

THE CULTURAL AND EDUCATIONAL STRUGGLE OF SAIGON TEACHERS (1954-1975)

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Abstract:

The article highlights the role of Saigon teachers in the resistance war against the US (1954-1975), during which they opposed the cultural enslavement policies of the US-backed regime. In the face of imposed hybrid culture and war-oriented education, teachers organized patriotic movements, implemented educational reforms, and safeguarded the Vietnamese language and national identity. They established organizations such as the Private Education Teachers' Union, organized cultural and artistic activities, and carried out both overt and covert struggles to protect national cultural values. These efforts not only preserved the nation's cultural heritage but also made significant contributions to the liberation of the South and the reunification of the country.

Keywords: Saigon Teachers, Cultural Struggle, Educational Reforms, National Identity.

1. The US-Puppet Policy of Cultural and Educational Invasion and Enslavement

To advance their neo-colonial ambitions, the US invaded South Vietnam (1954–1975) and employed numerous insidious and brutal strategies, including policies of cultural invasion and enslavement. “They aimed to enslave the people of South Vietnam culturally to facilitate their political and economic domination. They sought to undermine the nation from its very structure, to destroy the national culture at its foundation”¹. The enemy spared no sinister methods, combining deceit, bribery, and blatant brutality. It can be said that the US “invested” heavily in “anti-communism” in South Vietnam, particularly in Saigon — the capital of the puppet regime and their stronghold.

¹ *Vietnam is One, the Vietnamese People are One*, Social Sciences Publishing House, Hanoi, 1976, pp. 319–320.

In terms of culture, on the one hand, the US-puppet regime had to expand education due to the need for socio-economic development. On the other hand, they conspired to use education as a means of brainwashing, corrupting both teachers and young people, and effectively serving their war of aggression. The US and the puppet regime exploited all fields of ideology and culture — including philosophy, literature, art, education, religion — and all means of communication such as press, publishing, radio, and television as tools of psychological warfare to deceive and defeat our people ideologically and psychologically, to oppose socialism in the North, to obstruct the liberation of the South, and to hinder the reunification of the country.

The following statistics illustrate the insidious strategies and severe consequences of neo-colonial culture.

“In 1973, the South had 450,000 television sets. Saigon alone boasted 45 daily newspapers, 30 magazines, and 150 publishing houses. Over 20 years, the South imported 7,500 feature films from the United States, Hong Kong, and Western European countries, most of which contained anti-communist and morally corrupt content. To promote religious activities, the US Asian Cultural Agency devised a plan to train 200,000 monks and nuns in the United States. The regular upkeep of 1 million puppet soldiers, 120,000 policemen, 300,000 civil servants, and their relatives created a bloc of 6 to 7 million people dependent on salaries provided by the United States”².

“According to statistics left by the enemy, in 1974, there were 500,000 unemployed people, 170,000 war invalids, 700,000 people who had to leave their villages for various reasons and ended up living on city sidewalks, more than 100,000 prostitutes, 150,000 drug addicts, 10,000 street children, 10,000 beggars, 200,000 orphans, 200,000 vagabonds, and 30,000 gamblers and smugglers. Not to mention the 400,000 puppet soldiers who disbanded in the city on the day of liberation, essentially becoming unemployed... Neo-colonialism sought to attack the long-standing morality and patriotism of the city’s people by creating a class of urban residents with a completely different lifestyle: parasitic, idle, and disdainful of labor. They dragged workers out of factories and farmers out of fields, taught them the profession of killing, and returned to society individuals who had lost their connection to labor. This

² Truong Chinh, *On the Ideological and Cultural Revolution*, Truth Publishing House, Hanoi, 1984, p. 36.

was the most insidious scheme, causing the most devastating consequences of neo-colonialism: the moral and societal degradation of each family, each individual...”³.

It can be said that the enemy’s cultural activities had severe impacts and consequences on the cultural and spiritual life of the majority of our youth and people. However, the people of Saigon were not mere “passive objects” who would conform to the enemy’s designs. The people of Saigon were active agents of change within society, and this explains the many extraordinary events that occurred right in the enemy’s stronghold, which they could neither comprehend nor prevent. This article reflects only one facet of the myriad activities carried out by Saigon teachers during the anti-American resistance war.

2. Struggle on the Cultural and Educational Front of Saigon Teachers

From 1954 to 1975, this was a period of vigorous struggle against the neo-colonial cultural activities of the US-puppet regime to protect and develop the national culture.

The Saigon teachers continued to uphold the revolutionary tradition, gradually absorbing the influence of revolutionary cultural education. They formed organizations and associations that fought persistently, fiercely, and resolutely, contributing to the overall victory of the cause of liberating the South and reunifying the Fatherland. Based on the progress of the resistance war and the practical developments of Saigon teachers, this period can be divided into two major phases:

The period from July 1954 to mid-1965

During this period, the US imperialists exploited all forms of culture to fabricate a deceptive national image for their lackeys. Certain remnants of theology and personalism created a ludicrous and reactionary ideology called “personalist spiritualism”. Christianity was given special privileges—treated as the state religion—to support the regime while suppressing other religions. Various forms of superstition were revived and expanded as tools to pacify and enslave the people. The US-puppet regime promoted Eastern ideological trends and glorified the most conservative aspects of feudal and bourgeois ethics. They intensified psychological warfare while simultaneously implementing educational projects and plans to experiment with an education system heavily dependent on the US, turning it into a tool to effectively

³ Nguyen Van Linh, *Ho Chi Minh City: 10 Years*, Truth Publishing House, Hanoi, 1985, pp. 73–74.

serve the neo-colonial war through the two strategies of “unilateral war” and “special war”.

In the new historical context after July 1954, the Saigon-Cholon Special Zone concentrated on directing the teachers' movement by building foundations and arranging personnel to operate in schools. These schools became the backbone of the Vietnam Private Teachers' Union, established on May 10, 1953. A series of key schools were developed, including Nam Viet School (Dang Duc Sieu Street), Le Thanh Ton School (Co Bac Street), and Nguyen Hue School (Yen Do Street). Notably, Huynh Khuong Ninh School, under the leadership of Professor Luong Le Dong as principal, served as the Union's headquarters. The Union's mission was clearly outlined: “To foster a spirit of broad solidarity among private educators to serve Vietnamese education in the spirit of nationalism and democracy; to protect and improve the living standards of private teachers; to support, correct shortcomings, and learn from one another to enhance professional development”⁴.

With the policy of broadly mobilizing forces, the Union attracted teachers from primary to secondary schools, including those advocating for forming a bloc of patriotic intellectuals to fight on the cultural and educational front. For private school owners, the Union promoted solidarity with them in the common struggle for peace, national reunification, resistance against decadent and reactionary educational culture, and the implementation of a national and democratic educational program. The Union closely collaborated with organizations representing private school owners, such as the Private School Association, to resolve internal conflicts and coordinate activities, ensuring that its initiatives were not co-opted by the enemy or turned into opposing forces. For public school teachers, the Union engaged with them as colleagues, regularly exchanging ideas and organizing activities. Initially focusing on primary school teachers, the Union later established close relationships with other educational associations and unions, such as the Public Education Alumni Association, the Chinese Private Education Alumni Association, the Hanoi Pedagogical College Alumni Association, and the Pedagogical University Alumni Association.

In core schools, the Union gradually implemented school models inspired by those in liberated and resistance zones. These included self-governing student

⁴ Graduation Thesis of Tran Thi Xuan Quang, Faculty of History, Ho Chi Minh City University of Science, p. 20.

organizations, collective activities with healthy and practical content, the promotion of patriotic traditions, and the preservation of moral character. Student, class, and team organizations held meetings to discuss study organization, cultural activities, and provided feedback to schools, with teachers serving as advisors for each class. Many schools organized camps, excursions, and summer activities with enriching and diverse content, fostering class solidarity and national consciousness. These efforts opposed indoctrination, rote learning, detachment from reality and labor, as well as the infiltration of reactionary culture and education into schools.

Through public and lawful activities, the Union employed various methods to educate the younger generation about patriotism, national pride, self-reliance, and resistance against the enemy's enslaving and reactionary cultural and educational policies. A notable example was the student movement advocating for Vietnamese as the official language in general schools and universities and pushing to reform the curriculum to align with an independent and democratically reformed educational system (starting in February 1958). This struggle lasted for several months, culminating on September 11, 1960, and was strongly supported by professors and parents.

The Union directly participated in publishing the magazine *Vietnam Giao Khoa* as teaching materials, replacing *Vietnam Van Pham*, authored by Tran Trong Kim, which followed the French language framework and was unsuitable for Vietnamese. The Union also worked with school owners to abolish French-based curricula, transitioning to a Vietnamese-focused program and reforming content and teaching methods following progressive models for nurseries and kindergartens. The Vietnam Children's Friends Association, founded in 1958 with Professor Nguyen Thi Dieu as president, actively campaigned to improve education and eliminate publications deemed harmful to youth. Many books and newspapers with positive educational content were published or reprinted under the motto: "educating children and entertaining adults", such as the *New Education Bookcase*, the *Cong Ly* newspaper, and *Duy Tan* from the war zones.

Numerous cultural and artistic activities were staged and performed by teachers and students, showcasing patriotic themes, promoting hatred of foreign invaders, and celebrating national identity. Notable examples include the plays: *The*

Drum of Me Linh, The Writer Nguyet Hoa, The Suicide of So Ba Vuong, The Road to Tay Truc, Son Tinh Thuy Tinh, and On the Flowery Ground. Traditional dances such as *Sowing Silk, Dance of Planting Trees, Spring Flowers Bloom,* the Conical Hat Dance, the Silk Dance, and the Drum Dance were performed, along with operas like *Rabbit Against Tiger* and *Thang Cuoi and the Banyan Tree.* These performances attracted large audiences and enthusiastic applause.

The activities of Saigon teachers were increasingly influenced by the program of the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam, guided by the Southern Education Subcommittee (October 1962) and directly supported by the Saigon-Gia Dinh Patriotic Teachers Association (1965), a member of the Saigon-Gia Dinh National Liberation Front. These efforts enabled teachers to intensify their fight against American-style cowboy and enslaving culture, implementing Vietnamese-language instruction in schools, which combined literacy education with moral development. Many teachers from the National Language Propagation Association conducted free night classes in working-class neighborhoods for impoverished adults and children, actively combating illiteracy and ignorance. Teachers also organized mutual aid funds, celebrated Tet together, and collectively donated money to support the revolution.

Along with the struggles on the podium and in schools, the teachers' movement was also very active in street protests alongside patriotic and progressive forces. They fought for the implementation of the Geneva Agreement, national reunification, improved livelihoods, democracy, and against terrorism, repression, and the imprisonment of patriots. Notable examples include the peacekeeping movement, relief efforts for war victims, and struggles to commemorate Student Day (January 9), International Labor Day (May 1), as well as fundraising campaigns to support flood victims in the Central region (January 1964) and the Southwest region (1965).

The period from mid-1965 to April 1975

This was a period when the US imperialists directly deployed American troops and their allies to wage the "local war" (1965–1968), followed by the "Vietnamization of the war" strategy (1969–1975) in South Vietnam. During this time, the enemy's cultural policy aimed to destroy the minds and emotions of Southern youth by introducing an American lifestyle characterized by hedonism and moral decay. American goods and dollars were flooded into the South, creating a parasitic social

class that disregarded human dignity and decency, pursuing base desires. “*Saigon was submerged in a wave of prostitution, corruption, and an unimaginably abhorrent black market*”⁵. The pervasive culture of decadence became an insidious and dangerous plague, most evident in literature, art, music, cinema, and theater. Even more harmful was the debauched and depraved way of life that broke all moral and social norms, rejected justice, ideals, and human dignity, eroding love for the country, racial identity, and national pride.

In education, the US-puppet regime implemented policies to limit and eliminate the influence of French-era education, replacing it with an American-style education system under the motto of “pragmatism”. They promoted the “communalization” of primary schools, expanded comprehensive high schools, universities, and community colleges, and militarized schools. They also implemented partial and general mobilization, established “capital defense divisions” and “mass mobilization units” to serve the war effort.

Faced with the dangers posed by the US-puppet regime’s cultural policies, public and private teachers could not remain indifferent or passive. Saigon teachers, under the guidance of the Party, united and formed a large force, closely collaborating with other progressive cultural organizations to fight against the reactionary and decadent culture that was corrupting society and degrading human dignity, while striving to save and protect the national culture.

First of all, the establishment of the “Council for the Protection of the Spirit of Youth” (June 1965) included 17 associations in Saigon, with the Vietnam Private Education Union and the Vietnam Association for the Protection of Children as its core members. The Council for the Protection of the Spirit of Youth published the semi-monthly magazine *Hon Tre* as its mouthpiece. *Hon Tre* was continuously published (later, one issue per week to meet the demands of the Mau Than General Offensive and Uprising in 1968). The content focused on exposing to public opinion the reactionary education system, denouncing a society filled with hybrid and depraved cultural poisons, and advocating for a patriotic national education system to train a generation of youth who remained rooted in their culture. It promoted

⁵ *Revolutionary Tradition of Southern Women in the Bronze Citadel*, published in 1989, p. 372.

progressive educational ideologies and called for an independent and democratic regime to build a truly national education system.

The *New Education Bookcase* continued to publish various books widely disseminated in schools and among the general public to raise awareness of a national, scientific, and progressive education. At the same time, these books engaged in theoretical resistance against anti-progressive views within the American-puppet education system.

The Vietnam Private Education Union was an active member of the “Force for the Protection of National Culture” (established in mid-1968), chaired by Professor Le Van Giap, who led efforts against the policies of enslaving education and decadent culture in schools. The Union organized numerous presentations in Saigon and other provinces, attracting many participants, particularly youth and students.

The educational front was expanded through the promotion of public and private teacher unions under the umbrella of the Vietnam Teachers' Union (established November 10, 1966). The Union clearly outlined its goals: “To fight against the American-puppet educational culture, protect national culture, unite and support each other in daily life and professional work, and jointly implement national education for future generations”⁶. The Teachers' Union organized many seminars and training courses, attracting a significant number of public and private school teachers, cultural and religious organizations, and parents of students. These events focused on denouncing the harmful effects of neo-colonial education, thereby promoting a revolutionary and national educational and cultural direction, and advocating for an education system that serves life, transforms society, develops individuals comprehensively, and ensures equality in education.

Several notable presentations left a deep impression on educators and intellectuals, such as “*Towards a National Education*” by Truong Van Duc, “*Thoughts on the Two Words 'Lost Country'*” by Professor Ly Chanh Trung, and “*The True Value of Modern Female Students*” by Professor Phan Thi Cua. To disseminate progressive and revolutionary educational content, the Union maintained numerous public publications such as *Hon Tre* and *Voice of Intellectuals*, with contributions from many university professors and lecturers. Secretly, the Union published works like

⁶ “Association of Teachers”, *Saigon Voice of Knowledge Magazine*, No. 1/67, p. 9.

New Intellectuals and *Sai Gon Uong Len* under the Patriotic Teachers Association. Additionally, professional newsletters such as *Spring and Peace* and the *Spring Training Special Issue* were circulated.

Many educational books by authors such as Thien Giang, Van Trang, Vu Hanh, Nguyen Hien Le, and Trinh Tuan Lam, known for their high educational value, were introduced and widely studied. The movement demanding “Vietnamese as the language of instruction at universities” and “university autonomy” became increasingly vibrant, beginning at Saigon Medical University on October 19, 1966.

Cultural activities also saw significant progress under the positive influence of liberation literature. Among teachers and students, heroic epic songs by Luu Huu Phuoc, Van Cao, Do Nhuan, Hoang Viet, and Le Thuong were widely circulated. Numerous plays were staged and performed, including *The Sound of the Drum in Ha Hoi* and *Ham Tu Quan*. Ethnic dances such as *The Heroic Sound of the Drum*, *The Mirror of Birds*, and *Butterflies and Bees Playing with Lions* were also performed, showcasing the rich cultural heritage.

Saigon teachers were active participants and achieved significant results in urban people's movements such as the National Self-Determination Movement, the Youth Spirit Protection Movement, the National Culture Protection Force, the Women's Dignity and Rights Protection Movement, and the National Progressive Force. Street demonstrations to celebrate International Labor Day (May 1) and Teachers' Day (November 20) began in 1966 and peaked during the Mau Than General Offensive and Uprising in 1968⁷. At the end of 1968, the City's Education and Propaganda Committee was awarded the Third-Class Liberation Medal by the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam.

During the years 1969–1970, amidst the general difficulties faced by the revolution, the Saigon teachers' movement encountered significant challenges and suffered great losses, necessitating changes in organizational and mobilization strategies. Through persistent efforts over many years, revolutionary bases were established and consolidated in numerous schools, continuing to resist reactionary educational culture and coordinating with broader movements of all social classes in urban areas.

⁷ *Sharing the Same Flag* (about the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam), National Political Publishing House, Hanoi, pp. 714–715.

In 1972, the Private School Congress was held, including members from the Private School Association, the Private Education Union, and parents. The Congress discussed and issued a 10-point proposal calling for equal rights between public and private schools in terms of both spiritual and material conditions, laying the groundwork for implementing private school regulations. The Director of the Private School Department and the puppet Technical and Legal Department were present and were compelled to commit to these demands.

After the Paris Agreement (January 1973), the teachers' movement formed a relatively broad front, uniting diverse groups across southern cities, gaining the sympathy of various religious communities, exploiting internal conflicts among the enemy, and leveraging opportunities for open and legal struggles. When the enemy resorted to terrorism and school closures, teachers joined the broader movement to aid war victims, demand the implementation of the Paris Agreement, improve prison conditions, oppose dismissals, advocate for union freedoms, fight corruption, support the “journalists eat and work” day, and back the student movement during “sleepless nights” and “get up and go” campaigns.

A notable new feature of the movement during this period was its strong opposition to the mobilization law and the militarization of schools. Teachers played an essential role in struggles on the podium, in discussions, and in organizing training classes and professional development. They advocated for private school regulations, demanded ownership rights within schools, and engaged in activities that limited the enemy's enslaving, fascist, and reactionary educational policies, thereby contributing to the comprehensive crisis of the Saigon puppet regime.

During the General Offensive and Uprising to liberate Saigon, the teaching force within the “Intellectual Education Force” made significant contributions by safeguarding offices, schools, equipment, documents, and more. This ensured that cultural and educational activities could resume immediately after liberation. It is evident that “when our army entered Saigon, the educational force from the war zone was already present. However, the force was insufficient to take over all educational facilities in such a large city. It was the local teachers, students, and pupils—supported by our secret bases within the Private Education Union, the Friendship Association,

and the Teachers' Union—who made important contributions to protecting and preserving educational facilities from central to district levels”⁸.

Conclusion

The resistance war against the US was a people's war—comprehensive and long-lasting. Culture was both a front and a shared cause of the entire population, in which those directly engaged in cultural and educational work played a particularly vital role.

The contributions of Saigon's teaching staff throughout the 21 years of the resistance war against the US to save the country affirmed their role as “the core force on the cultural and educational front, fighting against the US colonial culture that corrupted human values, destroyed national cultural heritage and the healthy lifestyles of society, while protecting and fostering national and democratic elements in culture, preserving national identity, and liberating people from the influence of hybrid culture and the spiritual enslavement of the US-puppet regime”⁹.

Today, Ho Chi Minh City, along with the rest of the country, continues the renovation process and accelerates the industrialization and modernization of the nation. However, the legacies of neo-colonial culture have not been completely eradicated. Therefore, “building and developing an advanced Vietnamese culture imbued with national identity” remains the shared mission of all citizens, with intellectuals playing a crucial role. Now more than ever, the revolutionary cause calls upon the teaching staff—those on the frontlines of culture and education—to uphold the proud traditions of their profession, make greater efforts, and “strive for our Fatherland to forever remain a civilized nation and for our people to be a cultured nation”¹⁰.

References

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⁸ *Sharing the Same Flag* (on the National Liberation Front of South Vietnam), op. cit., p. 719.

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