Executive Committee and the CFRF Standing Committee, met only twice and never reached any conclusion (Tập Bình Tông 1992:110-11). This attempt at closer ties with the party was probably aimed at upgrading the club’s status to match that of the bigger and better-established mass organizations within the VFF. By strengthening its credentials as an organ "of" the party, club activists could feel more confident in whatever plans they were making for the CFRF. This enhancement of insider's status is in accord with the dynamics of the struggle paradigm.

Nguyễn Họ, whose name had been closely associated with the rise and fall of the CFRF, has not yet published any account of how he came into this venture. We must turn to Đỗ Trung Hiếu (1995:68-69, 81) for a perspective on the reforming zeal that characterized the CFRF activists. Influencing Hiệu and others were the winds of ideological change blowing through the Soviet Union (beginning in the Andropov era and into the Gorbachev years), the speech made by Vietnam’s own Trường Chinh at the

Eighth Plenum (Fifth Congress) in 1985 calling for economic reforms, the Sixth Congress resolution to promote đổi mới, and the writings of Soviet and Chinese theoreticians at that time. These currents gave Hiệu a new perspective on socialism’s recent history. He remained proud to be a Communist and believed Marxism-Leninism to be the fairest and most humane of all political ideologies. But he was no longer satisfied just to hear one perspective. For him, one duty of a good Communist was to breathe life back into Marxism-Leninism. Hiệu was also disillusioned by the post-1975 VCP treatment of him and his peers in the intelligentsia. To him, the party had never appreciated their true worth nor rewarded them appropriately. Their sound technocratic advice was frequently ignored and they were often marginalized. Thus, throughout 1987, he concentrated on reading the classics of Marxism-Leninism, and setting down his thoughts in a draft named “Comprehensive and absolute thought reform” (Tiết dạy đổi mới toàn diện và trí thức). This plan envisaged wide-ranging measures to straighten out corruption, bureaucracy and rigid ideological orthodoxy within the party-governments hierarchies. At no time, however, did it question VCP’s legitimacy. Hiệu also joined the CFRF that year. With a reforming vision of setting the party on the proper ideological path, he threw in his lot with those in the CFRF who wanted to take the club on a more politically active course in 1988. Hiệu was fundamentally an insider struggling to change things from within the system.

Organizing for Activism

The CFRF’s first two years were taken up with organization development (Đỗ Trung Hiếu 1995:13-14). During this period, Đỗ Trung Hiếu and other club activists were unhappy with just organizing CFRF activities of the type conventionally expected of a mass organization in Vietnam. These included raising funds for welfare programmes, commemorating important events, collecting memorabilia from veterans and producing formulaic grandiose versions of war history. They referred to these duties pejoratively as the “Fatherland Front way” (kiều Mặt Trận). For them, the

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8 To Bình Tông was eventually detained for his political activism and expelled from the VCP. The information on the CFRF’s bid to seek a symbiotic relationship with the party was in his speech made on the occasion of his expulsion. A copy has been published outside Vietnam in Đỗ Trung Hiếu. 1995. Những Ngưỡng Kháng Chiến Giữ - Lý Tưởng và Thực Tế Paris: TIN.

9 Đỗ Trung Hiếu joined the Communist Party in 1966 when he was a teacher in the pre-1975 ROV. He was arrested twice by the ROV regime for his political activism during the period 1956 to 1975. He worked as a party bureaucrat after 1975. Before he worked for the CFRF, he was Head of Administration in the Mass Mobilization Commission of the HCM City Party Executive Committee (Đỗ Trung Hiếu 1995:4).

10 “Fatherland Front” refers to the VFF. For an explanation of VFF, see footnote 10 on page 38 in Chapter One.
“Fatherland Front way” was just out of step with the intellectual ferment taking place in a country undergoing an unprecedented đổi mới policy.

That impetus for change among some club members led the CFRF Standing Committee to form a PCC (Political Consultative Committee) or Ban Tư Văn Chính Trị on 3 April 1988. The use of the term “political” in its name—something rarely done in Vietnam—portended the new committee’s plan to take the CFRF into sensitive arenas. CFRF Chairman Nguyễn Hợp headed the PCC (Nguyễn Văn Trần 1995:382). In the words of Đỗ Trung Hiếu (1995:14), the PCC’s objective was to lead the CFRF into a new kind of activism. This new agenda for the club would harness the country’s traditional will to resist foreign powers in a struggle against “corrupt, bureaucratic and conservative elements” (bộn tham nhũng, quan liêu bảo thủ) within the state. That sounded harmless enough. The club activists pushing this more aggressive programme also stressed that what they intended to do was to “demand for reforms according to the Sixth Party resolution” (đổi đổi mới theo nghị quyết Đại hội VI). In reality, the CFRF embarked on a string of activities that tested official tolerance to the limits. Nevertheless, its activist leaders were operating according to a familiar template for political change; that of a struggle by system insiders making use of the double-edged facility of the struggle paradigm.

An event on 27 May 1988 suggests that PCC members expected some people within the CFRF’s Executive Board not to be too enthusiastic about their agenda for change (Đỗ Trung Hiếu 1995:14). This was a PCC meeting at Nguyễn Hợp’s house which decided three things. The first was to continue pressing for the club to become an association commensurate with the political role it wanted to play. The second was to review the membership of the club’s Executive Board. The PCC decided that those board members who doubted the more politically-assertive agenda would be relegated to a nominal status. Instead, the board would seek to involve supporters from outside who were, in their words, “upright and capable” (cô dúc có tài). Viewed another way,

Nguyễn Hợp and his PCC colleagues were stepping up their control of the CFRF in order to push their new agenda.

The third PCC decision was to revamp the editorial policy of the CFRF’s publication. The first issue had just appeared after getting a publishing permit on 21 May 1988. The publication was not really a regular periodical, more like a “special issue” (độc san) of the club’s newsletter (Nguyên Hà 1989:7). Legally-recognized bodies in Vietnam may print a newsletter for circulation among members, and the convention was to allow the newsletter to be produced occasionally on a larger scale as a “special issue” to commemorate important events or to discuss a particular theme. This flexibility was exploited by many organizations in the early đổi mới years to produce tabloid-like publications that would sell and make money. The first special issue produced by the CFRF was politically cautious. It did not attract great attention from readers nor cause any controversy (Nguyên Hà 1989:7; and Nguyễn Văn Trần 1995:386). Of the 6,000 issues printed, only one quarter was circulated, mainly through the usual network of party-government organizations with official funds to buy subscriptions. Determined to publish a paper with greater impact, the PCC decided to replace the editor, Huỳnh Văn Tiệp, with two people of its own choice, Kỳ Nhịm and Nguyễn Quốc Phương. Nguyễn Hợp also became Chairman (Chủ nhiệm) of TTKC, which gave him overall control over editorial matters (Đỗ Trung Hiếu 1995:14).

Nguyễn Hợp and his supporters were now running three key centres of the club—the Standing Committee, the PCC and the paper TTKC. They were thus well-placed to set the agenda for the CFRF. Basically, the CFRF was a rather loosely-organized body. A handful of activists at the core and their supporters at lower levels brainstormed, planned and networked. Political luminaries who might or might not be of the club then lent their names to particular initiatives as they saw fit. To a certain extent, it was political theatre for some of them, quickly abandoned when the climate of tolerance became intimidating. But in the second half of 1988, the CFRF did capture the resive

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11 Those who were pushing for association status never made clear the specific differences between the prerogatives of a “club” and an “association”. The broad reasons cited suggest that an “association” status would give better justification for the political lobbying which the CFRF wanted to do, e.g., conduct dialogue with the authorities on national issues, and disseminate news on current affairs regularly and publicly.

12 The first issue was just called Truyền Thống (Tradition). It was changed to TTKC once the PCC decided to make it more politically aggressive.
mood of a sizeable number of its constituents and the larger public. Otherwise it would not have had the profile that it did.

The PCC set a time-table of immediate activities, including lobbying for a more democratic procedure in the National Assembly to elect the Prime Minister, calling for a revision of the 1980 Constitution and organizing conferences on topical issues (Đỗ Trung Hiếu 1995:14). For a mass organization to be actively involved in the first two of these three items was unprecedented. Of itself, the third activity of organizing conferences was not that contentious, but became so when meetings drew huge crowds to listen to fierce and incisive criticisms against the VCP's record of govt-eman. All these activities made up the controversial image of CFRF. The PCC was taking the club into uncharted political territory.

At its first political forum on 3 June 1988, the CFRF initiated its challenge to the National Assembly's usual practice of rubber-stamping a Prime Minister pre-decided by the party leadership. More than 200 people attended that forum decided to send the outcome of their deliberations as a proposal to the party's CC and the National Assembly (Đỗ Trung Hiếu 1995:14). The proposal had 102 signatories (Đỗ Trung Hiếu 1995:18). Among them were names such as the senior and eminent General Trần Văn Trà, and Lý Chánh Trang, who was leader of the HCM City delegation of National Assembly members. The PCC also made sure that the document was disseminated throughout the country down to the strict level. It signalled the CFRF activists' intention to raise the profile of the club as high as possible.

The PCC began cautiously by organizing political discussions for CFRF members; then it progressed to holding public seminars based on set themes which were attended by much larger crowds. These meetings usually resulted in forceful criticisms against official policies, voiced by individuals with impeccable revolutionary credentials which had the effect of undermining the legitimacy of the party even more. As with the first forum, the conclusions of such meetings would be recorded and then forwarded to key party-government organs, as well as disseminated through TTKC. One of these club forums was an unrestricted discussion of why the party's doi moi policy was being hobbled and the rise of civil society in Eastern Europe (Nguyễn Văn Trần 1995:398-99). This and other meetings produced some pointed indictments against the Politburo and Secretariat for their incompetence and violation of the party's doi moi policy (Nguyễn Văn Trần 1995:397). The outspokenness at the club's meetings included calling for the dismissal of cabinet ministers and other senior government officials (December 1988 issue of TTKC in JPRS-SEA-90-007 27/290/2). Although by 1988, a variety of voices throughout the country had emerged to engage the state in a critical discourse on matters such as corruption, freedom of expression and economic policies, the CFRF had been the most daring in terms of the issues it was prepared to raise and how trenchant it was prepared to be. In a sense, the club had approximated the role of an "opposition" party.

State-Media Contention

Once TTKC came under different editorial management appointed by the PCC, its troubled relationship with the authorities began. The HCM City Party Executive Committee reacted to the second issue by telling Nguyễn Hồ that it had instructions from the Party Central not to allow further issues. Published on 23 September 1988, this second issue reported the June forum and its petition to the CC on the election of a demonstra...
new Prime Minister (Phù: Thanh 1989:13-15; and Far Eastern Economic Review 5/10/89:24&26). Publicizing this significant event highlighted contradictions within the state as well as violated the tenet for the media not to divulge internal struggle. TT KC’s second issue also carried the details of a CFRF seminar on 18 September 1988 where participants had voiced a litany of discontent against the party leadership, e.g., falling literacy standards, restrictions on the media, meaningless legal statutes of the country which the state itself could flout at will, nepotism, bureaucracy and corruption (Phù: Thanh 1989).

The cited official reason for prohibiting TT KC was that Vietnam already had a glut of newspapers and the media situation was getting complicated (Câm Văn’s report in the December 1988 issue of TT KC carried in JPRS-SEA-90-007 27/2/90:11-12). This was not entirely a fabrication. At that time, the authorities were moving to restore some order to what they perceived to be a chaotic publishing scene. The number of publications had ballooned under the aegis of the đổi mới policy. Many of these, abetted by corrupt local officials, were quick money-making ventures which were too sensational for official liking. The new hardening mood derived from the Fifth Party Plenum (Sixth Congress) in June 1988 where conservative voices in the party had successfully launched a trend to review the scope and pace of liberalization (see Chapter Six). The prohibition of TT KC should be seen in the context of such a shifting ideological climate. September 1988 was also the month during which the WAS initiated action to curb Chief Editor Nguyễn Ngọc of IVN magazine (see Chapter Six).

But the more compelling reason for stopping TT KC probably went beyond its content. The CFRF, which was increasingly taking the form of an opposition movement with growing grassroots support, was a delicate problem in an avowedly one-party system. A background of politics growing more boisterous in Vietnam magnified the club’s threat potential. In August 1988, farmers and fishermen from the surrounding provinces in the Mekong Delta gathered in HCM city to demonstrate against bullying by local cadres (see Chapter Six). Under these circumstances, the authorities would want to curb the CFRF’s mobilizational momentum by depriving it of the oxygen of publicity. The paucity of coverage for CFRF activities, other than in TT KC, lends credence to the belief that media custodians had discouraged the Vietnamese press from writing about the club.

The HCM City Party Executive Committee also asked the CFRF to postpone a seminar schedule for 13 November 1988. The seminar aimed to discuss the obstructions to the party’s two-year-old đổi mới policy. Nguyễn Hợp said anonymous phone calls had warned that the meeting “should not make noise” (không được làm ồn) (Phù: Thanh 1989:14). Despite that, the seminar went ahead with an attendance of some 700 people. At the meeting, Nguyễn Hợp told the audience that the city party authority had ordered the CFRF to stop publishing TT KC. Many urged the club to resist and continue with the publication (Câm Văn’s report in the December 1988 issue of TT KC carried in JPRS-SEA-90-007 27/2/90:11-12). Taking that as a popular mandate, Nguyễn Hợp decided to proceed with a December issue of TT KC.

Nguyễn Hợp must have known he was now set on a collision course with the party authorities. But at that critical juncture, he was not alone in his defiance of the hardening party line. At about this time, the Lâm Đông team and their Hue colleagues were locked in an intense debate on how best to continue with their struggle for more political space when the party seemed to be retreating from its đổi mới policy (see Chapter Six). Ticie Dao Bảo Cự was canvassing for a more combative line of action to force the pace of liberal reforms. Eventually, Bảo Cự and Bùi Minh Quôc chose to press on with their rally to Hanoi rather than obey the command of their provincial cấp ủy to return to Dalat immediately. IVN’s Chief Editor, Nguyễn Ngọc, exemplified the same doggedness to resist rather than yield when he persevered in disputing his supervisory organ’s right to interfere with the magazine’s editorial policy. One suspects all of them were not yet convinced that the tide had turned distinctly against liberal reforms. What was being observed among these restive members of Vietnam’s intelligentsia was a political metabolism born of circumstances then, where the odds were starting to seem threatening but to back down from their struggle was also not a satisfactory option. It spawned a kind of "make-or-break" or "do-and-be-damned" attitude. In the case of the CFRF activists, that attitude was enhanced by the urgency to have a magazine to
publicize their cause because the rest of the media was not giving the club adequate coverage.

Work on the December issue started after another CFRF public forum on 19 December 1988 (see the report on Nguyễn Hợp's speech at the meeting in the December 1988 issue of TTKC carried in JPRS-SEA-90-007 27/2/90:1-3). In a letter to the club on 31 December 1988, however, the city's OCI (i.e., the Ministry of Culture and Information at the regional level) warned against any further publication of TTKC. The printing plates for the issue were also confiscated. This did not stop Nguyễn Hợp from trying to get the material printed in neighboring Tiền Giang province. Technically, no rule was violated because the Tiền Giang province authority had not banned the publication. Nevertheless, that provincial party authority also put a stop to it at the typesetting stage. Nguyễn Hợp then took the magazine to another province, Hậu Giang. There, local supporters of TTKC printed 20,000 copies of the magazine by 16 January 1989. When the HCM City's OCI found out, it sent the CFRF a second letter on 21 January 1989 forbidding the circulation of the new issue of TTKC. The CFRF replied that all the magazines had been sold and there was no means to recall them (Nguyễn Văn Trần 1995:388-89). Nguyễn Hợp's works illustrated how the state monopoly of printing facilities was a critical element in the control of media. The inconvenience of not having alternatives to state-owned printing facilities in HCM City in 1988 stood out in contrast to what the NV and GP could do in Hanoi in 1956 when private publishing was not yet closed down by the state (see Chapter Three).

The matter did not end there. The following month, on 20 February 1989, Nguyễn Hợp, in his capacity as CFRF Chairman, went on the offensive. He wrote to remind central and city-level officials in charge of ideology and media that denying TTKC a permit to publish was in violation of the Sixth Party Congress resolution and Article 67 of the country's constitution. Nguyễn Hợp's letter asked the Head of the party's Ideology Commission and the Minister of Information in Hanoi to state, for the public record, why TTKC could not be given a publishing permit. He also wanted these media control organs to organize a meeting with the nation's press to discuss the reasons for banning a series of newspapers recently. The letter ended with an ultimatum that if party-government officials did not reply in three weeks, the club would just proceed to publish the fourth issue of TTKC in May 1989 (Nguyễn Văn Trần 1995:388-96).

Nguyễn Hợp was not only challenging the legitimacy of the ban on TTKC, but also serving notice that his disregard for the ban would not stop at producing just one issue of the magazine. For those in the party leadership already uncomfortable with the attrition of the VCP's legitimacy wrought by the đổi mới policy, the CFRF activists must have seemed like troublemakers if not a threat to political order. But, at the same time, the CFRF challenge was not entirely without an acceptable basis. Nguyễn Hợp's insistence that the party should adhere to the spirit of its own congress resolution and the letter of the nation's constitution was to hold the party authorities to their own words. Even as he pushed activism to new limits, he was using the double-edged facility of the struggle paradigm. Therefore, people in authority had to deal with the challenge cautiously.

The CFRF defiance also came at a sensitive time of exacerbating intra-elite tension within the party. In the first half of 1989, the party debate over the future of the reform programme was heading towards a denouement at the Seventh Party Plenum (Sixth Congress) in August 1989. At that plenum, Politburo member Trần Xuân Bách saw his ambitious political liberalization design blocked by colleagues such as Đào Duy Hưng (see Chapter Six). Meanwhile, sentiments for democratic reforms were also percolating within the rank-and-file of the party and among the public, generating political strain and uncertainty. The CFRF activities both contributed to and were magnified by the atmospheres of contention.

For those party leaders concerned with such growing signs of challenge to the orthodoxy of party control, the anxiety was heightened by the amount of political resources which Nguyễn Hợp and his supporters could tap to produce the prohibited TTKC. In a system where printing facilities were still a state-controlled monopoly,
Nguyễn Hữu demonstrated he had the means to subvert it. With the party authority sensitized to the CFRF challenge, Nguyễn Hữu found it harder to produce another issue of TTKC. Politburo member and Head of the Party Organization Department, Nguyễn Đức Tâm, threatened to have anybody attempting to revive the magazine arrested (Lưu Văn Khánh 1990:64). Even if radical members of the club were wont to test Tâm's threat, the situation as it existed then made it extremely difficult to publish an underground magazine. All printing houses were under strict orders not to print TTKC. So, by May 1989, the fourth issue of TTKC was not published as Nguyễn Hữu had intended.

Instead, the CFRF resorted to cyclostyling and disseminating, as widely as possible, copies of open letters written by club members to the party leadership. These were usually forthright criticisms of the system and signalled profound differences with a growing official tendency to rein in liberal reforms. To the CFRF activists, scaling down the reforms was reneging on the đổi mới policy. An example of such open letters was one signed by 10 long-standing cadres and addressed to the CC on 22 August 1989, asking that the party adopt a comprehensive approach to reforms and not just confine liberalization to economic matters. That letter was particularly hard-hitting. It blamed the Party Central in Hanoi for economic mismanagement and exploitation in HCM City. It accused the party of living up to neither its own resolutions nor the country's constitution, and not engaging party members or the public in dialogue, choosing instead to impose policies by commandism and brute force. This letter also articulated the grievances of army veterans that they had not been allowed to have an association to represent their welfare. The club also issued reports of events which were not adequately covered by the country's media, such as the one it produced on the

October 1989 Fourth VWA Congress (TTĐHNVVN cited in Chapter Six). Mismatch though the club's information sheets might be, they had the potential to rally public feelings against the prevailing political order because they provided alternative sources of sensitive information which would otherwise be filtered out by the media regulatory system.

As part of their resolve in the face of an increasingly censorious party machine, the CFRF activists also attempted to expand the club's organizational network. Beginning in May 1989, they planned a subsidiary organization for intellectuals called Association of Former Resistance Intellectuals (Hội ISTRIBUTI Khánh Chiến Cự). Nguyễn Hữu assigned Đỗ Trung Hiếu to take charge of the preparatory work. The club's Standing Committee also agreed to set up two liaison groups to help with the task: the Patriotic Journalists Liaison Group (BAN LIÊN LẠC NHÀ BÁO YẾU NƯỚC) and the Liaison Group for Youth and Students of the Resistance (BAN LIÊN LẠC ĂN THÀNH NIÊN HỌC SINH SINH VIÊN KHÁNG CHIẾN, henceforth shortened to Youth Liaison Group). The Buddhist church loaned premises and moral support to help establish the Youth Liaison Group (Đỗ Trung Hiếu 1995:25). The thought of restive veterans and Buddhist clerics combining to agitate for political reforms would have raised the security concerns of the state even more.

Then came the Tiananmen upheaval in China on 4 June 1989. Together with the escalating clamour for democracy in Eastern Europe, it precipitated an unequivocal position at the 15-24 August 1989 VCP Seventh Plenum (Sixth Congress). The party authority sought to rein in reforms that were picking up momentum (see Chapter Six for details). Further political upheavals in Eastern Europe through the rest of the year sensitized some of Vietnam's political leaders to the risk of public and internal party activism slipping out of the grip of party control. For Đỗ Trung Hiếu, what Party General Secretary Nguyễn Văn Linh said at the Seventh Party Plenum (Sixth Congress) represented an about-turn from Linh's previous support for reform-intensive policies (Đỗ Trung Hiếu 1995:28). Being one of the early patrons of the CFRF, Linh's

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13 Chapter Five alludes to Nguyễn Đức Tâm’s role in protecting Hả Trọng Hòa against the media. Chapter Six describes Tâm’s effort to thwart those writers who were trying to lessen party control of the VWA at the latter’s Fourth Congress. These and Tâm’s involvement in the TTKC affair help to explain the popular belief that he was one of those leaders who wanted to limit liberal reforms.

14 Unlike today, photocopying machines were a rarity in Vietnam in 1989. Therefore cyclostyling was the most efficient way of duplicating print material in large quantities. To cyclostyle is to print with a machine that duplicates text cut into a stencil (see The Angus & Robertson Dictionary and Thesaurus).

15 Nguyễn Hữu and Trần Văn Trạch were among the 10 who signed the letter.

16 Summary of the content of this letter is based on a copy issued by the CFRF. All copies of material disseminated by the club, except for the three issues of TTKC, come from the collection of Professor David Marr at The Australian National University.

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18 In 1963-1966, the Buddhist clergy played a major dissident role against the ROV regime in the south. The VCP had an uneasy relationship with the Buddhist church in the south, after 1975, and that remains so to this day.

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ideological shift had dire implications for the club's activists. Within HCM City itself, the city's party authority was also starting to move resolutely to bride who they perceived to be wayward media practitioners. It acted first on Tô Hòa, the editor of its own newspaper SGGP, who had a reputation of daring to publish sensitive news which other editors would not. In an unprecedented move for Vietnam's media, Hòa announced his retirement on the front page of the 13 August 1989 edition of his paper, making clear that he was under pressure to go (JPRS-SEA-89-037. 29/11/89:29). Within this climate, it was unlikely that the HCM City Party Executive Committee would leave Nguyễn Hợp and his CFRF activists alone (Đỗ Trung Hiếu 1995:28). That opportunities for conflict between the two sides thus mounted.

On 23 September 1989, CFRF activists organized another public forum using the reason that they were commemorating the anniversary of a revolutionary incident. That made it hard for the authorities to disallow the meeting. CFRF Deputy Chairman Tạ Bá Tòng said he had the proper authorization from the HCM City Party Executive Committee to do so, but a day before the conference, the latter called him on the phone to say the meeting should have no more than 200 participants. Tòng rejected the instruction, saying invitations were already sent out and could not be recalled. Finally, some 6,000 people came to the conference (Tạ Bá Tòng 1992:110).

Another example of growing defiance by CFRF activists was their December 1989 newsletter (not TTNC), which published the text of a speech by Politburo member Trần Xuân Bách who was already facing the pressure of ideologues in the party leadership. Bạch's speech was delivered on 13 December 1989 at the Vietnam Union of Science and Technological Associations, a gathering of professionals and academics working in the sciences. Despite the growing hostility of his Politburo colleagues to his advocacy of the liberal line, Bách argued that the lessons Eastern Europe held for Vietnam were not to close its doors to challenging information but, instead, to promote a free flow of news and reform according to the lessons learnt. He added that the ideas of Marx, written at a time very different from the present, should also change with circumstances. That underlined the need to avoid being locked into dogmas. It was imperative to have political and economic reforms moving together like walking forward with two legs. In this context, Bách said pointedly that China's economic-centred reforms were wrong and Gorbachev's approach in the Soviet Union was the correct way.24 At one of its weekly briefings for the media, the party's Ideology Commission had already criticized Bách for his ideological mistakes (Bùi Tin 1995:159). It probably explains why not. of the major newspapers at the central level or of Hanoi and HCM City carried this speech.25 At the beginning of its newsletter disseminating Bách's provocative views, the CFRF declared that it was doing so because of the restriction on information in the present situation. The CFRF activists were flouting a basic rule of the media regulatory system by ignoring the Ideology Commission's warning as well as nailing their colours to the mast on this sensitive issue of contestation at the top.

As the CFRF activists became more difficult to control, it beg the question of why did the authorities not move resolutely to close the club. One reason could be a lack of consensus at the top on how to deal with this movement. An agreement on the need to deter the growing dissent may be easy to reach but finding the punishment to fit the crime may still prove a dilemma. To close a movement which began with the patronage of leaders who had since become Politburo members - Nguyễn Văn Linh and Vũ Văn Kiệt - would be awkward. Many of the veterans who had been attending club events and giving moral support were old friends of these senior leaders or were themselves influential, at least within the southern political elite. Trần Văn Trà was a classic example. Furthermore, Trà's daughter was married to the son of Politburo member, Vũ Chí Cường (Bùi Tin 1995:155). Moving against the CFRF required an

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22 In early Sep'CELER. 1945, British forces arrived in Saigon to receive the surrender of the Japanese forces in the south half of Vietnam. The French managed to persuade the British commander, General Gracey, to disarm their troops in the city. On 23 September 1945, hostility broke out between the Viet Minh and the remaining French forces.

23 The figure of 6,000 is Tạ Bá Tòng's estimate. He did not explain how he arrived at that figure. The meeting was held at the Workers Cultural House (Nhà Vær. Hà Lào Dốc). The attendance estimate may seem overly large to some people. I asked a few sources who had observed CFRF meetings although they were not participants (Source 4 Interview 9; and Source 6 Interview 2). They said attendances were larger than the average turnout for events organized by a mass organization, but could not put figures to the crowd sizes. As these meetings sometimes took the whole day, many came for a duration and left. This could help explain Hòa's large estimate.

24 Summary of the content of Trần Xuân Bách's speech is based on a copy of the CFRF newsletter.

25 At this stage, there was as yet no blanket ban on press coverage of Trần Xuân Bách. Party daily ND still carried reports of his protocol activities and some of his interviews with the foreign media which did not challenge the rising orthodoxy.
effective way of co-opting its prominent supporters, like Trà, first (which was what eventually happened). It is also possible to see a deeper and broader rationale for the authorities to deal with the CFRF in a more judicious way. More than just considerations for the personal status and connections of club supporters, there may be a preferred way of doing things. Its explanation can be found within the logic of the struggle paradigm. If struggle is an adept way of making use of the rules to overcome systemic constraints, it is better to deal with a struggle by using the same rules of the game. Hence the party authorities’ preferred way of dealing with the CFRF challenge was to launch internal struggle to rid it of its troublesome ringleaders, rather than the heavy-handed method of banning the entire club. An extreme act of prohibition would risk provoking acrimony against party authorities as well as arousing sympathy for the CFRF activists. To be sure, internal struggle is a more protracted way of getting rid of a problem, but it seemed to enjoy a certain level of currency. In Chapter Six, we saw this in the involved process of dismissing Nguyễn Ngọc.

The HCM City Party Executive Committee began to orchestrate Nguyễn Hợp’s removal from the leadership of the club (Đỗ Trung Hiếu 1995:29). The candidate it preferred to head the CFRF was Phan Văn Đăng (Đỗ Trung Hiếu 1995:32), but the party authority was also realistic enough to know that this would be too strongly resisted by a section of the CFRF membership. Phạm Khải, a close associate of General Trần Văn Trà, became the compromise candidate to replace Nguyễn Hợp. According to Tạ Bá Tỏng (Far Eastern Economic Review 29/3:90:18&120) Phạm Khải was basically a "yes man" who, like many Vietnamese, was unhappy with the VCP leadership and had therefore lent his support to the CFRF; but Phạm Khải would always toe the official party line in the final analysis. The strategem to curb Nguyễn Hợp and his activists also involved marginalizing the CFRF by setting up a Veterans Association (Hội Cựu Chiến Binh) as an alternative to the club. This also created the opportunity to co-opt General Trà by asking him to run the new association's B2 branch.24 If Trà could be wooed away, Nguyễn Hợp and his supporters would be significantly weakened. The ruse would also split the ranks of this activist group that had been running the key organs within the CFRF. Once again, the Hue writer Hoàng Phú Ngọc Trung’s warning (see Chapter Six) that top party authorities can outmanoeuvre any struggle by "playing the game using organizational rules" had proven prescient.

Phạm Khải discussed with Đỗ Trung Hiếu the machinations of the city's Party Executive Committee and proposed calling a full meeting of all CFRF members as a countervailing show of strength (Đỗ Trung Hiếu 1995:29&70). Hiếu, however, did not believe this would get the CFRF anywhere and suggested a compromise with the party. This would require the party authority to agree to upgrade the club to an association. Elections for new office-bearers would then follow. If the compromise candidate Phạm Khải were to be elected as the leader, he would then invite Nguyễn Hợp to be an adviser of the new association. Even though Hiếu and his activist colleagues were becoming increasingly confrontative against party authority, he appreciated the need and advantages of staying within the system as insiders. It was another instance of the struggle paradigm in operation, even at this eleventh hour when things were building up for a showdown over the leadership of the club.

Đỗ Trung Hiếu and Phạm Khải discussed their plans with the two advisers of the CFRF, Trần Văn Trà and Trần Bạch Đăng, on 7 January 1990. All four agreed that Hiếu's compromise solution was worth pursuing. Phạm Khải was assigned the job of liaising with the HCM City Party Executive Committee on the matter. It was also agreed that Trà should proceed with the party assignment of setting up the Veterans Association (Đỗ Trung Hiếu 1995:29&70).27 But two events could have caused the prospects of a compromise to be eventually scuttled.

24 In its war against the Americans, the VCP divided the southern half of Vietnam into several zones of operation. B2 was the zone which began from the pre-1975 province of Quảng Định and the part of Đac Lắc province that is known as Lâm Đồng province today, southwards through the rest of Vietnam. B2 contained half the territory of the southern theatre of war and two-thirds of the southern population (Trần Văn Trà 1992:9-11). Those geographical features attest to its strategic significance even today.
27 The question remains as to why Nguyễn Hợp was left out of this discussion on such an important issue which might lead to his replacement as leader of the CFRF. What we know from hindsight is that things moved very fast after 7 January 1990, so much so that by 4 March 1990, Nguyễn Hợp was usurped from his Chairmanship of the CFRF. Nguyễn Hợp himself blamed both Trần Văn Trà and Trần Bạch Đăng for plotting with Nguyễn Văn Lãnh and Võ Trần Chi, the Secretary of the HCM City Party Executive
The first event was the inauguration of the Youth Liaison Group that very same day. As Đỗ Trung Hiếu (1995:23) described it, the venue was overflowing with Buddhist clerics and devotees, a scene which must have made the city's party authority wary, given the state's concern with Buddhist activism. Despite an official warning, the Youth Liaison Group went ahead to print the inauguration speeches in its first newsletter. The city's Party Executive Committee reacted strongly by requiring the Chairman of the VFF (HCM City branch) to reprimand the 24 members of the Youth Liaison Group. The combination of a disaffected veteran's movement, student activism and illegal publication at this moment was particularly worrisome for authorities in HCM City. Since the latter part of 1988, university students in the city had been agitating against the excessive time given to ideological instruction in their curriculum (TT 24/12/88:6; and 29/12/88:6). In June 1989, an underground student magazine Khiết Vọng (Yearnings) had emerged, inspired by the student protest in China's Tiananmen Square (Chi Chi 1990; Nguyễn Hà 1990; Thạch Thảo 1990 and Thanh Tấn 1990).

As on the 7 January 1990, the CFRF held a public forum with the theme "The Re-Organization in Eastern Europe and Soviet Union and the situation of đối mới in Vietnam". Coming at a time when almost all Soviet bloc socialist regimes had been brought down by popular protest, the organizers would have known that such a forum tested the regime's tolerance. But Nguyễn Họ was careful to deploy tactics of the struggle paradigm. He and the whole CFRF Standing Committee asked to meet the city's Party Executive Committee before they proceeded to organize their 7 January 1990 forum on Eastern Europe (Tạ Bá Tổng 1992:110). Nguyễn Họ then invited the city's Party Secretary Vũ Trần Chí to chair the conference. It was a tactic to demonstrate that the CFRF had nothing to hide from party authority and would even welcome senior party leaders' participation in its activities. If Chí had accepted, he would have been forced into a debate with the outspoken types who normally attended CFRF forums. He declined the offer, but two officials in charge of ideology within the city's party bureaucracy were sent to observe the proceedings.

Just as happened at the CFRF forum on 23 September 1989, on the eve of the 7 January 1990 forum, CFRF Deputy Chairman Tạ Bá Tổng received a telephone call from the city's Party Executive Committee, this time demanding that no visitors from the surrounding provinces should be allowed to take part in the forum. Once again, Tạ Bá Tổng rejected the instructions on the grounds that the visitors were already in town; turning them away would harm the image of both the city's party authority and the CFRF.

Nguyễn Họ presided over the meeting. Participants raised a storm of criticisms against the VCP's failure in almost every aspect of governance, exorcising it for being undemocratic, inefficient, divisive rather than inclusive of the diversity that made up society, and ridden with corrupt groupings clinging tightly to vested interests. Some of the statements warned the party that either it carry out democratization or else citizens would take matters into their own hands. Such a "grant us our request or else..." attitude was far the most turbulent of all attempts to debate with party authorities. Defiant voices at the meeting exhorted organizers not only to continue with the club, but also to demand for the long-denied formal status of an "association". At the same time, a call was made to resume publication of the magazine TTKC. Thus an effort to bring out the fourth issue began in earnest, adding one more reason to the party authority's determination to curb the movement.

Dissidence was in the air. For decades, the party had not been required to face such a public temper. Despite the authoritarian Seventieth Party Plenum (Sixth Congress) Resolution, some elements of society were determined to continue with their struggle for a more open political order.

The Politburo in Hanoi reacted to this meeting with a list of stern demands. All future CFRF forums were banned and the club's subsidiary bodies like the Youth Liaison Group had to be dissolved. Where the CFRF was concerned, its Executive Board was obliged to launch internal struggle to shed the movement of its activists. The
immediate targets were Nguyễn Hôm and Tạ Bá Thông. The TTKC had to stop until the publication was prepared to resume the acceptable editorial line of its first issue (Đỗ Trung Hiếu 1995:27).

Given this command from the top, and all that had happened before and during the two CFRF-sponsored events on 7 January 1990, the city’s Party Executive Committee was unlikely to be interested in the compromise option conveyed by Phạm Khài (Đỗ Trung Hiếu 1995:29). The party authorities had no confidence that Phạm Khài would win a leadership election at a congress with a large number of CFRF members present. Should Nguyễn Hôm be elected instead, that kind of renewed mandate of an upgraded mass organization would make it even harder: to bring him to heel. The outcome of the Fourth VWA Congress in October 1989, where the Party Organization Department’s attempt to manipulate the office-bearers election had failed (see Chapter Six), probably contributed to the reluctance of the city’s Party Executive Committee. This was a time when party custodians knew they could no longer take acquiescence for granted. Thus the city’s party authority proceeded with its plan to have the CFRF Executive Board meet and find a way to evict Nguyễn Hôm. It felt more confident that it could oblige a majority of the CFRF Executive Board to vote according to the party’s call than if it were to be a large-scale meeting involving hundreds of CFRF members. The task of organizing the coup in the CFRF was handed to Nguyễn Văn Hạnh who wore three hats which made this an appropriate job for him: HCM City Party Executive Committee member, Chairman of the VFF (HCM City branch), and Head of the Party Central’s Mass Mobilization Commission (Trưởng Ban Dân Văn Trung Ứng). These were official organs whose prerogatives would include keeping a mass organization in line.

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Underground Publication

Against this background of adversaries planning to topple him, Nguyễn Hôm started preparing for the fourth issue of TTKC. Owing to the official ban on the magazine, editorial work had to be done surreptitiously rather than on the club’s premises. The planned fourth issue was a joint effort with another publication, Đôi Thoại (Dialogue), a literary magazine of nearby Củ Chi Long province, that had been recently banned (Nguyễn Văn Trần 1995:401-402). This linking up of activists in the region would have riled regulatory officials even more. Once the material for the 16-page issue was prepared, Nguyễn Hôm, Tạ Bá Thông and Nguyễn Văn Trần (who took charge of organizing this issue) set out for Cần Thơ city in Hậu Giang province to get TTKC printed by the same supporters who did the third issue. As a touch of irony, the journey to find a printer for what was by now an illegal underground magazine was made in a vehicle belonging to the HCM City Party Executive Committee. However, the same printing house in Hậu Giang dared not do it again because the ideological situation in the province was becoming tense. The printing facility might even be lost when the party launched a clean up of book and newspaper publishing. Nguyễn Hôm then tried a few other printers in various centres of the region – Rạch Giá, Sóc Trăng and Long Xuyên – but all to no avail. By then, Party General Secretary Nguyễn Văn Linh, having retreated from his earlier commitment to the đổi mới policy (see Chapter Six), had personally told all provincial party secretaries that they should not countenance TTKC being printed in places within their jurisdiction. Once more, events demonstrate how state ownership of print facilities is critical as an instrument of state regulation. Under the circumstances, Nguyễn Hôm had to fall back on a more rudimentary way of printing which was to use a cyclostyle machine. Since the January 1989 difficulties of getting the third issue of TTKC printed, Tạ Bá Thông had arranged to buy one such machine to the contact in the HCM City OCL. He had a contact at Bình Thủy, a place outside HCM City. In view of the tense situation, both Nguyễn Hôm and Thông decided to

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31 At the time of finalizing this thesis in 1999, Củ Chi Long province has been divided into the provinces of Vĩnh Long and Trà Vinh.
Standing Committee. Executive Board members turned up in full force, particularly those who rarely attended the regular meetings. CFRF activists suspected that the party authority had got to most of the people attending the meeting. This was going to be an internal struggle against Nguyễn Hồ and his supporters. Nguyễn Văn Hạnh, the party official tasked with arranging Nguyễn Hồ’s demise, was at the meeting. He opened the meeting by making clear what the authorities expected out of this disciplinary session. Thereafter, the attacks on the two men began, accusing them of a series of misconduct such as deviating from the original purpose of the CFRF, denying those with different opinions a voice in the affairs of the club, and disseminating CFRF material illegally. Phạm Khải, who was earlier identified as the compromise candidate to replace Nguyễn Hồ as Chairman, made the most serious charge that the latter "wanted to set up a centre of opposition against the whole country" (muốn lâm mổ trưng tâm lãnh đạo đối địch cả nước) (Đỗ Trùng Hiếu 1995:30). Hạnh also pointed out that Nguyễn Hồ and Trọng were guilty of breaching organizational discipline and not accepting the leadership of the city’s cấp ủy. Before stating the vote of no confidence, Hạnh said it was best for the two men to resign. Both the accused walked out of the meeting before the vote took place. All except one member of the 18 Executive Board members present voted against the two men. A new Executive Board was elected with Phạm Khải as the acting Chairman. Huyễn Văn Tiến, the man who was removed by Nguyễn Hồ as Chief Editor of TTKC after producing its anodyne first issue, became one of the two deputy chairmen. Nguyễn Hồ issued a statement that declared the Executive Board’s action illegal and that he was still the rightful Chairman of the CFRF. However,

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22 Apparently, not only Executive Board members were at that meeting. Nguyễn Văn Trần, who organized the millenium fourth issue of TTKC was present and published his eyewitness account in his book. Trần said he was never formally a member of the CFRF (Nguyễn Văn Trần 1995:385, 403-404).

23 The party security authority did suspect Nguyễn Hồ of planning to set up a Democratic Socialist Party (CĐ Trùng Hiếu 1995:99). Although no specific reference to Nguyễn Hồ was ever made, quite a few Vietnamese told me that during the years of 1968 to 1990, they heard about elements in the party wanting to set up an alternative party based on a socialist principles approximating the left-wing parties of Western Europe. None of them could confirm what they heard, but all were inclined to believe that in those politically-repressive years, it was highly plausible.
his means of reaching out to rank-and-file supporters were very restricted. The fourth issue of TTAT ever printed. The VFF (HCM City branch) declared on 7 March 1990 its recognition of the new Executive Board (TT 10/3/90:1&2).

The coup within the CFRF was just a few days before the tense Eighth Party Plenum (Sixth Congress) on 12-27 March 1990. Forces within the party elite were gearing up to attack Politburo member Trần Xuân Bách, and denounced his continuing call for a more liberal political order. The initial decision was just to remove him from the Politburo and Secretariat and allow him to remain on the CC. However, his opponents, with Đào Duy Tùng leading them, attacked him so fiercely and a plenum suspended him from even the CC (Bùi Tín 1995:159). The plenum resolution was issued in two parts, 8A on the relations between the party and the people, and 8B on the situation in Eastern Europe. In gist, they affirmed the need to proscribe any liberal tendency within the party. In practice, it brought about greater political regimentation. Following the resolution, party members had to undergo criticisms and self-criticisms; and hand-written copies of self-criticisms had to be submitted to the party branch for inclusion into the member’s own personnel file (Bùi Tín 1995:159-62). The pattern of activities was reminiscent (but short of the intensity) of the struggle sessions that had followed the Ninth Plenum (Third Congress) Resolution almost three decades earlier in December 1963 (see Chapter Four).

Following his removal from the CFRF, the relationship between Nguyễn Hợp and the authorities deteriorated further. The official party decision to expel him came on 21 March 1990, but he declared he was hanging on his own accord. The animosity and suspicion were of such a level as to drive Nguyễn Hợp to leave HCM City that day and seek refuge in Phú Giáo of nearby Sông Bé Province (Đỗ Trung Hiếu 1995:30). Beginning in April, Ta Ba Tông, Đỗ Trung Hiếu and another CFRF activist, Hồ Hiệu, were detained by the security agencies (Nguyễn Văn Trân 1995:405). Nguyễn Hợp himself was detained on 7 September 1990 (Nguyễn Hợp 1994:11). These activists had accused their opponents of being conservative and not living up to the real demands of the party’s đổi mới policy, but were, conversely, being charged with abusing the liberties of đổi mới. More specific charges included receiving, editing and distributing internal material in violation of party rules, taking an organization outside the control of the VFF’s control, not accepting the directions of the city’s cấp ủy, and intentionally flouting the organization discipline of the party. (Đỗ Trung Hiếu 1995:105&109)

While the CFRF activists had pushed the parameters of permissible discourse to the limit, their arrests should also be seen in the context of what happened in Vietnam throughout 1990. That year, the state carried out an extensive internal security sweep against political activists. In Hanoi, the security agency broke up a clandestine opposition group calling itself the Scientific Social Party of Vietnam in July 1990 (Keesings Record of World Events Octob.: 1990:37776). In the south, the list of people arrested included individuals who had since attracted international attention: two Catholic activists Nguyễn Ngọc Lan and Father Chân Tín in May 1990, and Doàn Việt Hoạt in November 1990 for his involvement in the pressure group Freedom Forum. Foreigners were also targeted in the security sweep (Keesings Record of World Events Vol 37 (11) (Supplement):38538). Owing to their contacts with politically-active Vietnamese, among them Đỗ Trung Hiếu and Ta Ba Tông, American journalist-turned-businessman, Mike Morrow, and British freelance writer, Nick Malloni, were accused of wanting to promote a forceful democratization programme in the country (Đỗ Trung Hiếu 1995:32 & 102-104).

Những khu vực cầm quyền ở Việt Nam, đặc biệt ở Sài Gòn, đã bắt đầu tăng cường kiểm soát, phong tỏa các kết nối chính trị, kinh tế và văn hóa với các nước ngoài. Quan chức cấp cao của Đảng Cộng sản Việt Nam, bao gồm cả các cấp ủy cấp cao của Thành ủy Hồ Chí Minh, đã bắt đầu thực hiện một loạt các biện pháp hạn chế quyền tự do ngôn luận, tự do tín ngưỡng và tự do giáo dục của công dân. Các hoạt động của các phong trào chính trị, dân chủ và văn hóa bị hạn chế nghiêm ngặt, và các cá nhân, nhóm và tổ chức có quan hệ với các nước ngoài, đặc biệt là Hoa Kỳ, đã遭到严厉的监控和限制。
Meanwhile, the CFRF wasotions down under its new leadership. For reasons unknown, Phạm Khôi turned down his position as acting Chairman and retired from active political life. Phan Văn Đang, the party's preferred candidate, then took over. The CFRF office was relocated to a small room in a conference hall in District Three of HCM City. No formal closure of the CFRF was announced, but it has since become moribund with veterans affairs entirely the prerogative of the rival Vietnam Veterans Association. The proscribed CFRF activists continue to associate in the name of the club, meeting periodically at each other's private residences (Đỗ Trung Hiếu 1995:35).

Conclusion

The CFRF activists understood the dynamics of the struggle paradigm. We saw it in how they sought and then tried to enhance the status of their club as a VCP-affiliated mass organization. Their activism, like the other instances of struggle we have looked at, appropriated the official đổi mới agenda as a basis for action and exploited the double-edged facility for criticism to its fullest. Among the activists and their supporters were party insiders who used their connections and familiarity with the system to ferry the club's activism through official reservations, thus producing a phenomenon of an opposition that was very much "within the system". Finally, the key activists Nguyễn Hồ and Tạ Bị Tông were neutralized through the device of an internal struggle (before they were incarcerated). As has been observed in previous instances of media activism, theTTYC incident also illustrates the opportunity for struggle that came with đổi mới and the propensity to struggle by a section of Vietnam's intelligentsia.

However, two things distinguish theTTYC affair from the other đổi mới press struggles examined in this dissertation. First, contrary to the conventions of the Vietnamese media regulatory system, TTYC's supervisory organ could not be counted on to restrain the magazine. In fact, the supervisory organ itself, the CFRF, was the rub of the political challenge to the state, more so than TTYC. The vigorous political mobilization of the CFRF had enhanced the threat potential of the magazine. These developments represent the fundamental disruption of an expected pattern of state-media dynamics and also presented the VCP with an unfamiliar problem: the potential of an emergent organized opposition. These outcomes indicate how extensive were some political changes that found expression through the struggle paradigm.

The second prominent feature of theTTYC struggle was the state-defying length to which the CFRF was prepared to go in order to have the magazine published underground. This defiance was probably what made TTYC affair one of the most controversial in recent press developments, more so than the magazine's content (although that was also a cause of official animus). Defiance is antithetical to the struggle paradigm which is about working astutely within the system to bring about change. Nguyễn Hồ's ultimate disregard for the official injunction and his perceived truculence raise the issues of the psychology of defiance and how it relates to the struggle paradigm.

For some, the need for defiance dramatizes the limitations of political activism that seeks expression through the struggle paradigm. We heard this problem being articulated in the VN affair by the Lâm Dông writers, Bôi Minh Quốc and Tiểu Dao Bảo Cr. They experienced a sense of impasse in their struggle; the feeling was that keeping a struggle within systemic parameters had carried their activism some distance, but beyond a certain point there was nowhere to go. The impression they conveyed is that at those critical junctures, individuals must choose either to err on the side of caution or to breach the limits of the struggle paradigm in defiance. Quốc and Bảo Cr chose to disobey their provincial cấp by outright. In theTTYC affair, we have seen how Nguyễn Hồ and his CFRF colleagues took defiance further. There could be careful calculations behind such moves. These individuals could be gambling on the long, but not impossible, odds that escalating their struggle could win significant support both within and outside the party, forcing the reversal of an unfavourable ideological trend. But my assessment is that, at some point, the CFRF activists knew the ideological centre of gravity within the party had moved against them. They were aware that senior party leaders had made it very clear the club had to becowed. They knew the consequences of their continued activism. Perseverance under those circumstances could only mean that their recklessness was girdled by a desire to sink with all guns blazing. I believe this was part of the psychology behind the growing defiance.
What price the success of defiance in a system where authority can respond with summary punitiveness when it feels threatened? This line of thinking implies the ultimate futility of activism that is channelled through the struggle paradigm, i.e., it can only go so far and only by the leave of the state. I shall take up this argument in the concluding chapter. For the time being, the following should be borne in mind when reflecting on what to make of the CFRF some 10 years after its demise. In many evident ways, the club had failed in what it sought to do. The activism was crushed and the CFRF manipulated into oblivion. Since then, no similar movement has emerged. But it was not such an unalloyed victory for the authorities either. The CFRF is not just a memory. Together with the other bursts of activism during those early years, of đồ mới, it has left the system more brittle.

CONCLUSION

This conclusion examines the significance of press activism that is manifested through the struggle paradigm and discusses the theoretical relevance of my findings, their implications for understanding Vietnamese politics today and the related areas for further research.

The previous chapters have explored how a form of press activism, not always friendly to the state, has been possible in a situation where the media is part of the state and obliged to support state agenda. The thesis I argue notes that some members of the press have done this through a struggle paradigm, which is the common theme that binds my five case studies. The varied empirical details suggest that the paradigm encompasses a wide range of behaviour which, in turn, provides a spectrum of state-media dynamics. The behaviour ranges from outright calls for greater press freedom at various times since the Communist Party came into power (the NVGP affair in 1956 and the đồ mới media beginning in earnest from 1986) to the masking of dissenting views through encoded editorial content (the XLCĐ period of the early 1960s). They tell us that press activism through the struggle paradigm depends on the variable opportunities that different time and circumstance offer for media struggle.

The diversity of the described press activism saw media practitioners persecuted for their criticism of the state, seeking political refuge in a foreign capital, sacked from their jobs, exposing a powerful CC member to have him dismissed, rallying their peers against overarching state control of the media and producing an underground publication. The official media and Vietnamese dissidents have discussed these events by using the word "struggle". My excavation of the vocabulary of "struggle" produces a paradigm of assumptions, rules, conventions, attitudes, motives, calculations and habits that frequently operated beneath the surface of the struggle.

Within this paradigm, we see how the regime allows some leeway for unflattering press treatment of its policies and performance. The permitted agitation is regarded as taking part in a "struggle" for the good of the state and the public. This was
struggles I have discussed are intimately meshed with the internal struggles of the party, making it all the more essential for media protagonists to have the advantage of being an insider to be privy to the often intricate calculus of power at the core of the party.

Viewed holistically, these features of the struggle paradigm are about a way of life within the Vietnamese political system. Media activism can exist outside the paradigm but probably would not last long or would have to operate underground. Activism that is refracted through the struggle paradigm has its sharpness softened or disguised by a purported identification with the state or state agenda. The protective coverage that working through the system offers, however, gives some cause to believe that it is a limited (and ineffectual in the long run) form of activism. At the end of the 7TKC affair, I referred to a sense of limitation keenly felt by some Vietnamese who had to operate within the struggle paradigm. It raises the question of what then has media activism of the struggle paradigm amounted to. Beyond a certain point, dissent permitted through the struggle paradigm seemed too feeble to bring about the improvements desired by its protagonists: not to mention that the state had the capacity to stop the effort summarily, a reality captured in all my case studies.

This dilemma has found expression in popular debate where “co-optation by the state” frequently has a pejorative meaning of an improper collusion with the powerful while “working to change the system from inside” is conversely presented as a sensible, worthy tactic. Scholarly writings on dissent against socialist regimes have embraced opposite positions on this issue. For example, the following works, either alone or in substance, have projected an image of co-optation making the life of the intelligentsia politically circumscribed and spiritually energizing. George Konrad and Ivan Szelenyi (1979) and Mihlós Haraszti (1988) excoriate the intellectuals of the erstwhile socialist Eastern European bloc for ingratiating themselves or colluding with the political elite. Timothy Cheek and Carol Lee Hamrin (1986), describing China’s establishment intellectuals in the 1950s and 1960s, saw them as a privileged stratum well-entrenched in the established order and interwoven with a limited retooling of Leninism so as not
to violate its core precepts. Geremie R. Barné (1999) looks at China's cultural politics of the last 10 years since the 1989 Tiananmen incident where seemingly dissident and subversive artists have burst on to the scene but most have not severed their links with the state. The cultural palette they have produced is thus a "contrived environment, an artful ruin that decorates the desolation of the state" (Barné 1999:xx). While I have gained valuable insights from reading all these works, it is Dina R Spechler's (1982) assessment of the achievements of Novy mir in the post-Stalin Soviet Union to which I am more partial.1 In Spechler's study of permitted dissent, the writers who "had important truths to tell" and the editor who struggled to get them published are described as "insider-dissenters".

[All of them had learned to function more or less successfully in official organizations and [believe] in the possibility and importance of working for change from within the establishment, as a kind of loyal opposition...[Their efforts through Novy mir] contributed not only to the democratization and liberalization of Soviet political life [but also] made a significant contribution to the pluralization of Soviet politics, that is, to the aggregation, organization and representation of interests and opinions different from and, to a considerable degree, opposed to those of the regime and the bureaucracies that dominated the political and cultural establishments. (Spechler 1982:245, 246, 248).

To varying degrees, this may be said of most of the Vietnamese press struggles I have described.

The achievements of the struggle-paradigm type of press activism are clearer if we view them over a perspective of 40 years, and not be distracted by the variable fortunes of individual cases. These controversies through the years have aggregated the notion of dissent to give it more force and visibility (see the Epilogue for a sense of

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1 Novy mir was a literary magazine which published many controversial works for 16 years after Stalin's death in 1953. This was no easy task despite the post-Stalin liberal thaw and required fortitude and skill on the part of its Chief Editor Aleksandr Tvirdovskij who had to resign in 1970.

how different episodes of dissidence are coalescing into a community of interest). The level of press activism may not seem so evident in post-1990 Vietnam, but an intangible yet potent legacy lingers even after the state has silenced or co-opted the pre-1990 clamour. Many unprecedented events have been given precedence and therefore become less unthinkable, and even considered urgent, for them to happen again. For example, the Hà Trong Hào affair, by establishing that press exposure could get a well-protected CC member sacked, remains a benchmark by which today's newspapers fall short in their attempt to combat corruption. This lack of credibility in the official anti-corruption campaign is keenly felt in Vietnam today and is a pressure point in state-society relations. The successes of pre-1990 dôi moi press struggles (the Hà Trong Hào affair was but one of them) have also allowed the media to enjoy, more than before, an authentic sense of political influence under a VCP regime, even though the media has been and still is subject to many restraints. Even when press struggles failed, as in the VN and TTKC affairs (and there were many others), the vigour with which the fight was carried out would have convinced the authorities that they had to find new ways to accommodate this more restive media culture rather than rely entirely on an old regimented approach. In that sense the media effort has softened the authoritarian state. It is difficult for the state to roll back these changes once they have entered society's awareness.

This dissertation also highlights a factor crucial to media struggle that I call the "propensity to struggle". It was apparent in 1956 when NV and GP protested the growing authoritarianism of the newly-in-power DRV. The state's summary discipline of those connected with NV and GP did not stop a resilient spirit among many media practitioners continuing into the early years of the 1960s during the XLCĐ affair. Activism at that time cost protagonists dearly. When the 1980s presented opportunities for a new round of activism, the intelligentsia quickly rose to the occasion to re-invigorate the press with a sense of struggle, taking it to levels which the authorities found hard to accept. It sounds like an aphorism, but I must emphasize that the state-media contentions described in this dissertation could only have arisen because some
media practitioners never forgot that they had to make an effort. Forty years of a political environment generally hostile to media activism had not eliminated that inclination among practitioners.

This dissertation has also provided a picture of Vietnam's media regulatory system. It highlights the party-centred characteristic of the control. This is symbolized by the party elite's discretionary power over the media, the party's Ideology Commission with its extensive media-regulating prerogatives and a regime of party decrees that set the ideological framework within which the media must function. Government ministries and the law of the land are periphrastic of this process and did not play any significant part in the press controversies discussed.

Beyond the specific topic of state-media dynamics, the findings of this study add to a theoretical discussion on how best to conceptualize state-society relations in contemporary Vietnam. But a note of caution is added at this point: too much is made of the significance of these findings. In this, I must first draw on Ben Kerkvliet's (1995:398-99) summary of the literature, pointing out that there is no consensus and various perspectives having shaken out into four broad schools of thought. Carlyle Thayer (1992b:111-12), Brantly Womack (1992:180) and Garett Porter (1993:101) represent the Vietnamese system as "mono-organizational socialism" where major decisions are made within the bureaucracy and are influenced by it rather than by extra-bureaucratic forces in society. William Turley (1993a:330-31; 1993b:262-70) modifies the first argument and suggests a concept of "mobilization authoritarianism" where social forces may influence policy but only through organizations that the state itself dominates. A third view by Nigel Thrift and Dean Forbes (1986:81-83,101-104) believes the Vietnamese state frequently does not have the resources to impose policies which therefore allows social groups access to state control to shape society as much as or more than state policy. This may be described as a form of "penetrating civil society". Kerkvliet, finding all these unsatisfactory, adds a fourth point of view which, for want of an appropriate term, may be tentatively called the "interactive" political system. By this he means "state and society are interactive and that the state can be responsive to pressures from society" (Kerkvliet 1995:414).

I find "mono-organizational socialism" in the form conceptualized by its originator, T.M. Rigby (1990), for the erstwhile Soviet Union, the most useful. Rigby (1990:6) identifies the following as key features of his mono-organizational model:

a) All spheres of social activity are directed and managed (not just controlled) by formal, hierarchical organizations set up by the political authorities for this purpose.

b) One organization, that of the Communist Party, is entrusted with integrating all the others into a single organizational whole, and does so primarily by appropriating and exercising on their behalf the key prerogatives of any autonomous organization, namely determination of their goals, structures and leadership.

c) Politics, in the sense of competition to influence decisions and their implementation, is mostly structured around the formal and informal organization of the official hierarchies and is in large part concealed from public view, although there is often a controlled airing of alternatives in selected areas of economic and social policy.

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2 Personal experience as a journalist in my native Singapore has reinforced this perspective. I am often astounded by how Vietnamese media practitioners are more tenacious and persevering than their Singaporean counterparts in challenging official restrictions. This is despite my observation that treatment of dissent in Vietnam is more draconian than in Singapore.

3 This tentative name was provided during personal communication with Kerkvliet at The Australian National University in August 1999. It was not formally identified in his article.

4 Rigby lists a total of six defining characteristics. I have selected the four that are pertinent to my discussion of media. Since I do not intend to verify Rigby's model for Vietnam, it is not critical to be comprehensive in matching his concept of "mono-organizational socialism" entirely with my findings. Furthermore, the other two do not contradict my findings but are omitted because they are minimal considerations in the media situations I have described. They refer to the subsidiary role of tradition and exchange (i.e., market) in social activity, and also to the dominance of official position, net wealth, birth or popularity, in the determination of power, status and material reward.
d) The system and its demands are legitimated by its Marxist-Leninist state-building ideology and this is protected from overt criticism and competition by close control over public communication and association backed by a coercive machinery.

Rigby's model makes the most sense when I try to locate my findings within broader theoretical concepts of state-society relations. However, I must reiterate that this thesis does not aim to verify the "mono-organizational socialism" model for Vietnam. I also concede the probability that researchers looking at other social-economic-political sectors may well find a misfit with the "mono-organizational socialism" model. An economist studying the growth of small-scale household/individual businesses, an anthropologist searching for traditions that are being revived in rural villages, or a political scientist looking at party discipline may end up with different perspectives on just how intensively the state controls society in Vietnam. Hence, I am not rejecting the possibility that some components of the Vietnamese reality approximate more closely the notions of "mobilization authoritarianism", "penetrating civil society" or "interactive" political system.

What further recommends the "mono-organizational socialism" perspective to me is its inherent complementarity with my struggle paradigm. Since a mono-organizational system is marked by a pervasive spread of party linkages, it becomes easier to understand why media practitioners need to struggle from within the system. After all, there is no way of avoiding some form of party organizational minding or other; the only means open to media activists must be to work within this party-saturated system with a mixture of discretion and guile. In other words, it becomes easier to understand why there is a struggle paradigm with its system-embedded properties if one sets it against the sort of political system described by the "mono-organizational socialism" school of thought. I should also add that in spirit, if not in exact detail, the struggle paradigm can relate to the dynamics of Kerkvliet's "interactive" political system for some of my case studies describe situations where state and media (or society) interacted closely to produce mutually-influenced outcomes. While "mono-organizational socialism" shall remain my key perspective to understand Vietnamese politics, this is not an argument for a mono-theoretical framework of analysis. In such matters I am not averse to a syncretic approach, if necessary.

In the Introduction I suggest a connection between my study of media in Vietnam and a body of literature which uses the language of civil society to analyse transition in socialist states. One argument within the civil society literature is that a robust civil society must be autonomous of the state. If media restiveness against authority is a manifestation of civil society, then my finding suggests that civil society in Vietnam may emerge or is emerging from within the state itself. X.L. Ding's work first alerted me to this possibility (Ding 1994:32). He analysed how quasi-official organizations can slip beyond the state's control and how members of such organizations "can more or less turn them from agents of governmental manipulation into instruments for the expression of ideals, or mobilization and co-ordination of interests, against the party-state". According to him, this is "partial conversion" of the party-state system. The struggle paradigm in this dissertation makes approximate at the same point. Vietnamese citizens who are locked into a system pervaded by official control, patronage and linkages, can sometimes spawn their own kind of systems-subverting politics, using skills that exploit the insider's connections or familiarity with the system in order to challenge the system.

My findings also feed into another theoretical perspective on civil society articulated by John Keane (1990) that he calls the "politics of retreat". With that he takes issue with modern political philosophy's emphasis on how power is acquired and then maintained. He feels that recent empirical examples in both socialist and non-socialist states require an ability to analyse instances of retreat from power where political leaders helped to dismantle the authoritarian regimes they ran (Keane

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5 Please note that the term "party-state" is used in this paragraph because it is the preferred terminology of those whose works I am citing. As explained in the Introduction, my choice would have been "party-government", or "state".
media content hark back to the past. Certainly, the Vietnamese press continues to
purvey its vocabulary of struggle against a whole range of social problems. I know
the institutional framework that manages the media remains intact. "Mono-organizational
socialism" is still around, at least where the media is concerned. Under these
circumstances, there is no reason to believe that the struggle paradigm which is
embedded deeply in such a political system would disappear overnight. That is not to
say it is unchanging. The attitudes, assumptions, habits, conventions and rules that
make up this paradigm would evolve along with the whole political system. Therefore I
have taken this close look at the past for two reasons. First, the questions that I have
posed and tried to answer in my pre-1990 case studies are the questions I continue to
pose of today's media. In a nutshell, I need to know where today's state-media dynamics
are coming from. Second, I believe the struggle paradigm continues to be a useful
framework to interpret today's state-media dynamics, if the empirical data is available.

The struggle paradigm up till 1990 has also explained how some of the most
dramatic political changes were fostered within the Vietnamese system at the liberal
peak of the doi moi policy. That may lead to an expectation that this perspective on
political change can be taken through a trajectory of transition to some predictable
endpoint of systemic collapse or regime change. It is ill-advised to take such a narrow
deterministic approach when dealing with so complex an issue as a whole nation in
transition. As Remington (1992:240) warns, if seismology is unable to say when the
next major earthquake will erupt in a particular place, students of political transition
should confine themselves to understanding the underlying tectonics. This dissertation
has that heuristic objective to advance knowledge of how the system operates and to
point out that a key feature of this system is that media can be of the state, for the state
and yet against the state.

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4 The examples of politicians of retreat cited by Keane include Adolfo Suarez of Spain, Constantine
Karmanlis of Greece, Josip Kissar of Hungary, Alexander Dubcek of Czechoslovakia, Wojciech
Jurezskii of Poland, and Nikita Khrouchtchev and Mikhail Gorbatchev of the Soviet Union.
EPILOGUE

Many key personalities in my case studies continue in the 1990s to experience a relationship of tension with the state. One of them was the poet Phùng Quân who was actively involved in the literary protest of the NVGP period. As part of the VCP’s đổi mới policy, the authorities had attempted to make amends with the persecuted writers from that era. Quietly, the latter had their membership in the VWA restored. Arrears of salary, lost during the years of political limbo, were paid. Along with those reparations was the opportunity to be politically involved again. In Chapter Six, we saw Hữu Loan, another NVGP poet, take part in the controversial 1988 cross-country rally of Bùi Minh Quốc and Tiểu Dao Bảo Cát. Up till his death in 1995, Phùng Quân networked with a new generation of activists and travelled around the country to read his poems to his fans. He also fought to rehabilitate Nguyễn Hữu Đăng, put on trial for his leading role in the magazine NV (see Chapter Three). Đăng had served a term in prison and was then banished to live in abject poverty in the countryside. Phùng Quân pressurized the state to provide Đăng with a home in Hanoi, threatening to raise funds among overseas Vietnamese to buy a place for Đăng, should the authorities not accede to his request. While he was never arrested for these activities, Phùng Quân had to live with regular surveillance by the security agencies (Phùng Quân 1994:8-13; and Hải Văn 1995).

Phùng Quân linked up with the CFRF activists in late 1993 when he visited them to read them his poems. When the poet died in January 1995, the CFRF activists held a remembrance service for him and sent condolences to his wife in the name of the CFRF. (Đỗ Trung Hiếu 1995:35-36).

Among those who were arrested for their alleged revisionist views in the 1960s (see the XLCD affair of Chapter Four), Hoàng Minh Chính and Nguyễn Kiên Giang have gone on to become prominent dissidents of the 1990s. Chính has been tireless in fighting for his own vindication through the years and commenting publicly on political issues of contemporary Vietnam. For his activities, he has been in and out of prison since his first arrest in 1967. Giang was able to resume his political writing career in the 1980s. The works he published then, using pen-names or anonymously with co-authors, were tolerated by the regime, but his current status as a dissident was sealed by an essay Vietnam — Crisis and the Way Out (Việt Nam — Khủng Hoảng và Lời Ra) which was circulated underground.²

CFRF activist, Đỗ Trung Hiếu, got in touch with Hoàng Minh Chính and Nguyễn Kiên Giang in Hanoi at the end of 1993 (Đỗ Trung Hiếu 1995:98). In 1984, Hiếu had read the party’s version of the XLCD affair and wanted to find out the truth for his own satisfaction. He had admired Chính’s continuing effort to exonerate himself after all these years. From Giang, he sought views of the present-day crisis faced by Vietnam. During that Hanoi visit, Hiếu stayed in the same house with another prominent outspoken intellectual, Hà Sĩ Phuu from Dalat.² The latter was a member of the restive Lãm Đồng Writers Association run by Bùi Minh Quốc and Tiểu Dao Bảo Cát, and contributed to their Langbian magazine in 1988 before it was banned (see Chapter Six). Hà Sĩ Phuu became prominent when his sharp analytical essays on the failings of the Communist system were circulated by hand within Vietnam, beginning in 1988, and also published in magazines like SH (Hà Sĩ Phuu 1996:15 & CV on the back cover).

In October 1993, Bùi Minh Quốc also added his voice to those calling for a review of the XLCD controversy (Bùi Minh Quốc 1993). Since then he has corresponded regularly with Hoàng Minh Chính to exchange material and offer mutual support. Pressure to review the XLCD controversy also received a fillip in 1995 when two retired senior cadres, Nguyễn Trung Thành and Lê Hồng Hà, added their voices to the

² Việt Nam – Khủng Hoảng và Lời Ra was published in the US in March 1993 (Nguyễn Kiên Giang 1993).
³ For Đỗ Trung Hiếu and Hà Sĩ Phuu to be in Hanoi simultaneously and staying under one roof may suggest some planning was involved rather than pure coincidence. Hiếu was reticent about this in his autobiographical essay, but it is likely that such an incident would make the Vietnam security apparatus apprehensive.
Their petitions to party leaders became available on the Hanoi grapevine and then outside Vietnam.

This networking tells us that members of Vietnam’s intelligentsia (writers, journalists and other activists) are associating across time and space to seek strength in camaraderie. Evidently they have found common meaning and significance in what each other has done at different periods of Vietnam’s history. If historical linkages are not always evident or easy, they seem determined to forge them.

The authorities took intimidatory action to discourage the networking. In June 1995, Hoàng Minh Chính and Đỗ Trung Hiếu were jointly arrested for disseminating anti-socialist propaganda and sentenced to gaol. Both were released the following year. In August 1996, Nguyễn Kiên Giang, Hà Si Phu and Lê Hồng Hà were put on trial for disclosure of national secrets because they passed among themselves a document which then Prime Minister Võ Văn Kiệt had sent to the Politburo (Free Vietnam Alliance website at http://www.fva.org/bios/nkgiang.htm; and http://www.fva.org/bios/hastphu.htm). Although the document was classified, its content was widely known in and outside Vietnam as copies had leaked to the public in the usual way. The security authority wanted to make an example of these dissenters.

Trần Đỗ, eclipsed after the VN controversy, burst into international fame from February 1998 when his petition asking the party to implement radical political reforms and abandon its monopoly of power got into the international wire services. By 1998, the public dissemination of such internal petitions was frequent enough to be no more a surprise. What remains unexplained is why had Trần Đỗ lain low for close to a decade before allowing his displeasure with the current party leadership to assume a public profile. It may have been part of a growing momentum of disaffection with the party leadership for failing to address the country’s growing socio-economic problems; a sense of impatience for change that could no longer be contained. The past few years seemed to reflect the popular exasperation more as a steady stream of petitions, harshly critical of the VCP’s leadership, and mostly from disillusioned retired cadres, were leaked into the public domain. Some of these accused Politburo members such as Phạm Thế Duyệt of corrupt dealings (Tivi Tiếng-sa 5/8/98:68 & 100). Trần Đỗ was expelled from the VCP on 4 January 1999 (Reuters Hanoi 7/1/99). Since then, he has adopted the tactic of publicizing his quarrel with the authorities to highlight the authoritarian image of the Vietnamese state. In July 1999, the international media carried the news that his application for a permit to publish his own newspaper had been turned down. Most people believed Trần Đỗ knew from the start that he would be turned down (Reuters Hanoi 12/7/99); it was his way of generating international pressure on the VCP leadership.

The magazine TTKC may have failed in its attempt to go underground in 1990, but in 1995 a satirical newsletter Người Sắt Gân (Saigonese) started to circulate informally in HCM City. It was reputed for its well-informed insider’s information of intra-official politics and the security agency suspected the writer to be the 81-year old retired senior cadre, Nguyễn Văn Trần, whom Nguyễn Hồ asked to be editor of the fourth issue of TT KC in early 1990 (see Chapter Seven). Trần already thumbed his nose at the authorities by having his controversial book Written for my Mother and the National Assembly (Việt Cho Mẹ và Quốc Hội) surreptitiously published and sold in HCM City before it was recalled and banned (Nguyễn Văn Trần 1995:488-501). Người Sắt Gân lasted till 1997. Trần died in 1998.

Viewed in perspective, the political mood of the 1990s carries a distinct restlessness characterized by a sense of impatience, the expansion of the circle of activism – both in terms of numbers and what people were prepared to do – and networking by the country’s community of dissenters. But it would be wrong to think that this mood defines the times. I have described only the more defiant individuals. Things were also subdued in large measures. The dormancy, however, should not be mistaken for inertia. Its tone and feel is more like an alert anticipation for change. There
is a feeling abroad that the đổi mới policy needs another round of determined reforms to tackle the many social-economic-political problems that continue to mire the country. A young journalist impressed on me that sense of expectancy with three Vietnamese words – nắm cho thì – which means "to lift low and bide one's time" (Source 8 Interview 3). It seems that below the restraint of the media are people waiting for the next wave of activism.

So we have impatience in various forms. Some are demonstrating an increasing boldness in political action. Others are quietly waiting for a right moment to do things. These do not exhaust a multitude of possible responses and nobody can really say for certain how things are going to shake out. Of all the images that the post-1990 situation offers, one remains most telling to me because it is in tune with what I have been saying about the struggle paradigm. It is about williness, manoeuvres and measures of pluck. It also suggests a tenacity – what I believe to be a hallmark of Vietnam's intelligentsia – to continue with little gestures when the bold moves are not yet feasible.

It is also persuasive because of its protagonist, Quang Đam, the Editorial Secretary of party daily ND: "In we first encountered him in the NVGP affair. Quang Đam was then obliged by senior party leader Trường Chinh to be a leading attacker of the NVGP writers. This was a man who played a leading role in crushing what is informally known as Vietnam's "Hundred Flowers" movement, named after a similar movement in China at around the same time. In 1992, a retired Quang Đam received a visit from an old journalist colleague. When the conversation got round to the subject of poetry, Quang Đam recited an old poem of his to reflect what he termed the "lively political situation" (thời sự chính trị lại nhịp nhàng) of the 1990s. Two lines stood out in the verse (Quang Đam 1994:69-71):

**Birdsongs tell of spring steaping up on us**

**A scented breeze bears tidings of flowers blooming in stealth**

This old retired media practitioner sensed something furtive coming everybody's way and he liked it. Here is a man who helped crushed the "hundred flowers" of 1956 but he has got round to celebrating buds blooming secretly in Vietnam's political scene. The state must now contend with some ironies that have come full circle.

5 Rặn rên xin sang chấn mạch leo
Chầm leo nở trên gò đua hương
APPENDIX 1

Politburo Resolution 60 on Press Work

8 December 1958

The press is a collective agitator, propagandist and organizer, an instrument of the party to lead the masses, and a sharp weapon of class struggle to oppose the enemy and build a new life.

The capability of the press to guide depends on how well it knows party policies. Whenever the party has a policy, the press should disseminate the news and explain it. But that is not enough. The press should also reflect how the masses are carrying out the policy and guide that process. The masses will run into difficulties, experiencing both successes as well as shortcomings and loss of direction. The press should be prompt in discovering these problems in the revolution's march forward. Positive models and experiences should be presented to help overcome difficulties and rectify shortcomings in order to accomplish the duty in hand.

The press should reflect the truth in an authentic way. Reflecting the truth is to strengthen the progress of the revolutionary cause. Truth comprises both the positive and the negative. For the northern half of our country in its present phase, it is the positive which is primary and fundamental in the truth. But that does not mean the negative does not exist and there should be no hesitation about exposing the bad or avoiding to talk about setbacks and shortcomings. But recognizing the real truth must be based on the perspective of Marxism-Leninism and only the essential truth should be revealed to serve the interest of the party and the state. ... press must always look in the same direction as the movement's advance to the fore. Reporting setbacks and shortcomings is to educate cadres, party members and the masses to struggle and seek ways of overcoming them in order to achieve victory. It is not to weaken the resolve of the masses.

1 The full text of the Resolution is not available. These excerpts are taken from Bao Tien Hoi to Hoi Phong, 1972, Cong Trieu Bac, 24, 28, 42, 146-48, 151, 173. Hoi Phong is the party paper for the city of Haiphong.

The press is the party's instrument of collective propaganda and agitation. For it to be good, the whole party must take part in building this press. Party executive committees at each administrative level (cwp uy) and their organizations which own newspapers should strengthen their leadership of the press; watch them regularly, examine them conscientiously, and help cadres performing editorial duties to improve their work. Cadres in leadership positions should know how to use the press (particularly the party papers) as a means of work supervision, and should also write for the press. Party chapters (cwp b) and ideological commissions, especially the party cells (cwp b), have the duty to supervise and participate in the distribution of newspapers, and organize and promote newspaper reading among the masses. All cadres and party members should put effort into reading newspapers in order to raise their standards and improve their work. They should value criticisms, evaluate newspapers, and talk to the press (especially party newspapers) about their problems at work.

Strengthening the practice of criticism and self-criticism (pha binh va tu pha binh) in newspapers is an extremely important task. Our party is now a party governing a state. If the faults of party organs, government departments, economic units and mass organizations are not promptly uncovered and rectified, it will very easily lead to outcomes which are detrimental to the interests of the masses. Criticisms and self-criticism is a very good method of discovering and correcting these faults and will strengthen the party's relationship with the masses as well as cure the disease of bureaucracy.

The press should recognize clearly the revolutionary type of criticism which we encourage, the type that is well-meaning and constructive which aims at strengthening unity and advancing the revolutionary enterprise. As for the destructive type of criticism which sow discord and anxiety, or offend the fighting will and revolutionary spirit of the masses, we should also reject and oppose them resolutely.

The press should make the various levels of party and government leadership as well as cadres inside and outside the party see the value of citizens' criticism in the

1 For an explanation of what is cwp uy, see Chapter Two.
newspapers and welcome them with the right attitude. Officials and cadres should not intimidate or attack their critics. When an individual and organization see that the criticism against them are correct, they should publicly accept as well as made known their rectification effort in the press. If the criticism is only correct in parts, then besides owning up to the correct portion, they should explain the incorrect portion.

The quality of a newspaper depends on the quality of the cadres working in it. So it is necessary to improve the training of these cadres with regard to theory, politics, profession and culture...Cadres should also take it upon themselves to exchange views on ideological, professional and cultural issues, take seriously political study sessions (học tập chính trị) in order to grasp accurately party and government policies, and involve themselves profoundly in the reality of the working masses.

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Vietnamese language material

Complete Vietnamese diacritics are provided here but the practical arrangement is not in the standard Vietnamese fashion where diacritical marks are factored in, e.g., a should come before ā which should precede ā. This simplification is to avoid confusing readers unfamiliar with diacritics.

Công An Thành Phố Hồ Chí Minh. 7/8/96:7. "Một vụ vi phạm nghiêm trọng Luật Báo Chí".


NDX: xem Nhân dân.

NDX': xem Nhân dân Chủ nhật.


27/4/56:1, "Lời bế mạc Hội nghị Ban Chấp Hành Trung Ương Đảng Lao Động Việt-Nam Lần thứ 9 (mô rộng)".

20/7/56:2, "Vinh viễn pha bò chê đá phong kiến chăm cố sự vụ đất di", 18/8/56:1, "Thư của Hợp Chúng Tiếp gửi đồng bào negro, và căn bản nỗ lực cải cách ruộng đất miền Bắc căn bản thành công".

25/9/56:4, Nguyễn Chuong, "Mã diём sai lầm chủ yếu trong báo Nhân Văn và tạp Giai Phẩm Múa Thu".

1/10/56:2, Quang Đam, "Quan hệ giữa nhu cầu và văn nghệ".

6/10/56:3, "Thông cáo của Ban Thường Vụ Hội Văn Nghệ Việt Nam".

20/10/56:1&4, "Nhân dùng Trung Quốc ký niệm một cách trọng thể đại văn hóa Lô Tấn".

30/10/56:1, "Thông cáo của Hội Nghị lần thứ 10 (mô rộng) của Ban Chấp Hành Trung Ương Đảng Lao Động Việt Nam về việc cử lại Tổng Bí Thư Ban Chấp Hành Trung Ương".

9/11/56:4, "Thông cáo về việc thi hành kỳ luật báo "Nhân Văn".

9/11/56:1, "Xả lụa - Dân chủ và chuyện cần giải".

11/12/56:3, Quang Đam, "Giả vờ những nguyên tắc dân chủ của chúng ta".

14/12/56:1&4, "Hướng ứng công nhận nhân ánh của Hà Nội - Hàng nghĩa bắc thuan của nhân dân Hà Nội phán đổi bao Nhân Văn".

16/12/56:3, Phương Kim, "Ý nghĩa một phong trào quan trọng".

19/12/56:1, "Quyết định của Ủy ban hành chính Hà Nội về việc đánh bàn và căn lưu hành báo Nhân Văn".

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