

PATRICIA D. NORLAND

The Saigon Sisters: Privileged Women in the Resistance.

Ithaca, NY: Northern Illinois University Press, 2020. 280 pages. \$39.95 (hardcover), \$25.99 (e-book).

Patricia D. Norland's *The Saigon Sisters* contributes to the limited primary sources available on the activity of Vietnamese women during the Indochina Wars. Norland, trained in journalism and diplomacy, brings to print the stories of nine women through interviews she conducted and translated over three decades, beginning in 1989. These women, collectively referred to as the "Saigon sisters," came from educated families only to leave their statuses and connections behind to participate in revolutionary activity in the 1950s. There are not many narratives about or by women, especially in the English language, regarding the social and political upheavals of twentieth-century Vietnam. The unprecedented achievement of recording these oral histories not only gives voice to these individuals, it also contributes to demystifying political participation.

Part 1 focuses on the women's families and student life at the Lycée Marie Curie, a school reserved for children of French and elite Vietnamese families. In these interviews, the women describe the different ways they became involved in politics. Sisters Thanh and Trang, for example, hid until their parents conceded to help them prepare for life in the jungle. Lê An, on the other hand, simply followed her father, since he was already involved in the resistance. Oanh did not leave for the maquis but instead went abroad to Wisconsin, which prepared her for a career in social work. Despite their varying involvement, these women all felt a conviction to restore justice and equality in the country. Part 2 subsequently focuses on their trajectories as older women during both the division and eventual reunification of the

Journal of Vietnamese Studies, Vol. 17, Issue 4, pps. 141–143. ISSN 1559-372X, electronic 1559-3738.
© 2022 by The Regents of the University of California. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press' Rights and Permissions website, at <https://online.ucpress.edu/journals/pages/reprintspermissions>. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1525/vs.2022.17.4.141>.

country, in 1954 and 1975, respectively. In addition to the accounts of the nine women, Norland also includes conversations with figures like musician Trần Văn Khê and Oanh's mentor Father Jacques, who recounts his meeting with Ngô Đình Diệm. The book concludes with the sisters' reunion after many years of separation.

Cultivated by their privileged educational backgrounds, the women brought to the maquis and their careers their own talents and interests, including a knowledge of arts and languages. In this way, beyond the image of guerilla warfare in jungles, they highlight the role of literature, theater, and music in boosting morale and building relationships, adding a human element to the characteristically violent terms of "revolution" and "resistance."

The foreword and preface, along with the opening remarks to the chapters, summarize and situate the content of the interviews but do little interpretation. There are only occasional suggestions for further areas of scrutiny. Norland's compilation indeed shines light onto interesting paradoxes and complexities of political involvement but leaves much room for exploration. For example, Norland strongly emphasizes the privileged background of these women and how striking this made their participation in the maquis. This narrative of leaving the comforts of their status in order to don black pajamas amplifies the grandeur of the revolutionary cause as well as their sacrifice. One of the women, Sen, reveals in her interview that the resistance treated people according to their class, for "the poorer you were, the more you were valued," and yet, it was the bourgeois girls who garnered more attention from the leaders (70). How is the ultimate communist ideal to create a classless society to be reconciled with the reality of such distinctions? In addition, the bureaucratic roles of some of the sisters' fathers show an important ambivalence of the bourgeois Vietnamese families toward the revolution. Their work as *fonctionnaires* in the French administration ensured family security without necessarily indicating a colonial allegiance. These details are extremely valuable to understanding the Vietnamese perspective to revolution and deserve more attention.

Norland also mentions that these women, raised within a Confucian society, were often uncomfortable speaking about themselves. In what they did share, many of the women, like Trang and Xuân, were in tune with the

contradictions within Confucian as well as colonial structures in society. Despite being sent to a Western school, Trang and her sisters were nevertheless confined to their father's feudal values in which daughters remained docile and obedient. Trang wanted simply to live freely (35). Such nuance clarifies Trang's participation in the maquis, for leaving the confines of Saigon and her surroundings seemed to bear meaning beyond the political, anticolonial cause. In these areas, Norland's presentations of the interviews could go further in framing and highlighting patterns that make movement from interview to interview more coherent.

Lastly, throughout the preface and in the interviews, it remains unclear what Norland means by "resistance." What was the Vietnamese term used? Is it resistance against colonialism, American imperialism, Ngô Đình Diệm, or a combination of all of these? We might gather from the sisters' clandestine activity in South Vietnam and their anti-Ngô Đình Diệm sentiments that perhaps Norland means the communist cause. What's important about such precision is not the determination of sides, but the wresting of meanings away from mainstream narratives. Presently, said "resistance" risks being glossed over as a monolithic Vietnamese effort that then castigates opposing parties, including the Ngô Đình Diệm administration, as being a mere instrument of American imperialism. It becomes easy to adhere to these common narratives regarding the First and Second Indochina Wars, as well as those of women's unconditional sacrifices for nationalist causes. It would do these women's stories a disservice if they were left to fall into the enclaves of these predetermined narratives.

Some lingering questions are left unanswered: Does Norland remain "neutral" in such a presentation of the interviews? How then might we interpret her role in assembling, translating, and editing the interviews? What is nevertheless important to retain from this work are the women's unprecedented voices in retelling these political moments in Vietnamese history and their commitment to construct an enduring society that they could live in and be proud of. Norland has done the hard work of consolidating them, and how we might make sense of what has been shared (or not) is the task that remains.

Yen Vu, Columbia University