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The origins of the role played by women in Vietnamese society today are very ancient. Popular tradition on the one hand and historical necessity on the other have in the course of many centuries forged the qualities of Vietnamese women and their capacity to struggle for meaningful participation in the building of society. Studies of folklore and popular tales, archaeological research, and ethnology have made it possible for us now to reconstruct a fairly accurate history of women in Viet Nam and envisage how their conditions were, what the role they played in ancient society was, and what their contributions to the common achievement of the Vietnamese people have been.

Chapter 1

WOMEN IN ANCIENT TIMES

A - THE BEGINNINGS OF VIETNAMESE HISTORY

Recent archaelogical excavations have made clear the significance of our tales and legends about the origin of our people and the birth of the Vietnamese nation. The land of Viet Nam, populated from time immemorial by aboriginal ethnic groups was the objective of considerable migrations from the north, and it was from the crossing of races in which ethnic elements of nordic origin prevailed that the Vietnamese people emerged. A legend handed down from generation to generation tells of this birth in the following manner:

"... Fifty of the boys followed their mother and settled in Phong Chau¹ and founded the kingdom of Van Lang. The most valorous of them was proclaimed king, the first Hung king².

^{1.} In Vinh Phu province today.

^{2.} The epoch of "the Hung Kings" was somewhere in the 2nd and 3rd millennia B.C.

"As Au Co, the mother, was a fairy, her children followed her to the country of the maternal line¹."

This legend that tells of the origins of the people on the maternal side substantiates that matriarchy held sway. Our ancestor, Lady Au Co, was the first of a long line of famous Vietnamese women.

I. Primitive Society and the Reign of Matriarchy

Legends have also been sources of precious information about primitive society, in which women played the dominant role. Women of the time are portrayed as veritable giants both stronger and more capable than men:

"Once upon a time there was a lady of the name of Nu Oa. She received a proposal of marriage from a man called Tu Tuong. Her answer was to invite him to compete with her in putting up a hill in less than three days. Nu Oa did much better than her suitor and she had no more than to kick the hill built by Tu Tuong to destroy it. Far from being discouraged, the man made several further attempts and finally succeeded in obtaining Nu Oa's consent."

Another legend relates the great labours of Nu Oa, who "carried rocks to mend the sky, dug up the beds of rivers, and raised mountains," vestiges of

Recent archaeological excavations have brought evidence of the existence of such women to light. In Thieu Duong, Thanh Hoa province, bones of women nearly two metres tall with bronze bracelets around their wrists have been unearthed. Preliminary analyses attribute these remains to human groups living about 3,000 years ago, a difficult epoch when the newly-laid delta was being brought under cultivation. The terrain was still swampy and dotted with rugged hills. The "Legend of the Mountain Genie and the Water Genie" derives from the terrible floods that jeopardized the existence of these first settlers. The efforts made by the descendants of Nu Oa to conquer adverse natural conditions and establish their first settlements symbolize the contribution of women to the building of society.

1. Economic and Social Life

A great number of folk tales portray the matriarchy and accord to women the role of initiating agriculture and production. According to a legend of the Tay ethnic minority (living in Northern Viet Nam), it was their ancestor, Lady Sao Cai, who introduced the cultivation of rice into Viet Nam:

... "One day, she discovered a grass with white grains. She picked off the grains and scattered them on the mud. More plants grew from them and on them more grains."

^{1.} According to popular belief, fairies and gods lived on mountains.

^{1.} See appendices.

Viet Nam is among the first countries where rice was grown. Tales of Giao Chau, the Chinese annals, say that the population of Giao Chi knew how to cultivate rice and to use the rise and fall of the rivers for irrigation purposes. Vietnamese archaeologists have found grains of rice in ancient pots unearthed at Go Nua and Dong Dau, Vinh Phu province. Carvings on drums excavated at Dong Son which date back to more than 3,000 years B.C. show couples pounding rice, the women being represented in a very expressive way. Their major contribution in daily life was one of the sources of inspiration in pre-historical art.

Primitive beliefs raised women to the rank of goddesses presiding over the cultivation of rice and other food crops whose introduction is attributed to women. In many regions on the plain, ancient temples erected in honour of women bearing the names of food crops are not infrequent: Temple to Lady Soya, Temple to Lady Mulberry, Temple to Lady Bean. These cults are still practised to some extent today among a number of ethnic minorities. At harvest time in Tay Bac (North West), the Khmu, Khua, and Khang minorities choose a woman to be the "mother of rice." The latter goes to the fields very early in the morning before the arrival of the harvesters and pick a few ears, thereby appeasing the soul of the rice and warding off inclement weather for the next crop.

Archaeological remains in Hoa Binh, Quynh Van, Bac Son, (northern Viet Nam) testify to ancient

pottery making. Pieces of pots and vases with female finger-prints on them have been discovered. It is likely that women specialized in this primitive handicraft, the appearance of which marks an important development from the material, cultural and artistic points of view.

The matriarchal family had great respect for mothers, who not only ensured the perpetuation of the clan but also provided for the needs of the children. Female figurines with disproportionately large breasts and hips are evidence of the preoccupation with ensuring the perpetuation of the race by numerous offspring. Mothers of numerous children are common figures in Vietnamese legends: Lady Au Co gave birth to a hundred boys, Lady Sao Cai of the Tay to a hundred boys and girls, the Al Cai Ua bird laid a hundred eggs that hatched into a hundred children.

In the primitive family, the suckling and care of children were the collective responsibility of all the mothers in the clan. One still finds some collective suckling in the rural areas: if a new-born baby is orphaned or separated from its mother, it may be nursed in turn by all mothers in the neighbourhood until normal weaning age. There is no doubt that the tradition of boundless maternal love dates back to these times when any mother's life was wholly devoted to all the children of the community in her charge.

Consistent with her role in the family, a woman had the initiative and freedom to choose her mate

in marriage; as borne out by the "Legend of Princess Tien Dzung and Chu Dong Tu" The annals of the Chinese early Han dynasty (2nd century B.C.) relate that:

"It is the custom of the Lac Viet [Vietnamese] people to organize weddings on the occasion of the autumn festivals. Young people meet one another at the festivals and get married, and their parents have no right to interfere."

In many popular songs of the minorities in Tay Nguyen, it is the girl who makes the proposal of marriage. This is still the custom among the Ede, Jarai, Hre and Mnong ethnic groups. In certain regions such as among the Sedang in Tay Nguyen, there is a tradition that the betrothed woman ambushes to "capture" her future husband.

When married the young woman remained with her clan: her husband had to move to her home. In a number of regions, this custom survived the establishment of private marriage which ordained that the woman had to change her home. In some villages in Ha Tay and Ha Bac provinces (northern Viet Nam) the rule of residence in the wife's home after marriage is still applied. The bride stays only one night at her husband's house, with some of her friends. A few months, even a few years, after, the bridegroom's family has to organize a "return ceremony" to get her back. This custom is a survival of matriarchal marriage. Among the Lo Lo and the

Another form of matriarchal marriage, the levirate, was also practised for a long time in Viet Nam, even after the feudal regime was solidly established. However, in the 15th century, King Le Thanh Tong of the Le dynasty wrote at the apogee of feudalism in his "Leisure Time Writings Under Southern Skies": "The Man and the Lao (minorities of northern Viet Nam) must strictly abide by the ethical laws and respect traditions. When a man dies, it is forbidden for his child, brother, or nephew to marry his wife nor his concubines." The levirate was condemned by the feudalists, but it continued among the Meo until the revolution. The annals of the Later Han (Ist century A.D.) make the point very strongly that "the Lac Viet do not know the name of their fathers and do not respect their marital duties". Among the Khang minority in Tay Bac (northern Viet Nam) and the Cham, Ede, and Jarai in Central Viet Nam, children bore their mothers' family name until recently.

"Brooding", another characteristic of matriarchy, has changed form with time, but always marked the predominance of women in the family. Under Chinese feudal domination (1st century B.C. — 9th century A.D.), Chinese historians wrote: "When a Lac Viet woman has been delivered she leaves her bed and her husband takes her place: like a confined

Laga, ethnic minorities of Tuyen Quang province (northern Viet Nam), the husband has to take his wife's family name.

^{1.} See appendices.

woman, he has to observe certain restrictions in his daily food and take care of the new-born baby. "Over a thousand years have passed since then, but as late as before the Revolution it was the practice in a number of villages in northern and central Viet Nam when the mother was suffering the pains of childbirth, for the father to lie in bed and mime acute pains so as to lessen those of his wife. Another custom obliged him to climb up onto the roof of his house: he had to run as many risks as his wife in child-bed.

The maternal line remained dominant, even after the abolition of matriarchy. For instance, the avuncular system gave maternal uncles full authority over their nephews and nieces. The Van Kieu, an ethnic minority of the Truong Son chain, keep up the tradition of maternal uncles appropriating one third of their nieces' marriage gifts.

At social level, one always attributed the discovery or the first use of anything vital for the collective welfare to the efforts and initiative of women. A Tay legend gives Lady Sao Cai credit for discovering fire: she took it from a blasted tree, put it on hearth stones and was the first to cook rice with it. In many regions Lady Fire, the genius of the hearth, was worshipped in the form of an old woman tending a perpetual fire and preparing meals for the tribe on it. Likewise, it was the goddess of carpentry who taught men to make saws with edges like pineapple leaves, and to build houses and

canoes. The whole tribe, bearing their mother's name, lived in the same cave or in small villages that the popular songs of Tay Nguyen minorities describe as rows of houses "as long as the vibrations of gongs". Houses built behind each other, in order of generation hark back to such villages. The oldest woman, who was head of the family, took charge of the main hearth, saw to the preparation of the collective meals, gathered all the members of the tribe together and shared food out to them, and assigned work to each of them. In Nghe An province, there are numerous caves bearing women's names: Grotto of Lady Luong, Grotto of Lady Su...

Before the August Revolution (1945) it was a rule among the ethnic groups of the plateaus of southern Viet Nam that when a conflict broke out between two tribes older women were chosen for their experience as "messengers of peace" for the job of reconciliation. Women were likewise elected to deal with the affairs of the community, to act as judges and to preside over ceremonies. At a higher level, they assumed national responsibilities. According to a legend of the time of the Hung Kings, a border conflict arose between the kingdom of Van Lang and a neighbouring country. Each country appointed a representative to meet and settle the question: they were walking towards each other at the same time and a border-stone would be set up at the place where they met. Van Lang chose Lady Gia who was a very rapid marcher, and this resulted in the

frontier-mark being placed to the country's advantage, and the spot was thereafter called the Pass of Lady Gia.

2. Culture and Religion

The importance of women in the cultural and spiritual life of primitive Vietnamese society reflects her position in social life.

Bronze objects of the first millennium B.C., particularly daggers, are engraved with sihouettes of women with their hair plaited at the back. The walls of the Dong Noi caves, Hoa Binh province, are hung with horned human heads which according to archaeologists are heads of women who represented hinds and heifers during prehistoric religious ceremonies. Women and their activities have a privileged place in primitive art. Women were not only a source of inspiration for artists, but also seemed to command the same respect in the field of beliefs and religion, and this lasted for many generations.

Before the appearance of male idols, prehistoric men worshipped goddesses and women-genii. The sun and the moon for instance were two sisters who "took their turns touring the world of human beings to inspect their lives and work". According to a folk song, there was a group of goddesses or "godmothers" that supervised births and the education of children:

"It is an old woman and thirteen maidens that shape the ears and the eyes of the child.

Draw the eyebrows and the features of his face. Teach him to cry, to smile, to suck, to eat, and to crawl on all fours.

Protect his fontanel 1".

The three Parques lived in hell, span and then cut the thread of human life, but the Vietnamese "godmothers" took care of children. When the baby smiled during his sleep it had to be his "godmothers" teaching him to do so. When he fell he would come to no harm since his "godmothers" were supporting him. The Vietnamese practised the cult of those goddesses who looked after the health, happiness and future of their children. When the baby was one year old, a ceremony was held in honour of the "godmothers". The feast was composed of traditional dishes made with crabs, snails, grilled rice pancakes and rice flour bread and cake. The baby was placed on a mat before the altar of the godmothers so that he might choose one of the toys there, his "godmothers" would guide him in his choice and thereby decide his future. Should he choose a pen-brush, he would be an educated man. Or a plane, he would be a worker.

Goddesses and women-genii were very close to the mortals, participated in daily life and dominated the spiritual world as their human counterparts, the heads of tribe and the heads of family, did in this world. This worship of goddesses and women-genii persisted until the epoch of patriarchy.

^{1.} The fontanel is considered a vital spot that has to be protected against the changing of temperatures and shocks (traditional medicine):

The cult of tutelary genii was introduced with the advent of patriarchy. Celebrated men and benefactors of the population were venerated after their death as tutelary genii who, according to popular belief, would protect people from dangers and misfortunes. Each village had a temple to its tutelary genius, access to which was forbidden to women. But even in the heyday of feudalism, long after the establishment of patriarchy, there were still a number of temples in which people practised the cult of tutelary women-genii whose exploits or benevolence had made them immortal. In a temple of a tutelary woman-genius there would be a sacred palanguin with a hammock made of silk thread, instead of the usual lacquered and gilded wooden horse.

The influence of matriarchy is also felt in the practice of Buddhism, which was introduced in Viet Nam at the beginning of our era i. e. about two thousand years ago. Some town and village pagodas bear the names of female Buddhas: Pagoda of Lady Dau (Mulberry) Pagoda of Lady Da (Stone), Pagoda of Lady Tuong (the general). The sacred biography preserved at the Pagoda of Lady Dau tells the story of the female-Bodhisatva worshipped there:

"A poor young girl named Man saved her village of floods by taming the waters. After her death, she was given the title of Mother Bodhisatva and a pagoda was built in her honour. The anniversary of her death, the 4th day of the 4th (lunar) month was celebrated with the same solemnity as the 8th day of the same month, Buddha's birthday."

The invasion by the feudal Chinese led to religious doctrines from China mixing with local beliefs. The Three Temples religion, in spite of its Taoist origins, incorporates elements of Vietnamese pantheism, in which the world of divinities was similar to that of human beings, but was presided over by three goddesses, the Goddess of the Waters, the Goddess of the Forests and the Goddess of the Heavens.

Matriarchy was deeply rooted in this land won at such a price. Lady Au Co, Lady Nu Oa and Lady Sao Cai symbolized these early women to whom we attribute the "opening up of forests and carving out of mountains" to build up the society and who made an important contribution to family and social life. They seem to have bequeathed their traditions of labour and endurance to the generations of women that followed and would continue their work.

II. The Division of Society into Different Classes and the Advent of Patriarchy

1. Role Reversal in the Family

The advent of patriarchy in Viet Nam coincides with the later neolithic period, the time of the Hung kings. The most ancient historical documents about Viet Nam and the Chinese annals of the early Han dynasty show that it was at the time of the Hung Kings that the first indications appeared of the division of Vietnamese society into different classes, and the beginning of the patriarchal regime. The legend of the Mountain Genie and the Water Genie describes the marriage of princess Ngoc Hoa (Jade

Flower) daughter of the last Hung King, with the Mountain Genie in accordance with the rites of monogamy, including the bride moving to the house of her husband's parents and obligatory marriage gifts, the pricing of women characteristic in patriarchal society. Certain survivals from this epoch show the contempt for women which was characteristic of feudalism and which took root in the customs of people as a reaction to the former regime.

Every year, the population of Phu Dong village, Gia Lam district, present-day Hanoi, commemorate the child-hero Giong who under the reign of King Hung the 6th drove away the An invaders coming from the north. This took the form of a procession of 28 young girls wearing military helmets and multicoloured clothes representing the enemy. Ancient cosmogony had it that women were the "female principle" and the symbol of misfortune, so these young girls represented a maleficent spirit and the cowardice of the enemy.

However the echo of the past has not died entirely. It remains chiefly in folk songs, tales and legends, as evidenced by this plaint of a woman at having become the private property of the husband under patriarchy:

We all have to pay someone the debt of life. But where formerly it was due to one's wife, today it is paid to one's husband.

(Popular song)

The reversal of roles in the family when patriarchy was established did not prevent the survival and continued observance of the ancient customs of the matriarchal epoch during and even long after the first centuries A. D.

2. Vestiges of a Centuries-Old Social Organization

According to legend Princess Ngoc Hoa remained for a long time at her father's home after her marriage with the Mountain Genie. When the Genie came and asked her to come to his home, she followed him as far up as Mt Hy Cuong (Vinh Phu province); then she stopped, burst into tears, and refused to go any farther. The inhabitants of the surrounding villages came and cheered her up with dances and songs, and accompanied her to the marital dwelling. Many centuries later, the "procession of the Genie and the Princess" was still celebrated each year commemorating the return of Ngoc Hoa to her husband. Another custom observed in Ha Bac, Ha Tay, and Vinh Phu provinces until the August Revolution allowed the young wife to live at her parents' for some time. This is a survival of marriage customs dating back to the time of the Hung Kings.

The Chinese feudal domination (1st-10th century A. D) was unable to completely eradicate the ancient forms of marriage and family life and they were maintained in spite of the imposition of Chinese habits and customs, compulsory reforms decreed by Chinese governors Tich Quang and Nham Dien, and the tyrannical methods of To Dinh.

Survivals of old customs were severely criticized by the Chinese feudal historians.

"The Lac Viet do not bear the name of their fathers and knew nothing about marital duties,"

(Annals of the later Han, 1st century A.D.)

A report addressed by Chinese governor Tiet Tong to his king, under the Wu dynasty (3rd century A. D.), reveals that the inhabitants of certain regions of Giao Chi were still practising an "immoral custom" "when a man dies, his younger brother may marry his wife. This deplorable custom survives from generation to generation, and the interdictions imposed by the Chinese governors have no effect at all". (Annals of the Wu, 3rd century A.D.)

Marriage remained a free institution for a long time while feudalism was unable to impose the severity of its rites on it. Children bore neither their farther's family name, nor their mother's: they had their own names. The father did not yet have the arbitrary power of the omnipotent patriarch. Studies of ancient beliefs and religions practised in Vinh Phu province (the cradle of the Vietnamese people) the history of gods and goddesses worshipped in the temples of this province, and the analysis of ancient rites and religious prohibitions, show that under the Hung Kings women had an important role in society and administered social activities. There were temples in honour of the wives and the daughters of the Hung Kings, the mothers of heroes, the

mothers of civilian and military mandarins who had done good service to the king, the women-leaders of ancient communities, women who had taught the people agriculture, weaving, silkworm raising and women who had participated in "State affairs". Thus matriarchy still had a historical role during this epoch.

Equality between the sexes remained a natural social feature. Women assumed the role of heads of the community on an equal footing with men. The first Vietnamese insurrection that broke out in the year 40 against the domination of the Han, was led by two women, the Trung sisters, daughters of a lac tuong (regional military commander). The elder of the two, Trung Trac, replaced her husband at the head of her community when he was killed by Chinese governor To Dinh, and led an uprising against the Chinese domination to "pay her debt towards the motherland and revenge her family". Generals, regional lords, army commanders, men and women all fought under the command of the two sisters. Lac hau and lac tuong lords representing sixty-five areas, symbolised by their citadels, united under their banner. The heritage of such a regime that lasted for many thousands of years, and during which women's abilities had been fostered and their prestige had grown, meant that there were other talented women who joined the two Trung sisters and drove away the invaders. All over northern Viet Nam there are still temples dedicated to the two sisters or to their women-captains, whose sacred

biographies ¹ preserved there relate their military feats in service of the people. Lady Le Chan, for instance, is even now worshipped at the Thi Nghe temple in Haiphong as the founder of this town. She organised the population in reclaiming and cultivating coastal heathland, and establishing the domain of An Bien (Tranquil Coasts). When the insurrection of the two Trung sisters broke out, she joined them at the head of her army and became one of their best generals.

Two centuries later, a young woman of Thanh Hoa province, Trieu Trinh Nuong, organised an uprising with her elder brother against the rule of the Wu feudalists. The brother has been forgotten but the image of this young woman, advancing at the head of her army on her elephant, exhorting men and women to fight, has been immortalised by the people as in this song:

Sleep, my child, sleep,

Mummy is going to fetch water to wash the gilded seat of the elephant.

Let's climb the hill to watch Lady Trieu on her elephant, beating the gong.

Let us fill brocade pouches, rose silk bags...
With betel for our husbands who are going to war.

(Folk song)

Patriotism and national spirit drew the whole nation into the struggle, but it was thanks to her own fighting spirit and ability to command that Lady Trieu was able to organise and lead an armed uprising. Recently a bronze sword was discovered on Mount Nua in Thanh Hoa province, where the insurrection of Lady Trieu took place. The carving on the handle of the sword shows a woman of the Vietnamese aristocracy wearing a turban and sumptuous clothing. The sword dates back to the last stage of the Dong Son culture (from the first century B. C to the first century A. D.) Male figures of the same epoch have bare torsos and wear simple loin-cloths. Thus women still played an important role then and were respected and esteemed by society both for their abilities and their functions. According to the 5th century annals of Kouang Tcheou (Chinese province close to Viet Nam), at ceremonies to bless bronze drums, it was always a young girl of the nobility who had the honour of beating the first strokes on the drums with a long gold or silver hairpin. The worship of goddesses was still practised. The mother of the young hero Giong (the saviour of the country in the reign of King Hung the 6th), the two Trung sisters, their women-army commanders and Lady Trieu, were all deified after their death. The four most ancient Vietnamese temples were built in the first centuries of the Christian era and dedicated to the cult of four women: Lady Zau, Lady Dau, Lady Gian, and Lady Tuong.

^{1.} Biographies of well-known men and women and women (workshipped like gods and goddesses) kept in temples erected to their memory.

Elements of matriarchy persisted till the 15th century, and even till today, sometimes very faithful to their original aspect. The period of transition to patriarchy in Viet Nam extended beyond the prehistoric era, and the reversal of roles in the family, the "great historic defeat of woman", was therefore less brutal than it could have been. This has had a profound effect on the development of women down through national history and has enabled them to shake off their oppression and pursue the path charted by their ancestors, in spite of the social inequalities and injustices characteristic of a class society.

B. TEN CENTURIES UNDER FEUDALISM

In 207 B.C. the kingdom of Au Lac was invaded by the Chinese feudal lord Trieu Da and merged with his own fief to form his kingdom. In 111 B.C. the kingdom of Trieu Da was in its turn subjugated by the Han feudalists, who defeated the other feudal lords and unified China into a large empire. Viet Nam fell under the yoke of the Han and suffered the oppression of the Chinese domination for ten centuries. During this ordeal, the Vietnamese people fought a constant battle to safeguard their existence as a nation and to reconquer their independence.

The Han feudalists applied a policy of systematic assimilation, promulgating stringent measures to this end, imposing the Confucian doctrine, and enforcing Chinese regulations and rites so as to sinicize the people even in the fields of language and clothing. This policy was pursued and developed by the conquering dynasties that followed the Tang, the Sung, the Wu..., but in vain, because the Vietnamese people remained united and kept their identity in spite of the deep marks left by ten centuries of Chinese domination. Their national spirit, steeled by successive armed insurrections, was also strengthened by the indomitable determination of a whole people deeply attached to freedom and to their motherland.

Viet Nam's invaders found a well-organized and long-established society, and a developed bronze civilisation of some age with marked national characteristics. Bronze drums, jewelry and tools all testify to an advanced civilization. Thousands of years of fierce struggle against nature had taught the Vietnamese people to work together in order to survive and they gradually developed into a nation with much experience of struggle and an undaunted national spirit.

Vietnamese women were intimately bound up with the evolution of the people, and had contributed to the emergence of this national spirit. The considerable part they played in the common endeavours of the nation armed them for the struggle for the right to live in feudal society.

I. Women's Status under the Feudal Regime

In 939, Ngo Quyen drove away the Nam Han and this ushered in the era of Vietnamese independence. The dynasties that succeeded Ngo Quyen

consolidated this independence and strove to organize a feudal Stage on the Chinese model. Confucianism, the ideological basis of Chinese feudalism, became the national doctrine and the fundamental ideological system of Vietnamese society from the 13th century onward. The organization of the State as well as family and social relations were increasingly influenced by it.

However, societal organisation in communes which had lasted for over two thousand years, continued to develop, and the village communities solid social units whose members were all "relatives and co-villagers" united by close family and social ties - remained autonomous vis-à-vis the central administration and were actually bastions of traditional Vietnamese customs and habits as well as preserving Vietnamese national characteristics. Edicts or laws which grossly encroached on traditions which had developed over the course of thousands of years often remained dead letters in the countryside. Whence we have this dictum: "The King's decrees bow to the village customs". The feudal State had to take this social reality into account and to adapt the political doctrines of Confucianism applied in China to it. Their policy towards women paid special attention to these national characteristics. But the development of Vietnamese feudalism could not be stopped, and gradually its national character was reduced and a more and more rigorous and reactionary regime imposed on the country.

1. From the Code of the Ly Dynasty to the Hong Duc Code

The 10th-century King Dinh Tiên Hoang had five queens crowned, as did his successor, King Le Dai Hanh. In subsequent dynasties, there were even more queens: Ly Thai To and Ly Thanh Tong had nine each. Confucian historians sternly criticized this practice as not conforming to the patriarchal regime: "A king can maintain a numerous harem but he can appoint only one queen as his legitimate wife." The first kings of feudal Viet Nam did not abide by the laws observed in China at the same epoch: for instance, the heir to the throne was not necessarily the king's eldest son, as in China, but was chosen among the royal descendants for his courage and abilities. Thus, Vietnamese feudalism in its initial stage was influenced by the previous social regime.

Vietnamese society, however, was a class society which considered women inferior. Under the Ly (11th century) the legal code allowed the requisition of the wives and children of exiled persons; and the royal concubines were burned at the death of the King and the queen. Forced marriage became the lot of women of the aristocracy as well as of the popular strata. For reason of State Vietnamese princesses under the Ly and the Tran were made to marry the chiefs of minority tribes, these promising in exchange their allegiance to the King. Princess Huyen Tran (12th century) was exchanged for O and Ly provinces (present-day Quang Binh and

Quang Tri) belonging to the King of Champa. Polygamy and the sale of wives and daughters were allowed by law. The penal code of the Ly in 1042 forbade only the sale of male children 18 years of age and older, the sale of daughters being a father's right. Concubinage became legal and the legitimate wife, who was herself a subject of her husband, had absolute power over her husband's concubines.

However, these rites and decrees were not accepted among the people so easily. Marriage remained free, and according to the historian Le Trac (18th century):

"Matches between poor young people¹ were not arranged through a go-between²; they chose their husbands and wives freely."

The practice of the bride remaining at her parents' home was widespread until the 15th century. "At that time (from the period of the Hung Kings to the 15th century) marriages did not conform to the prevailing rules. The bridegroom's family had to wait three or four years before they could celebrate the return of the bride" (History of Viet Nam through Excerpts, 18th century).

The Hong Duc code (15th century) granted women the right to ownership of property on the same footing as men. Articles 372 and 374 stipulated that Many other facts about the social life of that epoch testify to the rights of women being in proportion to their important role in the family and in society. In 1968, a series of legal papers dating back to the 15th and 16th centuries were found in a cave of Nui Che (Mt Ba Vi) in Ha Tay province. These are bills of sale, bills of purchase, and mortgages, many of them bearing women's names under the fingerprints: Mrs Vu Thi Duc, orphan girl Trinh Thi Chau, Mrs Nguyen Thi Pha... Women were evid-

[&]quot;wives have the same right to ownership as their husbands. When a couple shared property, the wife retained full rights over any property she had inherited from her own parents and over her dowry. Common property was divided equally between husband and wife. "Article No 387 gave both sons and daughters inheritance rights. If there was no son Article № 390 stipulated that the eldest daughter might inherit the "incense-and-fire property" 1 to ensure perpetuation of the cult of the family ancestors. When King Ly Hue Ton (11th century) retired he left the throne to his daughter Phat Kim. The court approved her investiture in as solemn a coronation as if she had been a prince. She was the first titular queen of Viet Nam, queen Ly Chieu Hoang. Thus "if there is no son, the daughter will replace him" (popular saying).

^{1.} Young persons of the common people.

^{2.} Intermediary personage, indispensable in feudal marriages, ensuring the liaison between the two families.

^{1.} Movable and immovable property—lands, ancestral house, cult objects, altar to the ancestors—which the eldest child of the eldest branch of a family inherited to perpetuate the cult of ancestors.

ently free to utilize, sell or offer their personal property to pagodas as religious donations. Women's names are often found engraved on the stelae of ancient pagodas. The name of Mrs Do Thi Tinh was engraved in 1331 in Sung Thien pagoda (Veneration of the Good). Hai Hung province, when she offered one of her fields to the pagoda. The inaugural oration engraved on a bell cast in the Ly dynasty, the Big Bell of Vân Ban (Clouds and Trees) pagoda, in Do Son, Hai Phong, quotes among other names: "Mr. Nguven Nghe and Mrs. Chu Thi Trai offered an orchard. Mr. Chu Lam and his sister, Mrs. Chu Thi Trai offered a field..." (Chu Thi Trai thus offered two presents, one with her husband which was taken from their common property, one with her brother, taken from her personal property).

The legal power of women allowed them to bring a regional mandarin or functionary to court. In the same cave of Nui Che, a petition was discovered bearing the date "Second year of the reign of Thong Nguyen, eleventh month, twenty-eighth day" (1523). It was signed by a woman of the name of Nguyen Thi Ninh who was suing a civil servant called Pham Pho.

Royal annals and official history imbued with the feudal spirit say almost nothing about the political

and social activities of the women of that epoch, but they mention the names of nationally renowned women who were outstanding in their direction of public affairs. The kings or the Ly dynasty (11th and 12th centuries) allowed princesses to attend royal conferences with the high-ranking mandarins of the Court and deal with State affairs. When King Dinh Tien Hoang was assassinated in 979 his six-year-old son succeeded him, but the court also crowned young Queen Duong Vân Nga as queen-mother and regent to the child-king. When the Chinese Sung feudalists heard this they sent an expeditionary corps to Dai Co Viet (The Large Country of the Viet1) in 980. The queen-mother entrusted the conduct of the national resistance to Le Hoan, a young general who had great prestige among his soldiers, and whom they wanted on the throne. In view of the serious situation, Queen Duong Vân Nga ceded the throne to Le Hoan before he went to war. She convened the court and made him to put on the regal robe to symbolise the step. The young military chief became king, drove away the Sung and married the queen, inaugurating the early Le dynasty (980-1009). Official annals as well as historical chronicles of subsequent periods, far from praising the intelligence and the patriotism of the young queen, did nothing but condemn her remarriage as an act of infidelity to her dead husband and a serious infringement of the rule of the Three Obedien-

^{1.} Personal property (land, houses, money, jewelry) was offered to pagodas to finance the cult of Euddha, ensure the upkeep of pagoda buildings; to contribute to the casting of bells... According to popular belief, these gifts would bring eternal beatitude to the donors, whose names are engraved on the stone stelae set up in these pagodas.

^{1.} Name of Viet Nam under the reign of Dinh Tien Hoang.

ces 1. But among the people, her merit was extolled and her second marriage was qualified "a most suitable union between a beautiful woman and a talented man". There remain to this day two temples in Ninh Binh² erected in commemoration of the two kings, Dinh Tiên Hoang and Lê Hoan, and Queen Duong Vân Nga. The statue of the queen is in the temple dedicated to Lê Hoan. The river running through Ninh Binh after passing Hoa Lu (ancient capital of Dai Viet) where legend has it that the queen came to welcome the victorious general, is called the river of Lady Vân, an expression of the people's sympathy for a woman who acted counter to the stringent prohibitions of feudalism.

Conditions for women in national independence and sovereignty favoured the development of their aptitude for directing public affairs and their capacity for management. All agree on the great merits and the good deeds of Queen Y Lan, wife of King Ly Thanh Ton and mother of Ly Nhan Ton (11th century). She was born of a poor family, but never tried to conceal her modest origins; she was a highly appreciated collaborator of the king, her husband, then of her son, in their efforts to unify the people. The "Complete History of Viet Nam" (15th century) tells us:

"... in 1069, King Ly Thanh Ton led an army to

the South to fight Champa which was launching

1. See page 43. 2. The native province of both Dinh Tien Hoang and Le Hoan.

armed provocations at the frontier. The expedition failed at first and the king decided to pull back his troops. On his way home, he heard everywhere how the people praised the queen's good deeds while she replaced him during his absence. Security reigned throughout his Kingdom and the queen was honoured as the Merciful Lady. The King was deeply moved, and was heard to cry out "The queen is only a woman but has achieved great marvels. What have I done myself. I a man? "He turned his troops round and marched on Champa again and vanquished it this time."

"... One day in 1117, Queen-Mother Linh Nhan1 told her son, King Ly Nhan Ton "Buffalo stealing is causing the peasants great hardships. Many families have only one buffalo between them for ploughing and harrowing. I have already brought this fact to your knowledge. Moreover, although the killing of buffaloes has been forbidden by the Court, the number of animals slaughtered continues increasing." Thereafter, King Ly Nhan Ton decreed that "He who kills a buffalo shall be punished by 80 strokes of the stick and condemned to hard labour in the army, his wife shall also have 80 strokes of the stick and be condemned to hard labour rearing silk worms. Those neighbours who are aware of the crime and fail to denounce it shall be subjected to 80 strokes of the stick..."

^{1.} Queen Y Lan was made Queen-Mother Linh Nhan at the death of King Ly Thanh Ton.

The Queen-Mother was the first woman of the ruling classes to take action in favour of the unfortunate young girls who were sold to rich families. In 1103, she requested the King for enough money from the royal funds to redeem these young girls and marry them to poor young men or to widowers.

The patriarchal regime was a source of numerous trials for women. However the still relatively favourable historical context enabled them to retain their former role in many fields of activity. The feudal regime had in its first stage to guarantee women their legitimate rights. The Hong Duc code dealt with the position of women in an exceptional way for this epoch, giving the question a national character. Article 307, for instance, defined the responsibility of the husband for his wife: if he abandoned her for five months (and there were no children) or for one year (for couples having children), the wife would be entitled to ask for divorce. Article 321 allowed a woman to divorce if her husband had abandoned her, if he was mentally deranged or if he was leprous...

Nevertheless, the Hong Duc code remains above all an institution created at the apogee of Vietnamese feudalism and designed to maintain this regime and preserve the privileges of the feudal caste. In the main it bolstered the supremacy of patriarchy; it was based on monarchy as a state system and on the Confucian doctrine as its ideological instrument. It was inevitable that it should contain contradictions with regard to the position of

women as it marked the transition from feudalism with markedly national characteristics to a period in which a backward and reactionary policy vis-àvis women was applied primarily. While it reflected recognition by the new regime of existing realities, i. e. that women played a real role in society, it constituted a manifesto disfavouring women and foreshadowed their enslavement and oppression by the dominant feudal class.

2. The Development of Confucianism

The introduction and popularization of Confucianism were carried out at an accelerated rate by the successive dynasties, from the Ly in the 11th century to the Nguyen in the 19th century. All teaching and education, the organization of selective examinations to recruit functionnaries, the officialdom of the regime, and intense, detailed propaganda work spread the basic tenets of this doctrine, including contempt for women, which gradually permeated the various strata of society, first and foremost the ruling class, i. e. the Vietnamese aristocracy. A legal system was established to maintain and consolidate the new social order. From the Ly to the Nguyen, three different codes — the Code of the Ly (11th century) the Hong Duc code (15th century), and the Gia Long code (19th century)1 were adopted, each one more reactionary and anti-national than the last

^{1.} The Gia Long code remained in force under French colonial rule, until the 1945 August Revolution.

and projecting more and more rigorous discrimination against women.

The Vietnamese feudal class acted according to strict principles and rules aimed at moulding docile women and keeping them that way, without personality, apathetic, true automatons subordinate to their privileges. The principle that "men are to be respected and women despised" was the basis on which Confucianism and the feudal sociale organization introduced an arbitrary and unequal division of labour: "Men live outside (in society), women inside the family". Women had to do all "domestic" tasks, small agrarian tasks and other productive occupations connected with ensuring the livelihood of the family, and the innumerable and harassing house chores. Moreover, mothers had to bring up their children but had no claim whatsoever on them. Confined within the family enclosure, their lot was to do the manual work that society held in contempt, while for men, the superior beings, was reserved the noble and refined spiritual activity worthy of those destined to assume leading roles. Access to various social positions, political gatherings, collective entertainments... which women had had for thousands of years, was forbidden to them from then on.

In keeping with the Confucian precept that "women are difficult to educate", men saw it as their mission to bring them up in accordance with "moral principles". The doors of public and private schools were closed to them, and women had no right to an education. The whole patriarchal hierarchy, — notable persons, heads of family, fathers, uncles,

brothers — brought them up very strictly right from their early childhood. The principles involved in this education stemmed from a subtle but powerful organization and brought strong moral pressure to bear upon women. It can be summed up in the two Dao, the two rules of life used as general principles, the Four Virtues, and the Three Obediences.

The rule of the Four Virtues compelled women to comply with a rigid factitious propriety in behaviour, gesture, language, and facial expression. They had to cultivate the particular qualities that were required of them - frankness, modesty, politeness and fidelity; they had at the same time to learn how to do all the domestic work and to see to the needs of all members of their families. The rule of the Three Obediences completed this education by binding women to their families and depriving them of their rights: young girls had to obey their father; when women married they had to obey their husbands; widows had to respect the guidance of their sons. So they remained legal minors all their lives. These fundamental tenets of Confucianism were the educational principles followed in public and private schools where boys and young men were prepared for their roles as patriarchs or heads of families, where their future behaviour as husbands and masters was inculcated into them.

Educational statutes were issued by successive dynasties and they contained particular directives concerning women. The 15th-century king Le Thanh Ton promulgated not only the Hong Duc code, but

the "24 points on education" as well, nine of which concerned women's duties:

"... Point 6: a guilty woman punished by her parents or her husband must endeavour to correct herself. She must not flee away, nor dishonour feminine virtues..."

"Point 7: It is prohibited for a widow to accommodate young men for immoral purposes."

"Point 9: A childless widow shall remain in the family of her husband and observe the rules of mourning. She may not transfer the movable and immovable property of the married couple to her own parents'".

"Point 10: A married woman must obey her husband. She must not boast of her riches and hold him in contempt. If she fails to accomplish her duties as a wife, her parents shall be punished."

In accordance with a royal decree, regional administrative authorities had to organize courses to explain these "24 points" to the population. In the villages, the basic unit of social organization, "the officials picked aged and virtuous men to discourse on the royal ordinance" "Obeying these wise admonitions, the inhabitants follow the path of the good, and customs and habits will improve."

The new "47-point edict" of the 17th century further established these obscurantist and enslaving tendencies. In the 19th century under the reactionary regime of the Nguyen, the oppression of the people, women especially, came to a head. Under the reign of Minh Mang, the whole population of each

village, men and women, old and young, had to gather every month in the communal house to listen to the agent of the administration explaining "the King's 10 commandments." ¹

A profusion of didactic works were published from the 15th century on many of them, such as "Education in the family" (15th century), had whole chapters devoted to women. Specialized works with such titles as "Education of Girls", "Duties of Women and Girls", educational songs and poems took pains to illustrate the rules of the Four Virtues and the Three Obediences, using the form and content most suitable for each social stratum, from the common people to the aristocracy. Administrative sanctions were enforced against any traditional customs and habits which ran counter to the tenets of Confucianism and the patriarchal regime.

According to a custom in Thanh Hoa, young men and women got together at each traditional festival to sing love songs while holding hands and looking into each other's eyes. In 1435, King Le Nhan Ton went to Thanh Hoa. The young people had gathered to sing in this way to welcome the king. A mandarin of the royal suite, Dông Hanh Phat, remarked to general Le Kha "This custom is intolerable. These young people should not have sung such songs in

^{1.} These compulsory educational meetings, as strange and irritating as they were unpopular, were the cause of much derision by the people whence this popular saying: "As tasteless as listening to explanations of the ten commandments."

front of His Majesty." Le Kha prohibited the songs on the spot.

To wipe out all traces of matriarchal marriage, like the bride living at her mother's after the marriage, which was still popular, King Le Thanh Ton issued the following order in 1470: "All marriages must be decided on by intermediaries... then there must be a betrothal ceremony!, and then a wedding proposal ceremony. Once these rites have been accomplished, an auspicious day will be chosen for the welcoming of the bride (the principal ceremony of a marriage). The next day, the latter must go to greet her parents-in-law, and the third day, she must go and prostrate herself before her husband's ancestors' altar. No one may diverge from these rites."

Feudal tyranny also resorted to new laws to confine women to the family dwelling and to deprive them of all possibility of emancipation. Those women who were bold enough to trespass against the imposed discipline were subjected to barbarous chastisements. The wife was the private property of the husband, and he had the legal right to punish her if she should commit adultery. He might, for example, tie her onto a raft and let her drift down a river, or paste lime on her nape after cropping her hair and walk her about the village... From the Hong Duc code to the Gia Long code, articles depriv-

ing women of their rights became more numerous and more rigorous. First their rights to ownership and inheritance were abrogated. All family property, even the results of their own labour, belonged to their fathers or their husbands. The Hong Duc code at the beginning of the 15th century, still recognized the women's right to ownership, but at the end of the Le dynasty (16th century) this right was a thing of the past. "From the common people to the Wise Men, everyone is grieved by this fact" the scholars of the epoch grumbled, "our ancestors should have assured their succession. If the eldest branch has no male child, the younger branch assumes the right to succeed in order to perpetuate the line. A daughter should never inherit nor be entrusted with the worship of ancestors" 1. Because of their economic and moral dependency, women were deprived of their basic rights. Cruel practices encouraged by the feudal authorities banned them from society and made them objects of contempt. The conception that "women belong to the female principle, a sign of evil and inferiority", was gradually made even worse by a backward and discriminatory system of education to become the complete arbitrary rule that women were bearers of misfortune and were impure beings. These ideas acquired a social force in the course of time and determined collective behaviour towards women. If a man met a woman when leaving his house, he

^{1.} Ceremony in which wedding gifts were handed over by the family of the future bridegroom. From that date on, the girl was considered betrothed.

^{1.} Vu Trung Tuy But (Essays Written on Rainy Days) by Pham Dinh Ho (19th century).

would return home at once, because his day was fated and he would only meet with failure in his business. If he was a tradesman he would burn votive objects to eliminate the baleful influence the woman would have on the number of his customers. Women, impure beings, could not approach sacred places, and especially not the altars of ancestors and the temples of tutelar genii. Women swallowed their inferior role, their original sin, humbled themselves in their social and family relations, and concealed themselves as much as possible. Sometimes, even nowadays, in the countryside when a woman meets a man on the way, she may instinctively step aside to save him the mishap of "crossing a woman at the outset".

3. Slave and Commodity

"A hundred girls are not worth one boy". This saying had both economic as well as moral significance: the male child ensures succession, he "brings" his parents, in addition to the heritage, a daughter-in-law, an extra work-hand for the family. Feeding a daughter on the contrary, is an unprofitable investment.

A daughter is the child of other people
Only a daughter-in-law is the true child of her
parents-in-law since they have bought her.

(Folk song)

Until the development of the agricultural cooperative movement (1960), there were parents who never taught their daughters the trade practised in

their village community, lest they should divulge the secret of the craft to other communities. The village of Vong (outskirts of Hanoi) is wellknown throughout the country for its "com" (sticky eighth-month rice harvested unripe, grilled and lightly pounded with a pestle), but the preparation of this rice was taught to daughters-in law only.

Mothers who bore many daughters would cry over their misfortune: they were accused of being "fatal mothers", their husbands would take concubines and might have male children by them, and the wives' parents-in-law would repudiate them. The family heritage which they had made a great contribution to through their labour would pass beyond their control. The life of a girl in her family followed her condition. While a boy "devoted all his time to reading, reciting poetry, preparing for exams, and ensuring the family succession", a girl had to "attend to domestic work, now weaving, now embroidering" (Folk song). When she is young, it is mainly she who helps her mother; when the latter becomes too old, exhausted by long years of hard work, it is she who will do all the domestic tasks and take her place in agricultural and handicraft production. Although she enriches the family by her labour she is not considered a full member of it, because once married she will live for ever in another family. This constitutes an economic and financial loss for her parents, which has to be redeemed, and they can legitimately demand compensation for the pains they have taken to bring her up and the cost of feeding her. The wedding gifts originate from this

attitude that the young woman is no more than a piece of merchandise. In popular language, the words for "marry" and "sell" often go together. The price of a girl to be married is composed of three kinds of exchange values: foodstuffs (particularly sticky rice and pork), utensils and clothes, and money. The Gia Long code lists the marriage gifts prescribed for various social classes, from common people to the nobility. Among a number of ethnic minorities in Tay Bac the bridegroom's family had to furnish a buffalo in exchange for the bride, the idea being that the animal would replace her in production work. The exchange was made between the bride's parents — the true owners of the girl — and the marriage-broker, the indispensable intermediary stipulated in the marriage statutes. "A daughter sits where her parents tell her to." (popular saying). She had to give them complete obedience and she was tied the rest of her life to the man her parents chose for her. If she resisted and refused to live with him, she would be blamed for "abandoning her husband" and was subject to humiliation until she yielded, having no alternative but suicide. Formerly

"In Phuong Bang village, Ha Tay province, every year at the Mid-Autumn festival (15th day of the 8th lunar month) night watchers¹ would break into houses of the families of "girls who had abandoned their husbands" They would

3

upset straw stacks, and climb all over the bins of paddy looking for the fugitive. Should the latter have hidden in a trunk, she and the box would be brought out and the young woman would be taken back to her parents-in-law's by force, exposed to abuse and beaten on the way. In another region, the culprit would be taken to the communal house, and judged by officials. There, she would be terrified by an array of instruments of torture — sticks, whips and canes — and subjected to the abuses of the gathering. After such humiliation, she was taken back to her husband's."

As for a married man, he could indulge in the pleasures of an idle life.

All day long he drinks tea and liquor, Smokes, and plays games for money.

(Folk song)

Now he has a wife at his service. It is she who looks after his old parents in his place. She takes care of the children, from their birth to their marriage; and then she withdraws and leaves the decisions to her husband. She busies herself with all kinds of work, gets up early and sits up late at night. She has the sole responsibility for providing the whole family with everything they need, from their daily meals to banquets on the ancestors' anniversaries, from clothes for everyone in the family to the personal taxes of the men. If her husband was brutal or unfaithful, she would resign

^{1.} Night watchers were in charge of order and security in the village.

herself to it because it was her fate. Legislation was on the husband's side, allowing him seven reasons for repudiation of his wife:

Article 108 of the Gia Long code permitted the husband and his family to repudiate the wife without having to bring her to the mandarin, if she committed one of these faults:

- 1. no male issue;
- 2. bad behaviour;
- 3. failure to fulfil her duties towards her parents-in-law;
- 4. given to gossip;
- 5. theft;
- 6. jealousy;
- 7. disability.

If a legitimate wife ran away from the marital family while her husband was alive, she would be punished by 100 strokes of the rod and her husband was empowered to sell her to another man. If she ran away and remarried, she would be condemned to strangulation, but reprieve was possible. In similar cases, a concubine would receive the same punishment, with reduction of two degrees. A wifeservant who ran away would be returned to her husband. Anyone affording refuge to the fugitive or marrying her of his own free will would be punished in the same way, in addition to having his property confiscated. So the husband was able to repudiate, at any moment and for no reason, his wife

who was already a victim at the mercy of his strictly hierarchized family in which his aunts were "more ferocious than the Wu pirates" 1

The father-in-law is like the plumage of a phoenix,
The mother-in-law, a freshly lacquered and gilded
statue,²

The new bride, a basket for abuses.

(Folk song)

Mothers-in-law were traditionally cruel to their daughters-in-law, over whom they had absolute power. Ill-treated all their lives by their husbands' families, they sometimes took out their revenge on their daughters-in-law; who would wield full power when their turns come. This endless succession of misery was closely linked with the position of women whose horizons were limited to the family enclosure: they were cut off from social life and condemned to obscurantism.

Child marriage and polygamy increased women's ordeal. A father could give his daughter to the family of his creditor, to acquit a debt, and she would be married to a young boy whose family needed a

^{1.} The lowest-ranking kind of wife.

^{1.} Name of the aggressors who invaded Viet Nam in the 3rd century.

^{2.} Ironical comparison: the father-in-law, the supreme chief, is distant, inaccessible to his daughter-in-law and as precious as a phoenix. The mother-in-law is mellow, hypocritical and has a deceptive appearance like a statue of baked clay.

work-hand or to an old man in need of a concubine or a servant.

"What a miserable fate to be tied to an old man! When the couple go out, the wife is asked "Is he your father or your husband?"

(Folk song)

Rich families used to find wives for their sons when the latter were still boys, but this was really a case of finding daughters-in-law for the families, more like engaging a servant in exchange for a sum paid to her family, who were always needy in this sort of case. The girl came to live in the new family and served her parents-in-law and her husband, who was often only a child. She had to look after their affairs and devote all her strength to working for them:

Your parents, avid for money, marry you to a little boy,

Not for lack of young pretenders in the village. You have to let this small husband torment your

youth.

In the icy winter, he sleeps soundly and leaves you alone.

(Folk song)

As the years went by, the great difference of age between husband and wife become a tragedy for the woman. She never knew the joy of conjugal life and the happiness of maternity when young, and when old, she would be relegated to the second rank, abandoned by her young husband who would take other wives and have children by them. Moreover, she would be threatened with expulsion from the family where she had been since her youth and to whose enrichment she had greatly contributed by her work during a major part of her life.

In Ha Tay, Vinh Phu and Ha Bac provinces, child marriage survived for a long time. Betrothal of two children by their families before their birth (prenatal marriage) or weddings of small children carried on the backs of grown-ups in the nuptial cortège were not uncommon. It was always the woman who bore the worst consequences of this situation, both physically and morally.

Polygamy, at first a "privilege of the rich and the aristocracy", finally spread to all social strata. "Talented men may take five wives and seven concubines, but a virtuous woman may have only one husband". This precept was justified by the absolute power of man in the patriarchal family, by his economic interest in inheriting the ancestral patrimony and by his need for work-hands to enrich this patrimony. Both legitimate wives and concubines alike were but unpaid servants. The husband, for his part, did not work, he only exploited the labour of the many women under his control. The feudal system tied at least two or three women to the yoke of a single man keeping them in a constant state of rivalry and jealousy of each other while maintaining a moral and material discrimination among them. Article 96 of the Gia Long code stipulated that only the legitimate wife, the (wife) or ca (principal wife) or chinh that (principal room) was

entitled to call her husband phu (husband). The concubine, thiep (small wife or le (second rank) or thu that (anteroom) had to call her husband gia truong (patriarch). The living conditions and the interests of the wife and the concubine were also different. Under Article 96 of the Gia Long code, a man who lowered his legitimate wife to the rank of concubine was punishable by 100 truong (strokes of the stick). If the concubine was promoted to the rank of legitimate wife while the latter was still alive, the husband was punished by 90 truong and had to redress his crime. The legitimate wife had to mourn the death of her parents-in-law for three years (the same duration as for her husband), the concubine for one year only. The legitimate wife's son did not have to mourn his father's concubine but the latter had to mourn the death of such a son for one year. This discrimination created rivalry between wife and concubine in their daily lives and caused quarrels between them, which the husband had to arbitrate in, and profited from. Everyone viewed this situation as normal behaviour between "wives of the same husband". But the most humiliated and the most ill-treated was always the concubine.

Widows were victims of other trials, essentially moral ones. The rule of the three Obediences bound them to the families of their parents-in-law. They were obliged by feudal law to live in economic dependence, deprived of the right to own property. If they got married again, they had to leave their children and they forfeited their property. Article 76 of the Gia Long code allowed widows to use part

of their property for their own maintenance and for bringing up their children. But they could not use it as private property. When they died or got married again, this portion of their property had to be restituted either to their children, who were placed under the guardianship of their paternal uncles, or to the family of their husbands. The absolute fidelity of the widow was much more profitable to the patriarchal family: the hierarchic order, the solid prop of the regime, would not then be disturbed; the political and moral prestige of patriarchy was safeguarded; the ideological unity of the members of the family, primarily the lineage of the orphans, was maintained. From the economic point of view this fidelity enabled the family of the defunct husband to continue to benefit from a permanent labour force and to keep the family property intact. It is understandable that feudalism did its utmost to extol the examples of "faithful widows".

In 1437, the Court praised Mrs. Lê, a widow of Quoc Oai (a district of Ha Tay province today). Although she was still young, beautiful, and childless, she remained in her late husband's family and ensured the worship of the family ancestors until her death...

In 1456, the Court praised Mrs. Nguyen, a widow living in Nam Sach district, Thai Binh province; after her husband's death, she remained faithful to his memory and behaved irreproachably.

(History of Viet Nam through Excerpts, 18th century)

In the reign of the Nguyen (19th century) the last phase of feudalism which had then reached the peak of reaction, the authorities issued royal certificates of approval to "faithful widows", composed of the four characters: TIET HANH KHA PHONG (worthy of praise for her faithfulness and virtues) on a long, lacquered gilded plaque. The plaque was hung in a place of honour in the principal room of the house, to be admired by all... However, a widow's energy and interest in life were hardly reflected in these customs:

I forget my sorrow only in sleep, awake to cry over my fate, lost before a choice between many paths.

I have lost my property, I feel sorrow for my children.

I think of my labour during all these years.

(Folk song)

Feudal laws, moral precepts and customs all weighed heavily on women:

The willow bends in the storm,
What will become of my youth after three years
of mourning?

(Folk song)

A thousand years of Confucian feudalism succeeded in forging a tragic social reality which reflected the nature of the regime, its juridical institutions and its ideology, and was actively encouraged by the patriarchal regime.

Feudalism has deeply affected the Vietnamese people's lives. It could not however blot out one

reality: the long existence of a social organization which women, as mistresses of society, had contributed considerably to building and to maintaining and the survival of certain traditions which answered needs arising during the evolution of Vietnamese society.

II. The Role of Women in the Family and their Contribution to the Development of Society

1. Responsibility for the Family: a Historical Necessity

In ancient Vietnamese society, the small-production agricultural economy necessitated intense activity on the part of the basic social cells: the patriarchal family. All adult members, men and women, had to work indefatigably on their portion of private land. Moreover, the cultivation of rice, the basic crop in Viet Nam, required farm labourers. in great numbers, patient, meticulous and versatile workers for such time-consuming tasks as sowing, transplanting, irrigating, harvesting and drying... The cultivation of food plants, productive occupations, and cottage industry, which were all necessary for a self-sufficient economy, were mainly the tasks of women with their long experience. The Confucian theory that: "Men live outside, women inside the family" could be applied only among the ruling class which was cut off from productive work and in which men were engaged in social functions while women were left with domestic tasks. From the 17th century onwards, the development of feudal bureaucracy brought more and more parasites - scholars,

mandarins, agents of the administration from the village to the provincial level — into existence, and in order to maintain them, women had to work as much as men. Women constituted an important productive force indispensable for society. They controlled part of the social economy and their contribution, although inconspicuous for two thousand years and denied by the patriarchal regime, ensured the continuity of their forbears' traditions of patient and courageous labour.

On the other hand, thousands of men were permanently mobilized for irrigation works, the construction of dams and citadels, the fighting of floods, a familiar aspect of people's lives.

The construction of dams in particular dates back to prehistoric times. The miracle performed by the god Tan Vien who raised the mountain as the water level rose, is but an allegory of the immense work accomplished by our forefathers at a time when man was beginning to cope with natural calamities. In 1108, a king of the Ly dynasty ordered the construction of the Co Xa dyke to protect the capital Thang Long (Hanoi today) from the Red River in spate. In 1248, a king of the Trân dynasty had a secondary dyke built right along the Thai Binh river from its source to its mouth. The system of dykes, great and small, along rivers was completed, in the 15th century, and ever since the preservation and consolidation of dykes has been one of the primary domestic political preoccupations of successive reigns. The concentration of masculine labour for this task of vital importance for the country was

such that even students of the state university (Quoc Tu Giam), who were all of aristocratic stock and exempt from all civil work and corvees, also had to do this compulsory service. A major part of the masculine labour force was thereby lost to the countryside, and women had to replace the men somehow in the fields.

More historical circumstances often required women to make up for their husbands' absence. When our forefathers founded the nation, they had to struggle against nature and also wage a still fiercer battle against foreign invasions. For a thousand years under Chinese domination, continual insurrections kept most of the able-bodied men mobilized in the ranks of the "soldiers of a just cause". After the recovery of independence, successive royal dynasties adopted the motto "Nam Chinh, Bac Chien" (wage war in the South and do battle in the North): foreign invasion was a permanent threat to the survival of the people both in the North and the South. In wartime, men had to leave their land for the front. In peacetime, considerable numbers of troops were kept under the colours by the State, a permanent army was mobilized and kept combatready. As a result of the traditional policy of keeping "the whole people under arms" the young men of the village had to take it in turns to do three years' compulsory military service.

In 1285, the Mongols invaded our country. All lords and military chiefs assembled their troops at the national conference of Van Kiep (Hai Duong at present) and organized the resistance. The sons of

Generalissimo Tran Hung Dao, the supreme military commander of the country, arrived at the conference at the head of the contingent of 200,000 inhabitants of their fiefs covering the regions of Hai Hung, Quang Ninh, and Ha Bac of today (in the northeastern part of Viet Nam). King Tran Thai Ton declared: "The Region of Hoan Chau and Diên Chau¹ can supply another 100,000 men" The population did not exceed five or six million inhabitants at that time, so almost all able-bodied men were mobilized for the patriotic war.

From the 18th century on, continual peasant insurrections against the decadent feudal regime broke out one after the other. Peasants in whole provinces, fathers and sons together joined ranks of the rebels in such densely populated regions of Viet Nam as Hai Duong (Hai Hung today), Son Nam (Thai Binh today), Bac Ninh (Ha Bac today).

Over the past thousand years of our history, men were constantly obliged to leave their villages, families, and land either to take up arms or to take part in civil construction works or royal corvees. The feudalist division of labour was not able to influence these social and historical realities which caused women to shoulder tasks far beyond the domestic circle. Tales, folk songs, and annals bear witness to these hard times in which women had to strive their utmost making their contribution. The wife of a volunteer in the great Tay Son peasant insurrection in the 18th century told her husband:

You follow the call of our Tay Son Lords

I will return to our fields and will take care of our old mother.

(Folk song)

- 2. Participation in Production
- a) Agriculture and Handicrafts

The ancient village festivals, essentially agricultural in character, testify to the intense activity of women in production.

In Dong Vi and Binh Dai villages, Vinh Phu province, young people used to gather at the communal house on the 4th and the 5th days of the first lunar month for the Spring festival: young women in men's clothes and young men in women's pushed wooden ploughs and pulled straw buffaloes, others "sowed" handfuls of paddy chaff... This was the very ancient festival of "preliminary job training" and proved the equal participation of men and women in work in the fields.

High fields and low fields

The husband ploughs, the wife transplants rice.

(Folk song)

This was a common scene in the countryside.

At the very beginning of our era, the Vietnamese were already reaping two rice harvests per year, thanks to intensive and patient farming, in which women played no small part. The cultivation of rice

^{1.} Thanh Hoa, Nghe An today.

in a tropical country with capricious weather conditions — storms, floods, and droughts — is a labour-consuming and strenuous work. Immense expanses of fields and the silhouettes of Vietnamese peasant women, bent under the scorching sun transplanting rice or leg-deep in cold mud irrigating their paddy fields in winter, have been associated with each other for thousands of years. Folk songs about work on the fieds consist mainly of women's confidences often of their pride in their work.

A good harvest is due to good fertilizers,

To my mud-stained hands, and to my feet worn out by work.

While in other Asian countries, women are not allowed to engage in production work and play no part in economic life, in Viet Nam, the equality of women in work, which ensures them some position in society, originates from a centuries-old tradition and from social and historical necessity. Thanks to their courage, patience, and initiative, major qualities they have had from time immemorial, they have succeeded in shouldering both production work and responsibility for the family. It was thanks to their efforts that progress was made in changing and multiplying crops. In the 18th century, Vietnamese peasants already were harvesting four crops per year and with good seeds increased the quality and the productivity of their rice-growing. Besides the cultivation of rice, our women grew other food plants and flowers, reared silk-worms, wove fabrics, made paper... and assumed the major part of the work involved in Vietnamese traditional handicrafts.

According to the annals of the Han dynasty, "the Lac Viet girls grow mulberry, rear silk worms, weave silk and cloth". Archaeological research at Phung Nguyen (Vinh Phu province) and Thieu Duong (Thanh Hoa province) has brought to light spinning wheels made of baked clay dating back to the first century A.D. and even the first century B.C. This discovery proves that weaving was practised even in ancient times. Likewise, whereas in other Far-eastern countries only two batches of silk worms are reared per year, in Viet Nam, from Phong Chau (Ha Tay province) to Lam Ap (Quang Binh province), eight were obtained. Almost all Chinese historical or literary works of that epoch spoke of this performance, for instance "The Rhythmical Prose of Tam Do", "The Principal Trades of the People". "Plants and Trees of the South"... Until the 17th century, silk, satin, gauze and crepe were well-known export products and objects of tribute paid to Chinese kings. Cloth made in Giao Chi with banana and bamboo fibres had been exported since the third century.

Weaving remained a specifically feminine occupation and was one of women's "family duties" from childhood. Its importance transcended the confines of the family in being useful to society as a whole. There were weaver villages whose special cloths were known throughout the country, such as Truc silk (Ha Tay province), Buoi satin (suburb of Ha Noi), and the white linen of Dong Lam (Ha Tay province)... In the 11th century, the kings of the Ly dynasty decided to stop imports of brocade from

China as Vietnamese brocade woven by the court concubines met demands.

b) Commerce

Under feudalism, traders had the lowest social rank, coming after craftsmen ¹. Men who did not aim at becoming scholars worked on the land, commerce being left to women. The exchange of goods between village communities, between rural areas and provincial towns or the capital, the small trade indispensable in a self-sufficient economy, was done by women: the seclusion imposed on women officially had to give way to economic necessity. The circulation of goods, which was instrumental to development of the agricultural society, was eventually taken over by women:

My beauty, you buy thread and sell silk; You buy where the Bo river has its source and sell at the mouth of the Thao²

The district market is held four times a month, I am looking forward to these four days to meet the beautiful trades-woman and to ask for her hand.

(Folk song)

Western traders began to come in great numbers to Viet Nam in the 17th century. They were attracted by the country's agricultural and forest products, by its traditional handicrafts, objects in chased silver, embroidery and textiles... The Vietnamese supplied them with these products and bought manufactured consumer goods from them, thus establishing the first commercial ties between Viet Nam and the West. The reports of western missionaries and travellers, such as Kiffler, John Barrow, Christofo Borri, who came to Viet Nam in the 17th and the 18th centuries, described Vietnamese women both as good wives and kind mothers and as important agents in such realms of the economy as agriculture, handicrafts, and national commerce.

3. Ministers of the Interior

These numerous social occupations did not divert women from their function as mothers and house-keepers. On the contrary. And this explains their nickname "Ministers of the Interior".

Confucian rites and conformism had little effect on the traditional Vietnamese family; real freedom prevailed in the relationship between husband and wife. Women were involved in the upkeep of the family on the same footing as men. The popular saying "husband's property comes from wife's labour" underlines the part played by women in the accumulation of the family patrimony. Their management and organizational abilities, their ingenuity and their energy made them men's precious companions and devoted aids.

Among the ruling class, the wife managed the family economy and spared the husband all material

^{1.} There were traditionally four social categories: scholars, farmers, craftsmen, and traders in that order.

^{2.} The Bo river waters Hoa Binh province. The Thao river is a tributary of the Red river and waters Vinh Phu province.

preoccupations. She brought up her children, attended to her parents-in-law, looked after her husband, and replaced him when he was absent. Queen Y Lan replaced King Ly Thanh Ton when he went on an expedition against Champa. The heroine of the *Chinh Phu Ngam* (Plaint of a Soldier's Wife)¹ "feeds her parents-in-law and educates her small child alone". Women of the aristocracy, educated in the same traditions of devotion and courage, took charge of the family in the absence of the "great pillar of the household" — their husbands.

As for women of the common people, they had to work with their husbands to feed their children. But as their husbands were often conscripted into the army, or for corvees or public works, they had to struggle alone.

During this period, the agricultural economy stagnated, development of the relations of production were held back by the forces of production, and the thoroughly conservative spirit of Confucianism discouraged any tendency to progress. Vietnamese society became increasingly impoverished by creeping feudal decadence from the 16th century onwards. In the countryside, the unchanging communal organization remained closed to any innovative elements. Women had to face innumerable difficulties, particularly the peasant women who were

caught between communal and family duties. The popular saying "to cut off the hem of one's dress to patch the shoulder" reflects their daily battle to subsist on meagre incomes, poor annual harvests and little profit from their productive labour. With composure and perseverance, "alone, they row and struggle against the waves" (popular saying). Another folk song depicts a farewell between a married couple. The departing husband is deeply moved:

"You are going to be alone, your confinement approaches

A son or a daughter will be born

I will not be at your side to share your pains."

Son or daughter, I will get them a husband or wife when they come of age;

The women answers:

You may leave with your mind at rest, I'll take care of everything.

(Folk song)

That the country was able to mobilise its children for national salvation at decisive moments, that the combatant could leave his home with his mind at peace, must be credited to those women who overcame their sorrow and got on with their tasks as mothers and wives. The most beautiful folk songs, the most moving tales extolled girls' and wives' love for and the faithfulness to their sweethearts and husbands, sentiments that separation could in no way weaken:

^{1.} Literary work in Chinese characters by Dang Tran Con, a scholar and writer of the 18th century, translated into nom (demotic characters) by the well-known poetess Doan Thi Diem. The excellent translation became even more famous than the original text.

Who would dare try to sweep away all the leaves
of the forest?

If one could, I would advise the wind not to shake
the trees.

But the wind does shake the tree, its branches,
and its leaves,
And tries to shake my heart too! But I do not
bend.

(Folk song)

In Lang Son there is a rock shaped like a woman holding a child in her arms, her eyes looking to the horizon. According to a legend many centuries old, a woman once lived in that area, known as "young To". Her husband was away; every evening the young woman would climb the hill and stand there holding her baby in her arms, waiting for her dear one's return. She waited there a long time and gradually she was turned into stone, and she is still waiting. It seems that long separation between couples and the faithfulness of the wives inspired our fathers to call the rock Mt. Vong Phu (Woman waiting for Her Husband). In a folk song which has immortalized the story of young Mrs To, the writer pities the fate of the young woman, and blames the husband for failing to return:

In Dong Dang ¹ you find Ky Lua street,

The rock of young To and the pagoda of Tam

Thanh ²

Who is willing to go to Lang Son with me?

My beauty, I am sorry for the pains of those who have brought you into this world.

As for you, liquor and feasting enticed you.

Drowned in your pleasures, you have forgotten the entreaties of your sweetheart.

The people sang the praises of women's love and fidelity, particularly their boundless maternal love and their praiseworthy effort in bringing up their children alone. A widower who looked after his children was considered as abnormal as "a cock bringing up its chicks". According to another saying, "The mother had to shoulder the entire responsibility for the bad behaviour of her children". Before entering the active life in the community, men were always given their first lessons in ethics and social conduct from their mothers. Character and personality were moulded in childhood in the family under the vigilant eyes of the "Minister of the Interior".

Both among the peasants and the ruling class, mothers had many occasions to take their husbands' places in the course of history. A woman of the aristocracy addressed her husband before his departure for the front like this:

I perform the function of a father and teach the writings of the Wise to our child."

(Plaint of a Soldier's Wife)

and here is the farewell of a peasant woman comforting her husband who has to leave:

^{1.} A district of Lang Son.

^{2.} Three well-known sights of Lang Son.

"You leave, and I return to our dwelling.

On my shoulders weighs the burden of caring for our old mother and our baby from now on.

I don't care at all that our meals will only consist of salt and vegetables; I don't mind difficulties.

Go and keep up your fervent fighting spirit."

(Folk song)

Mothers brought up their children in the family tradition, the cradle of the Vietnamese spirit, the abiding guarantee of national characteristics. Fathers had omnipotent moral power, and were distant and stern masters; mothers were sympathetic confidents, the closest advisers of their children and resolved all problems arising in connection with their daily life. They took particular care of their daughters whom they moulded after their own image.

In the legend of little Giong, the hero's mother is a popular figure who symbolises ancient social reality of Viet Nam. Mrs Giong ¹ suffered the greatest misfortune ever to befall a mother. She gave birth to a son, and alone she brought him up, until the age of three. The baby could neither speak nor walk. The country was threatened with invasion. On the King's appeal, the child suddenly grew up, and his first words to his mother were to tell her that he wanted to go and fight the invaders. For the mother,

the sorrow of separation was mingled with the joy of seeing her only child freed from his infirmity. She prepared a meal for her son, who had now become a giant. "Seven baskets of rice and a big jar of soused eggplants". Then, Mrs Giong led him to the iron horse wrought for him by the local population. The magic horse galloped away, and the hero annihilated the enemy. He was a god sent from Heaven, and there he returned after the victory. Before leaving the earth, he came back once again to his village, Phu Dong (Gia Lam district, Hanoi) to pay his respects to his mother. Mrs Giong, a kind and devoted mother, beloved and respected by her son whom she had shown the way to save the fatherland, symbolises Vietnamese mothers. There are famous and honoured mothers in each generation, mothers who mark their epoch. Mrs. Man Thien, mother of the first national heroine Trung Trac, was the wife of a military governor in Me Linh. Widowed early, she brought up her two daughters in the warrior traditions of her family. When her eldest daughter Trung Trac organized an insurrection against the Chinese governor To Dinh, she went about Ha Tay and Hung Hoa provinces pleading her cause and exhorting the governors and the population to rise against the Chinese domination. Her grave is in her native village of Nam Nguyen (Ba Vi district, Ha Tay province) and is still known by the local population as " Lady Mother's grave."

Nguyen Binh Khiem, a poet and thinker of the 16th century, was taught to write by his mother, the daughter of a scholar who had been educated

^{1.} According to a custom still existing in rural areas, a mother is called by the name of her first child, whether it be a boy or a girl.

by her very cultured father. This woman educated her son alone. Besides teaching him the writings of the Wise, she introduced him to the Kinh Thai At, a philosophy and astrology which was supposed to enable the scholar to predict the destiny of society and of individuals. Nguyen Binh Khiem became an illustrious and unanimously respected scholar thanks to his vast learning and deep knowledge and his great virtues.

"It is the mother who creates the happiness and shapes the morality of her children". For centuries, neither efforts at assimilation, from the 1st-century Han to the 14th century Minh, nor various social upheavals were able to efface the national characteristics of the Vietnamese people, and the credit for this belongs in great part to Vietnamese mothers, who have taken to heart the task of bringing up their children according to the traditions of their people.

4. The Defence of Cultural Traditions

Some Chinese governors tried to force the Giao chi (Vietnamese) to speak Chinese and wear Chinese dress, but our national language and dress still prevailed after long years of occupation. The mother tongue continued to be used in the family and in community activities. The discovery at Yen Bai and Thanh Hoa of women's statues shows us that female dress in those early days was composed of a gown, a skirt and a turban. This dress varied according to fashion in the course of centuries, but the traditional national style remained fundamentally the same. During village festivals, young girls in Ha Bac wore

a skirt of coarse black silk and a chestnut or lightbrown silk gown over a short yellow silk coat whose wide collar exposed the upper part of an orange bodice. The gown was kept in place by a long belt of green silk tied in two knots. In many villages old women still wear the traditional gowns and skirts. This national dress survived several attempts to eliminate it. In the 14th century, Chinese governor Chang Fu made a concerted effort to destroy Vietnamese culture. Literary and scientific books were seized, talented men deported to China; women were forced to wear Chinese dress. Four centuries later, a Vietnamese king, Minh Menh imitated the Chinese ruler and forced his people to adopt Manchustyle dress, and decreed that Vietnamese women from North to South should replace the traditional skirt by Chinese-style trousers.

In this eighth month, a royal decree is issued. Forbidding women to wear bottomless trousers ¹ And great is our embarrassment.

If we stay at home, there will be few people at the market.

But how can we strip our husbands of their trousers to put them on and go out?

(Popular song)

The reaction to the arbitrary measure went much further than the biting irony of such songs: an obstinate struggle was waged against the ridiculous interdiction which led to unspeakable abuses and went against deep-rooted aesthetic sensibility:

^{1.} Meaning skirts.

- Fair young lady, who has dyed your turban with that colour?

It makes you look so beautiful and fills my heart with love for you?

- Fair young lady with a green silk belt,
Who are you waiting for day and night behind
your window?

(Popular song)

Many popular songs were composed by women who were illiterate, and sought to express their feelings in popular oral literature. Most of these beautiful songs take their inspiration from the daily work.

The crescent moon is scintillating, dancing in my hands

Before, me the grass bends,

Women were looked down on in decadent feudal society: they were the lowest-ranking members of society. No wonder they were bitter,

I'm like a piece of rose-coloured silk Floating in the thick of the market! Into whose hands will I fall?

During village festivals the young people participated in singing competitions, when songs composed on the spot — sentimental in content — were sung, and most often it was the women who were the winners. There were amateur song groups all over the country made up of women engaged in the same trade. After the harvest, young people's gatherings were organised in the villages, when the presence

of those women's song groups attracted a large audience.

Dancing dates back to the 1st century BC: designs on ancient drums show women making graceful movements with their arms and bodies, as now seen at cheo (Vietnamese popular theatre) performances. In his "History of the Vietnamese Theatre" the 15th-century scholar Luong The Vinh said that it was a woman named Pham Thi Tran, a native of the present Hai Hung province, who created the cheo. She was a beautiful and talented dancer and singer living under the Dinh dynasty in the 10th century, and she was invited to the Court of King Dinh Tien Hoang to teach music, singing and dancing to members of the army ensembles. She was called Huyen Nu (the musician) or Ba (the artist) by her contemporaries. The period from the 10th to the 15th century saw the apogee of Vietnamese art and literature. The stone stele erected in 1121 in the Doi pagoda (present Nam Ha province) bears this inscription: "... Under the reign of Le Thanh Ton (1072-1127), the royal music and dance ensembles included fairy-like girls who danced most gracefully on the steps before the royal palace..." In the 13th century, an envoy of the Chinese emperor, Tran Trung Cuong, who attended a theatrical performance at the Vietnamese King's palace wrote: ..."An orchestra of ten men and ten women play the zither, the onestringed guitar, the guitar and sing traditional songs..." (Mission to Giao Chau). Wooden sculptures in pagodas, communal houses and palaces dating from the Ly and Tran dynasties, vestiges of which are found in Nam Ha, Hai Hung and Yen Bai provinces, are often of young women—royal concubines or amateur popular artists—performing the ancient "Flower-offering Dance" and playing various musical instruments. Later, in the 18th century, historian Pham Dinh Ho mentioned in his "Essays Written on Rainy Days" the principal musical instruments many of which were usually only played by women, such as the flute, the 16-string zither, and the moon-shaped lute.

Cultural recreation was a necessity after the day's work, especially after the harvest. Many of the popular amateur artists were young women who performed for their relatives and village folk on stages set up in the courtyard of the communal house. There, actors and spectators collaborated to create, improvise cheo dramas, dance steps and songs according to their own taste and inspiration. This cultural heritage of the people has been preserved, improved, and saved from the ravages of aggressions and foreign influence, and in this women have played an important role. In our day, old women in Ha Bac, Ha Tay, Vinh Phu can still recite whole ancient cheo plays or anonymous novels in verse. Many of them still remember very old songs. They have contributed much to the study of our folklore and other vestiges of ancient national culture.

Few women could read and write; those that did were a few exceptional cases — a teacher's daughter who might secretly learn the "characters of wise men", or the daughter of a non-conformist scholar.

And yet there have always been good women authors: Ngo Chi Lan (15th century), Ho Xuan Huong, Doan Thi Diem (18th century) Thanh Quan (19th century). Women-mandarin titles were created in the 13th century. Women who excelled in scholarly literature, in the study on Writings of Wise Men, and in Nom, script of the national language, were invited to the Court to teach the princesses, the Queen's attendants and the King's concubines. The regime forbade women to take part in examinations, and highly educated and talented women like Ngo Chi Lan, Doan Thi Diem, founded schools attended by thousands of men students, many of whom obtained high academic degrees and became Court mandarins.

However, Confucian feudalism accorded women only an insignificant role, not commensurate with the part they were actually contributing in society.

III. The struggle for Liberation and Social Progress.

1. Participation in Armed Struggle

For two thousand years, Viet Nam was in an almost permanent state of war: not a century went by that was not marked by a popular patriotic war against foreign aggressors. Wives remained in the rear, loyal to their husbands gone to the front, devoted to their families and cursing the enemy — this is a familiar theme of both popular tales and songs and of scholarly literature.

My love, go and fulfil your duty, I'll take charge of our home, now empty.

Woe to the invaders, those cursed pirates, Who force me to carry supplies. I've been north and west, Bringing food to my husband, And now to my children.

But the sadness of separation, solitude and the daily worries were nothing in comparison with the miseries brought by the aggressors.

- "... In the 13th century, the Mongols invaded Viet Nam, broke into Thang Long, the capital, and attacked the population, mostly women and children.
- "... In the 15th century, seeking a pretext to attack Viet Nam, the Chinese Ming feudalists demanded that the King supply girls for their harems. This request being flatly rejected they sent a large army to massacre the population of the capital and seize young women. They conquered Viet Nam in 1494, and forced Vietnamese women to plait their hair and wear Chinese-style jackets and trousers. Governor Chang Fu, notorious for his cruelty, had a large number of girls seized to be put at his service in China.
- "...In the 18th century, the Ching feudalists of China invaded Viet Nam, under pretext of bringing assistance to King Le Chieu Thong who had been dethroned during the great Tay Son insurrection. With the cooperation of Vietnamese traitors, they massacred the insurgents. Women rebels were taken to the market place where they were tied up and disembowelled..."

Humiliation, terror, dispersal of their family and threats to their lives soon brought home to Vietnamese women the fact that "if the country is invaded by the enemy, the family will be destroyed." The destruction of the country by a much more powerful enemy was a constant threat of the times.

The popular saying "when the enemy comes, women also must fight", probably dates from when the country's existence was threatened and when every woman participated in the struggle to preserve the family and the fatherland she loved, to save her people from extinction, to "avenge her family, and pay her debt to her country". Since the early centuries of our era the fighting woman has been a familiar image.

The official annals of different dynasties as well as the oral history of popular songs praise the exploits of the two Trung sisters, brilliant national heroines who inaugurated Vietnamese women's traditions of struggle against the invader. In his "Complete History of the Great Viet Country", the first Vietnamese historical work, completed in 1272, Le Van Huu, remarked: "Trung Trac and Trung Nhi were women. Yet, the province of Cuu Chan, Nhat Nam, ¹ Hop Pho ² and sixty citadels responded to their call. With this wide support, they proclaimed themselves queens ³ and founded a kingdom".

^{1.} Present-day Thanh Hoa, Nghe Tinh.

^{2.} Now Kwang Si province, formerly part of Nam Viet's territory.

^{3.} Literally: woman sovereign.

Even the envoys of Chinese emperors praised these two women who were considered by their sovereigns as "barbarous rebels". The author of the Han Annals, for instance, said that the two Trung sisters were "extremely brave women", and that of "Giao Chau Stories" wrote: "Trung Trac is a most courageous woman". Subsequent historians highly praised Trieu Trinh Nuong "Dressed in a yellow gown, with a gold pin through her hair, wearing ivory shoes, she is always to be seen on her elephant, in the front line." Soldiers of the Wu feudalists greatly admired her and called her the Queen.

It is easy to handle a spear, to attack a tiger But facing the Queen, how difficult it is to fight!

Those women whose names went down in history were both of common origins as well as from the aristocracy. In 938, Ngo Quyen annihilated the Nam Han fleet on the Bach Dang river: this decisive victory which inaugurated the era of Viet Nam's independence was due to a stratagem of Duong Thi Nhu Ngoc, Ngo Quyen's wife. A daughter of a military leader assassinated by a traitor, she married an officer serving under her father and helped him to continue the struggle against the enemy. In 1257, Thoat Hoan, a Mongol general who was a son of Gengis Khan, marched on the northwest of Viet Nam at the head of a powerful army. In face of the might and savagery of the aggressors, the Tran king decided to withdraw his troops to the south. The capital of Thang Long had to be evacuated. Tran Thi Dung, wife of commander-in-chief Tran Thu Do,

took charge of the evacuation of the royal family, the concubines, the attendants and the children, the families of civilian and military Court dignitaries. She mobilized the population of the capital and distributed arms and ammunition taken from State depots. When the Tran launched their first counterattack, Tran Thi Dung had these arms taken to the front. When she died, she was awarded the title of "Good and Noble Mother of the People" by the King. Later, historian Ngo Si Lien remarked: "Our lady, the mother of the people, is much to be praised for assisting the Tran kings in carrying out their domestic policy. Heaven has created her for the purpose of founding the Tran dynasty."

Ordinary women also contributed to the liberation struggle:

"In the early 15th century, Viet Nam was occupied by the Ming feudalists. The enemy built the vast Co Dong citadel at Ngoc Chuc village, Y Yen district, in present-day Nam Ha province on the road linking Dong Do¹ with Tay Giai² southern capital of Viet Nam. A woman of Ngoc Chuc village, Mrs Luong, kept an inn, by the citadel. Occupation troops were attracted by good food as well as by the beauty of the inn-keeper, and came to the place every day. Through them, Mrs Luong got information about the enemy forces, while her husband secretly organized volunteers into a combat unit. At

^{1.} Present-day Hanoi.

^{2.} Present-day Thanh Hoa. Dong Do and Tay Giai were names given by the Ming.

that time. Le Loi headed an insurrection and liberated a vast region stretching from Thanh Hoa to Ha Tinh. Mrs. Luong braved many dangers to cross enemy-occupied areas and soon reached the resistance base where she reported to Le Loi on the enemy forces and suggested a plan of attack against the Co Dong citadel. When Le Loi marched on northern Viet Nam in his winter offensive, the information supplied by Mrs Luong made it possible for him to take the citadel without difficulty. After his victory Le Loi held a meeting at Giang Vo (now a Hanoi suburb) when those who had contributed to the victory were given awards, and Mrs. Luong received the title of "Country Builder". When she died in 1432. Le Loi had a temple built in memory of the heroine. In 1439, the temple was restored by King Le Thanh Tong who also asked historian Le Tung to write a biography of Lady Luong. Le Tung wrote a poem.

"...A talented woman worthy of high praise
Whose combativity makes her as valuable as ten
thousand troops.

... In the history of Viet Nam

Her fame equals that of heroine Trung Vuong
In building this temple to her memory

We shall keep her image alive for more than a
thousand years."

Thus, lower-class women — inn-keepers, boatwomen, songstresses — have made history through their patriotism and their participation in the struggle for national liberation. Many of them have

been deified and worshipped as patron saints. Temples built in their memory include the Temple of the Queen on the Bach Dang river, in memory of a tea-seller who contributed to the great 1288 naval victory, the Temple of the Two Princesses at the Da Moi village, in memory of two young women who lured two officers of the advance party of Mongol troops into their boat and killed them, making it possible for our troops to annihilate the enemy forces on terrain unfamiliar to them; the temple in memory of a boatwoman of Nhan Hue village (Ha Tay province), who, together with her daughter, helped Le Loi's army in 1426 to cross a river on the way to Tot Dong to attack Ming troops.

Popular oral literature often spoke of unknown women who went through long resistance wars with courage and patience and who remained calm when their husbands, then their sons, left for the front, although the men's absence brought many hardships:

The distance is great, we are separated by mountains and rivers

Mother has white hair, but I'm still young, My love, share my sorrows...

(Popular song)

These women did not shirk their responsibilities: conjugal and family love strengthened by attachment to the village community gave them the necessary courage. The following lines are said to have been composed by participants in the Insurrection of the Trung Sisters (40-42 A.D) when a whole

generation of women rose up against the foreign aggressor.

For the sake of one's husband, one must spare no efforts
Although nobody has an iron body or skin as hard as bronze.

2. The Struggle against Social Oppression

Exploitation and oppression of women was, as we have seen, one of the characteristics of the feudal regime. No wonder upper-class women also took part in peasant insurrections. One of them who participated in the Tay Son insurrection in the 18th century became a legendary figure. Known as Lady Thieu Pho ¹, Bui Thi Xuan was the wife of Tran Quang Dieu, a Tay Son military leader. At the head of 5,000 men, she beat the Siamese invaders and the Nguyen traitors in the South, and routed Trinh and Le forces in the North. When Nguyen Anh assisted by the French colonialists, defeated the Tay Son, Bui Thi Xuan was captured; but even when savagely tortured she refused to submit to the enemy. She was condemned to be burnt at the stake, and she cursed the traitors to her last breath. The Nguyen destroyed all the work the Tay Son had done in the economic, political and literary fields, and even forbade people to make any mention of the peasant insurrection. But people kept singing the Song of Lady Thieu Pho in praise of Bui Thi Xuan, the indomitable heroine.

In the 18th and 19th centuries, the ferocious repression carried out by a decadent feudalism could not check the spread of peasant insurrections. Each uprising had eminent women strategists among its participants, such as Cai Vang's wife who took part in an insurrection in the 19th century, and Quan Te's wife who headed another insurrection in the same period.

Literature, particularly popular literature, was a tribune used by women to denounce injustice and oppression of which they were the main victims. Realities of family and social life constituted the content of songs, tales and satires in which the real nature of the "lords" was exposed, Confucian theories bolstering inequality between the sexes were rejected, class and sex discrimination in the family and in society condemned... The concubine, victim of polygamy and social oppression was particularly severe in her verdict:

Night after night. Elder Sister 1 keeps the husband, While in an alcove I sleep alone on a shabby reed mat!

Very early in the morning she calls me: Hey, Number Two^2 ,

Get up, prepare the pig's feed, slice the potatoes and chop the vegetables!

(Popular song)

^{1.} One of the nine mandarinal grades in ancient China.

^{1., 2.} The way the legitimate wife and the concubine call each other.

Many a poetic and dramatic work supported women's struggle. One subject in particular was an inexhaustible source of inspiration: the oppressed, humiliated woman whose intelligence and presence of mind save her from the claws of feudal lords.

A pretty young widow is importuned by a village chief, a scholar and a bonze1 who want to make love to her without compromising themselves; for, after all, she is only a widow, a weak, neglected, despised creature in feudal society. Alone, and without any assistance, the young woman must resort to tricks to get rid of the three individuals. She agrees to meet them at her home, one after the other. Each of the three men is so afraid of being caught that each time there is a knock at the door, he quickly hides himself. Thus, the first hides under a bed, the second in a trunk and the third, in a large basket hanging from the ceiling. All the three are beaten black and blue by the neighbours who, warned by the widow, break into the house and take them by surprise. Then all three are brought before the village assembly and subjected to public censure.

This amusing story, by an anonymous author, continues to be told or acted on the **cheo** stage, and is still very popular. From the 18th century a period of expanding peasant struggles meant that women's

writing no longer expressed moderate protests, but outright accusations. The century of peasant insurrections saw the appearance of many anonymous works in verse which reflect the social reality of the time: the participation of women in the popular revolt aimed at winning their right to a decent life. The heroines were mostly women who did not hesitate to smash the age-old feudal barriers to defend their loved ones, their homes, their dignity. Phuong Hoa (Fragrant Flower) took part in an examination disguised as a man in place of her husband who was unjustly imprisoned by a mandarin. She exposed the misdeed of the latter after passing the examination. Cuc Hoa (Chrysanthemum) went to hell to complain to Diem Vuong (King of Hell) of the cruel King Trang who had killed her husband in order to get hold of her. There are also stories of women who disregarded the precepts of the Three Obediences and married the men they loved. Ngoc Hoa (Jade Flower), daughter of a rich mandarin fell in love with a poor student, and her father had to accept her choice. In the novel in verse Lady Luu, a woman general, which appeared in the 18th century, the main character symbolizes the deep aspirations of women of the time: a young woman "whose literary talent equals that of any scholar and whose military skill surpasses that of the best warrior" raised the banner of insurrection against the cruel king and his courtiers. She overthrew the king, ascended the throne, and founded a new kingdom... The popular writers who wrote these novels made real people the heroines of their stories. Phuong Hoa

^{1.} Three symbolic characters representing the three feudal powers.

is worshipped in a temple at Ha Thanh (Thien Hoa district, Thanh Hoa province). Tong Tran, the poor student reduced to begging, whom the daughter of a big landlord married despite her father's opposition was the scholar Gau whose temple still stands at An Cau (Mu Cu district, Hai Hung province). These sung tales have been handed down from generation to generation, loved and preserved by the people, as they faithfully reflected their thoughts and aspirations. People used to gather in the moonlight round a story-teller, most often a woman, who recited or sang whole novels to the accompaniment of a violin or a one-string guitar, before a large audience composed of people of all ages. The women were able to identify with the story being retold; and Phuong Hoa, Cuc Hoa, characters who are both real and imaginary, have thus survived on the lips of many generations of women who found in the heroines a faithful reflection of their life and their struggle.

3. The Burden of Feudal Institutions

This struggle by women was closely linked with daily life, and helped restrict and weaken the influence of Confucian feudalism and to preserve the essential character of the Vietnamese people. By struggling, women were able to ensure the continuity of traditions dating from time immemorial and further enhance them during the last two thousand years of our history.

However, Confucian feudalism — the reigning ideology in feudal society — left imprints that, even

in the present day, are difficult to remove. Indoctrination with the precepts of the Three Obediences and Four Virtues, all within the narrow framework of patriarchal family, resigned women to their lot, rendering them excessively diffident and submissive towards men. Moreover, small-scale private production failed to satisfy family needs and women, especially those born and brought up in poverty, had to make parsimony a virtue. Daily preoccupations, and petty calculations affected the feminine mind, narrowing its horizon and thinking. In those days women who devoted themselves to their husbands and children could not be highly conscious of community interest, except when the existence of the country was endangered. Discrimination between women of different family ranks in patriarchal society led to many conflicts in daily life, with scenes of jealousy between the legitimate wife and the concubines, cruelty by the mother-in-law towards her daughters-in-law, rivalry between sisters-inlaw... These conflicts made women bitter. Deprived of education for centuries, they were prisoners of superstitions, and of ancient moral and religious beliefs. Confucian feudalism thus limited women's contribution to social life and national struggles, and consequently further aggravated the exploitation and oppression of the people by the ruling class.

The history of Vietnamese women in the last twenty centuries and especially since the establishment of the patriarchal system and of Confucian feudalism, has two closely linked aspects: women's daily life and their struggle. A life of misery and oppression, but also one of persevering and complex struggle which testifies to powerful energy drawn from the depths of the age-old soil of Viet Nam.

C. FRENCH COLONIZATION

In 1858, French warships pounded Da Nang, launching a surprise attack against a weakened Viet Nam then under the rule of the decaying Nguyen regime.

Women suffered most in the first days of aggression when the enemy sowed destruction and death in different parts of the country. The "appeal to struggle against the French" was very popular in those days and denounced the aggressors' atrocious crimes:

"Look, everywhere the enemy is desecrating our ancestors' tombs, destroying our pagodas, and committing many other wicked crimes.

"Everywhere the enemy is burning down our houses, raping our wives and daughters, behaving like monsters".

The unequal struggle between a small nation and one of the most mighty imperialist powers of the time ended with the defeat of the Vietnamese resistance, a defeat hastened by the treason of the Nguyen Kings and the Court mandarins who were anxious to preserve their privileges. Colonization brought women many new hardships, and they became the "slaves of slaves".

I. New Forms of Exploitation

With their honeyed words—"preservation of old traditions, respect for Viet Nam's ancestral customs and usages", the French colonialists were only prolonging feudalism, adding new forms of exploitation and oppression.

The granting of vast domains to French colonists and their agents led to the expropriation of a large number of peasants who became hired labourers on their own land. Rents and heavy taxes reduced peasants and other working people to utter misery.

Expropriated and indebted, they became cheap labour for the colonialists' factories, mines and plantations. They were followed by their wives to new places of work. The women's movement had a peasant character until its ranks were joined by women workers and women of the bourgeoisie and petty-bourgeoisie, which were new social classes born from colonialist exploitation and the installation of the colonial apparatus. Like the old social structures, feudal ideology was strongly shaken by western civilization introduced by colonization. Consciousness of the individual and of individual freedom was budding among the bourgeoisie and the petty-bourgeoisie of the towns directly exposed to the influence of western thought. While these classes did not go hungry, did not have to toil hard for a living, they were nevertheless subjected to colonialist and feudalist oppression. The "native woman" suffered not only from discrimination as a woman, but also from racial discrimination.

"Everywhere she is exposed to brutalities. In town, at home, in the market, in the countryside, she was exposed to ill-treatment by the administrator, the officer, the gendarme, the customs officer, the railway station employee. She was often called con di (prostitute) or buzu (monkey) by Europeans. Even at the central market of Saigon, supposed to be a French city, the European guards did not hesitate to use cudgel to beat native women to make them move on "1

The Gia Long Code remained in force until 1931. The colonial administration encouraged the publication of such books as "Women's Education" and "Women's Duties" which taught precepts of the Three Obediences and Four Virtues as in the three preceding centuries.

In 1931, after crushing the revolutionary movement in Nghe An and Ha Tinh provinces, the colonial government attempted to appease the popular movement of struggle for radical change in colonial policy, promulgated the Tonkin Civil Code, to be applied in Tonkin only (present North Viet Namminus the provinces of Thanh Hoa, Nghe An, Ha Tinh). In 1936, the first volume of the Annam Civil Code appeared (for Central Viet Nam), a replica of the Tonkin code.

"This codification work reflected an effort to leave the fundamental structures of Vietnamese society intact, while adapting them to the evolution of customs and the present social stage of the natives".

No great change was to be expected, especially regarding the patriarchal regime, the mainstay of colonial administration. Subordination of children of whatever age to their father was recognized in law. With respect to marriage, article 76 marked some slight progress in specifying that "the consent of the man and the woman is indispensable to a marriage". but it is contradicted by the following article: "Children — under age or of age — can in no circumstances contract a marriage without the consent of their father and mother". Thus in fact a girl had no freedom of choice. Society was pushed several centuries backwards. With the advent of capitalism, money became more powerful than ever. Marriage became a trading act, with the families of the future husband and wife openly bargaining with each other, and the price of the girl was euphemistically called "the bride's return money". Later, in the heyday of colonialism, many a mandarin used his paternal authority to offer his daughter to a superior in order to be promoted.

Polygamy was legal. Articles of the Tonkin Civil Code specified that second-rank wives "owe obedience and respect to the legitimate wife". On the one hand, the law prescribed that "a husband cannot marry a second-rank wife without the consent of the legitimate wife", on the other hand, it recognized that the husband had the role of "chief of the conjugal union". The married woman held no responsibility before the law. The wife's subordination to the husband was the order of the day:

^{1.} Nguyen Ai Quoc: Le procès de la colonisation française. (French Colonization on Trial).

Article 98: "The legitimate wife and/or the second-rank wife could bring an affair before the courts, or enter into a contract, only with the husband's authorization.

"Any suit instituted by a legitimate wife or by second-rank wives without the husband's authorization could be annulled at the request of the husband or his heirs."

Article 102: "The wife could not give away mortgage, or otherwise alienate or acquire property either gratuitously or by purchase without her husband's cooperation or consent."

A woman could engage in a trade only with her husband's explicit or tacit consent. If she abandoned the conjugal home, her husband could sue for a divorce.

Only the husband could manage the common property. The wife can do it only if she is qualified to represent the conjugal union.

A widow could enjoy only the profits arising from her deceased husband's property, the common property, and her own property (usufruct).

Repudiation of one's wife was forbidden. However, the husband could sue for a divorce in case of:

- 1. Adultery;
- 2. Abandoning the conjugal home after injunction to return to it.

In case of divorce, the children remained with their father, unless the tribunal ordered that all or some of them should be kept by their mother or a third person for the children's good.

1. In the Countryside

For nearly one hundred years of French colonization, millions of peasants remained tied to the landlords' ricefields. The feudal relations of production based on the lease of thousands of parcels of land and rent collection were encouraged by colonialism, whose rule and exploitation in the countryside was helped by the landlord class and an hierarchy of local tyrants. The colonialists did not bother about improvement of techniques and means of production. and the peasants continued to work with tools exactly like those used by their ancestors. Those who were too poor to hire buffaloes replaced the animals with their wives, and the men walked behind the ploughs while the woman pulled them. The yield was low and the poor harvests meant that little rice was left after paying the rent, taxes and debts: "The sickle hangs on the wall, and the (empty) rice pot is put away" 1. In Cochinchina (part of Viet Nam stretching from Bien Hoa southwards) the landlords took 50 to 80 per cent of the crop as land rent, in Tonkin (North Viet Nam) and Annam (Central Viet Nam) it was 40 to 50 per cent. The "Indochina budget" was founded mainly on taxes, which swelled rapidly, from 38,362,000 piastres in 1912 to

^{1.} Popular saying: i.e. little is left to support the family after a harvest.

108,960,000 piastres in 1930. Each inhabitant had to contribute on an average 8 piastres a year, or three-fourths of the annual income of a peasant family.

The yearly collection of taxes was a real calamity for every village. The harvest was hardly finished when tax collectors, soldiers and village authorities came to each house to demand prompt payment of taxes. Drums beat at the communal house, the women ran about in the hamlets, borrowing money, selling furniture and even young children dirt cheap, to save their men from being arrested for failing to pay their taxes.

From midnight, the drums beat,

Blood was shed in the communal yard, soldiers

appeared in the hamlets...1

The peasants were left destitute after each tax collection. Yet, they had to find a way to support their families. This lullaby singing a hungry child sleep is a sorrowful plaint:

Sleep, my child, sleep,
Your mother is going to the hamlet
To borrow a handful of rice or some potatoes.
We eat what we can get in order to survive
Oh, my little one, when will fortune smile on us?

(Popular song)

A mother sometimes had to sell her children to keep them from starving:

Sleep my child, sleep

By boat, on the swelling river, I'm taking you To the place shaded by the big banyan.

I can no longer feed you, and I'm selling you away.

(Popular song)

In the villages, backward customs and habits still prevailed. The women were exploited and oppressed by rich people and local officials, and fell victim to social evils.

At the centre of Phuong Bang village (Ha Tay province), an imposing 14th-century communal house which is still standing recalls women's darkest days. In the past, the frequent festivities which took place there were attended by men only. All the farm work was done by women, while the men's only occupation was bird hunting. As the women could not earn enough to meet all the men's needs, many had to sell their daughters. Polygamy was wide-spread. People of all strata were proud of the number of concubines they had.

Men were idle, living as parasites, ruling over their families like omnipotent patriarchs. Ancient feudal customs required women's complete subjection to men.

Before the Revolution at Dinh Bang village (Ha Bac province) a husband could punish his wife by taking her to the market, with two pails in her hands, and expose her to mockery. At Mai Phong (Ha Bac province), when a daughter who had been married

^{1.} From a poem by To Huu.

when she was still a child rebelled, her father would tie her up before the altar of ancestors and swear that he would kill the "rebel" if she refused to return to her husband's house.

Women's sufferings were caused by backward customs and superstitions as well as ignorance and poverty.

A woman in childbirth was regarded as being impure and bringing bad luck. She had to keep away from the ancestral home and stayed in a hut in a corner of the garden or a field outside the village. She was allowed to return home seven days after the birth of a boy, nine days after that of a girl, after throwing a handful of salt up into the air to drive away the demon.

Children were born in conditions completely lacking hygiene, and grew up in a state of permanent under-nourishment. Poverty, frequent bad harvests, superstitions, diseases were responsible for a high mortality rate, which reached 60 per cent in some regions, such as Ha Bac and Kien An provinces. A peasant woman bore five to eight children on an average but often only three or four survived through childhood.

In the villages in the delta as in the mountainous regions, everywhere one could see pale emaciated women with sore red eyes. In a rural community practically cut off from the outside world, women's time was fully taken up with household chores and farm work. This daily routine left them no time to think of the real causes of their sufferings. They merely sought an escape in petty quarrels. These ne-

gative aspects were to become obstacles in women's struggle for emancipation.

2. The First Women Workers

Colonial capitalism employed a large female force. The number of women workers increased rapidly, with the constant growth of investments by the colonists.

In 1908, there were 6,687 women out of 15,308 workers in Tonkin factories. In 1912, the corresponding figures were 7,500 and 17,000.

The "Tonkin Cotton Enterprise" established in 1900 employed 600 workers, mostly women. By 1937, the number had risen to 14,000.

In 1939, at the Hong Gai — Dong Trieu coal-mining enterprise, women made up 13.6 per cent of the total number of miners. A year later the proportion had risen to 20.2 per cent.

In the rubber plantations women made up 15 per cent of the labour force. A woman worker was paid only two-thirds of a man's wage for the same work. A skilled woman worker received only one third of the wage of a man doing the same work.

In 1937, a workers' Wages Study Council met in Hanoi. There were over forty French and Vietnamese delegates who met under the chairmanship of Delsalle, Senior Resident of Tonkin. According to the August 14, 1937 issue of the Vietnamese daily Dong Phap (French Indochina), the Council came to the following conclusions:

The daily minimum wages for an Annamite (Vietnamese) worker were 25 cents:

8 cents
4
4
3
2 _
3 —
1 cent

For these starvation wages, women had to toil 12, even 14 hours a day. A Vietnamese periodical, *Phu Nu Tan Van* (New Women's Review) investigated Hong Gai miners' lives in 1929:

"... Women working at Cai Bau¹ get up at 2.30 or 3 a.m. After a hasty meal, they run to catch the trucks leaving at 4.30 for the coal face. Arriving at 5.30, they work until 11.00 a.m.; then from 0.30 p.m to 6.30 p.m. Back home at 9 or 10 p.m. they take a second meal, then go to bed at midnight. Working 19 or 20 hours a day, no wonder many of them die prematurely!"

At the Tonkin Cotton Enterprise, women workers had to go to work very early in the morning, and any rice they took with them they had to eat stealthily near their machines. Nursing mothers were not allowed a break to breast feed their children. The child was often taken to the factory by its sister or grandmother to wait by the barbed-wire fence. The mother fed her child through the fence when the superintendent was not looking.

Women workers were often victims of accidents. There was no work protection; and many were

buried alive when mine galleries collapsed, were crushed by machines in factories or by falling trees in rubber plantations

Day after day, pick on the shoulder, one climbs
the mountain,
It is only when one is back home, late in the
evening, that one can be certain of having
survived the day
(Popular song)

For the colonial capitalists a "coolie's" life was worthless. One of them, Depré, Director of the Tonkin Cotton Enterprise, told striking miners: « ... To find 100 dogs is difficult, but I only have to raise my little finger to have 1,000 coolies to replace you all. »

A rigorous piecework system forced women to overwork themselves. At the Hong Gai coal mines, for instance, a woman worker was required to transport 50 pha¹ of coal per day. Those who could transport only 40 pha would not receive any payment. Besides ill treatment, fines and deductions from wages, women workers were subjected to many humiliations. They were frequently "teased" by superintendents and foremen who behaved in a most uncouth manner and extorted "favour" from them. The more attractive women were often molested.

"At the Tonkin coal-mining enterprise, the workers were searched by Indian watchmen on leaving

^{1.} An isle in Ha Long Bay where coal was mined.

^{1.} Measure unit equivalent to a basketload.

the work site. The latter took full advantage of their position to humiliate the women. In the twenties a violent strike broke out at the Mao Khe mine after two women workers were raped by Indian watchmen".

In the towns, which were exposed to the direct influence of colonization, middle-class women suffered other forms of "native women's martyrdom"

3. "Emancipated Women" of the Towns

Colonization thoroughly transformed the towns of Viet Nam: there were new administrative organs, public services, schools, factories, business enterprises... all of which created a new social class of government employees and workers, whose life now depended completely on the omnipotent French masters. The establishment of the administrative machine and the colonial army brought such things as cabarets, dancing halls and brothels... In order to train a new generation of Vietnamese "attached to the mother country", the colonial administration opened a number of schools. In principle, girls were also admitted to these schools, but in fact these were accessible only to daughters of well-to-do people. It was in these educational institutions that notions of individual freedom and individual rights were propagated, but only insofar as they did not harm "the interests of the mother country". It was there

that young Vietnamese were gradually alienated from ancient national traditions.

The traditional ethic was threatened by these new notions. Many a moralistic writer expressed the concern that Asian civilization and traditional moral values would eventually disappear.

The precepts of the Three Obediences and Four Virtues, these fundamental moral principles which constituted the basis of traditional culture, were no longer sacred to women imbued with the new ideas—"emancipated women" who were severely condemned by conservative moralists.

For the first time in Vietnamese history, there were young women who did not lacquer their teeth or wear traditional turbans. They spoke of individual freedom, freedom of marriage, of struggling against family oppression and for equality with men. This was the first generation of "city women" educated in colonial schools whose primary aim was "to conquer the minds of native women". This education diverted them from the right path to liberation, by setting them solely against the patriarchal family and the feudal precepts. Their isolated demands were ignored and this sometimes led them to desperate acts. The patriarchal regime was recognized by the law and supported by the colonialists and it remained omnipotent. The feudal ideology had been based on an economy of an agricultural and small-production character, further bolstered by

^{1.} Nguyen Ai Quoc: Le Procès de la colonisation française.

^{1.} C. Pretre — La femme et l'enfant au pays d'Annam Asie française, May 1912.

bourgeois ideology. The "emancipated women" of the towns could not liberate themselves from family and marital oppression. Even those who became "intellectuals" were still subjected to oppression and sex discrimination, and of course, to the humiliations of being members of a conquered nation.

Nguyen Ai Quoc described a scene in le Procès de la colonisation française :

"A native woman teacher was taken to the provincial town and made to stand bare-headed under a scorching sun".

Many women could see no solution to their conditions, no support for their claims, and they sank into passivity: many girls protested against the marriages forced on them by their parents, by drowning themselves; women ill-treated by their husbands committed suicide. In the twenties, these suicides were much publicized by the press.

In the towns, which were more or less Europeanized, the brightly-lit French quarter with modern buildings was in stark contrast to the cramped dark popular quarters with no tap water, full of sordid slums where tens of thousands of workers and small merchants lived. Beggars and prostitutes were vivid images of the benefits of the kind of civilization brought by the colonialists.

According to statistics published by the Vietnamese language periodical *Ich Huu* (Useful Friend) in its issue of December 15, 1937, "Hanoi has 270 geisha houses, 20 dancing halls, 15 licensed brothels and dozens of clandestine brothels. The population being 100,000, the average of one prostitute for every ten inhabitants is alarming. About 10,000

women are engaged in legal prostitution, but there are also many song girls, taxi-girls and bar hostesses who prostitute themselves."

Wounded dignity led Vietnamese women to gradually become conscious of the fact that in a country under foreign rule, they were the main victims of oppression and exploitation.

II. In the Combatants' Ranks

Vietnamese women took an active part in the struggle against colonialist domination, responding to the traditional call: When the enemy comes, women also must fight".

Our women had been kept in a state of ignorance and backwardness for centuries, and they now rose up and participated in all armed insurrections. The "rebels", "women pirates", as they were called by the colonialists who did not hesitate to massacre them ruthlessly, were venerated by the people.

From 1883 to 1885, a patriotic organization operating near Hanoi, the "Association of People devoted to the Just Cause", rallied as many as 5,000 members. The president of the organization was a very beautiful and clever woman called Nhu. Her husband Tu So led the activities of the organisation. When he was assassinated by a traitor, Nhu replaced him and led an operation during which the murderer was captured and punished. She cooperated with resistance combatants of Me Tri village (a Hanoi suburb), many of whom were women, to win a brilliant victory when a company of French and puppet troops was routed, and their commander, a traitor named Dang Van Tai, was killed.

She withdrew to Tuyen Quang afterwards where she organized a resistance base. But her forces were soon decimated in unequal battles, and in the end she went into exile in Kwang Si province, in China, choosing to die on foreign soil rather than to live under French rule.

Other combatants upheld the best traditions of Vietnamese women: military leader Khuy, daughter of a leader of the Bai Say insurrection (Hung Yen, 1883-1892), took command of the rebel forces at the death of her father, Can, the wife of the leader of the Yen The insurrection (1883-1913), Hoang Hoa Tham, captured by the enemy, chose deportation rather than reddition. In the resistance bases which sprang up everywhere from the North to the South, such as those at Ba Dinh¹ (1886-1887), Huong Son² (1885-1890), women engaged in propaganda work among puppet troops, and won them over to the ranks of the insurrection. They also organized a vast liaison network in the country and abroad to acquire weapons.

At the close of the 19th century, armed struggle ceased with the country still under foreign rule. In the early years of the 20th century under the influence of bourgeois revolutions in China and in Japan, reformist revolutionary movements gained ground in Viet Nam. Women promptly joined in the new struggle. Many of them volunteered to propagate "western science" and engaged in activities designed to revive patriotic feelings and the national spirit.

Others went to all parts of the country from North to South, exhorting the population to rise up and fight, acquiring weapons, circulating revolutionary documents.

Dinh was a liaison agent of the "Vietnam Restoration Association". With other patriotic women, she organized a liaison network for resistance groups in different parts of the country, transporting letters, money and weapons. She was captured by the French, and savagely tortured, but the enemy could not extract any information from her. Before committing suicide, she wrote a poem on the wall of her cell with her own blood:

In the land of golden streams¹, I'll meet heroine Trung Vuong.

I cry from regret, like a moaning moor hen.²
Let omnipotent Buddha bring me back to life
And give me one thousand hands to handle one
thousand rifles!

Attempts at reform were smothered by the colonial administration. Many revolutionaries were killed or deported, others died a slow death in prisons. Women now devoted themselves more ardently than ever to the cause of national liberation. But their struggles did not succeed until the Party of the Vietnamese working class was founded and put them on the right path toward complete emancipation.

^{1.} Now Thanh Hoa province.

^{2.} Present-day Nghe Tinh.

^{1.} In the world of the dead.

^{2.} Literary allusion: an exiled man got so homesick that he was turned by Buddha into a moor-hen whose cry sounds like the word "quoc" meaning "country".

Chapter II

WOMEN AND THE REVOLUTION

A. THE NATIONAL DEMOCRATIC REVOLUTION.

I. National Liberation and Women's Emancipation

Peasant insurrections under feudalism did not bring about any great change in the social structure. Private ownership and the feudal relations of production meant that women remained inferior and submissive, despite their having participated in all the uprisings.

In the 19th century, colonialist exploitation intensified the oppression. Neither the national reforms proposed by the patriotic scholars nor the uprisings led by the bourgeoisie and the petty-bourgeoisie during the early half of the 20th century were able to mobilize the labouring masses, the majority of the population, half of whom were women. The people wanted liberation and the elimination of all social inequalities. The bourgeois and petty-bourgeois movements for liberation had no clear-cut radical policy vis-à-vis the appropriation of land by the land-owners and the multiform exploitation of the

workers and the working people by the colonial capitalists, and could therefore not expect support from the masses. They were bound to end in bloody failures.

Vietnamese women became conscious very early of their responsibility for the survival of their families and their country. However, the long feudalist and then colonialist oppression somewhat blunted their spirit of combat. When the bourgeois insurrections in which the leaders did not know how to mobilize the masses broke out early this century, they counted few women peasants - who made up the great majority of the women - women workers and other working women among the participants. Feudal prejudices and the deep and varied effects of the policy of obscurantism stood in the way of women developing consciousness of their situation. To make them relive their historical role and arouse their militant spirit was one of the primary tasks of the Vietnamese working class which stood in the front rank of the struggle for national liberation. Nguyen Ai Quoc, founder of the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) was the first revolutionary to show Vietnamese women the road to genuine emancipation. In an appeal to the people he made in 1930, he wrote:

Dear oppressed brothers and sisters,

The Indochinese Communist Party had been founded. It is the Party of the proletariat. It will lead the working class in the struggle for the libera-

tion of all our oppressed and exploited brothers and sisters. Join it and support it in order to:

...

10. Achieve equality between the sexes.

It was the first time in the history of the struggle for national independence that a patriotic appeal was addressed to women and dealt with the question of equality between the sexes. The programmes of action of the bourgeois and petty-bourgeois parties in this period never touched upon this question explicitly. The national and democratic revolution advocated by the ICP proved capable of mobilizing all strata of the people and all patriotic forces on the basis of objectives which corresponded with their own aspirations: to overthrow colonialism and feudalism, to wrest back independence and to eliminate social inequalities. In its political programme worked out in October 1930, achieving equality between the sexes was listed among the ten fundamental tasks of the revolution. It presented a profound analysis of the living conditions of the working people, notably of women workers and peasants, and appreciative awareness of the rich revolutionary potential they represented.

... "Once fired with revolutionary ideas, women will participate with ardour and determination in the revolutionary struggles. The revolutionary potential of women constitutes one of the main forces of the revolution. Without the participation of the masses of women in the revolutionary struggles, the revolution will never succeed."

II — The Mobilization of Women in the Revolution

One of the first tasks of the national revolution was to arouse women's political consciousness so as to turn it into a driving force in the liberation struggles.

This was a completely new idea to most of the militants whose attitudes were strongly influenced by feudal prejudices. There were therefore quite a number who found it difficult to accept that women be given a role to play in any issue of national import. And often enough, the social realities were consistent with their prejudices. Education was denied to the majority of women. Almost all the illiterate women peasants were kept in a state of miserable underdevelopment and the first generation of women workers were still handicapped by their peasant origin. The small number of women intellectuals, civil servants and students lived isolated from the masses. Some of them fell prey to the illusory ideas of bourgeois feminism and were beguiled by demagogic theories of individual freedom, and of "respect for the fair sex". Moreover, women found it difficult to free themselves from the trammels of excessive modesty and resignation that they had grown used to and which were imposed on them by the feudal regime.

All women, workers, peasants or intellectuals, suffered from the servitude of their whole people; our early revolutionaries saw in this situation a real basis on which to draw them into the national struggle. At first, political agitation by the various

levels of the ICP among women was either superficial or neglected. There were numerous difficulties. It is true that the women peasants and workers absorbed revolutionary ideas slowly, but it was social prejudice and the dead weight of feudal ideology that were the main causes of this negligence. Not even the limited number of women members had sufficient training to become good militants. Mobilization for the political struggle made more headway among the well-to-do where the educated women grasped the revolutionary theories more quickly. Another factor was that colonialist domination exposed women militants to numerous dangers and required sacrifices, endurance and patience of them. Women peasants and workers may have been hampered by ignorance and superstition and slower in joining the struggle, but they proved to be more resolute and tenacious in fighting for the revolution. The old society offered them nothing and its perpetuation held no attraction for them. At first, the movement's cadres neglected the mass character of the revolution and the mobilization of labouring women. Women peasants and workers were few in the ranks of revolutionaries. The political work tackled the general questions of equality and freedom but skimmed over those which directly concerned women. In the political struggles of 1929 and 1930, none of the slogans concerned defence of women's rights, such as abolition of the feudalist laws ,access to education, a ban on night-shift work for women... The plenary session of the ICP held

in October 1930 severely criticized these shortcomings. It stressed the mass character of the national democratic revolution and the need to win the support of the labouring people and their active participation in the struggle. It also stressed the essential difference between the objectives of the Party's mobilization of women and those of bourgeois feminism: Party mobilization aimed at the complete emancipation of working women, who made up the majority of all women, and equality between the sexes on the basis of women's conscious participation in state management. The present task, i.e. the struggle against the colonialist yoke, involved the entire people regardless of sex. The ICP's programme of action in this period already included the first measures that would serve to ensure social equality in the stage of national democratic revolution. As regards the women's movement, it made concrete proposals concerning certain indispensable forms of action:

... "The Party must free women from bourgeois ideas, eliminate the illusion of 'equality between the sexes' expounded in bourgeois theories. At the same time, it must enable women to participate in the revolutionary struggles of the workers and peasants: this is an important task. For if women do not take part in these struggles, they can never emancipate themselves. So, it is necessary to fight the feudalist or religious customs and superstitions in their way, give women workers and peasants intensive political education, arouse their class consciousness and enable them to join the organizations of the working class. Political work must be carried out not only in

towns but also in the countryside, among the poor peasants and all working women.

"In all the leading organs of the Party and the Youth at regional and central levels, there must be a women's commission or an official in charge of women's affairs. The Party must hold debates on the mobilization of women, and women's congresses to study appropriate methods for carrying out the political work. Women workers and peasants should be organized in the workers' trade unions and the peasants associations and appointed to the leading organs to become conversant with the work of leadership.

To rally the majority of women workers and peasants in the organizations where they belong, it is necessary to fight in support of their concrete demands: ban on risky jobs and night work for women; equal pay for equal work; paid maternity leave

"To rally the women of all social strata, women's organizations should be founded to unite them in the struggle for their own rights and for their complete emancipation. These organizations shall enrol working women, workers' wives, women small traders and all those who cannot join the workers' and peasants' organizations."

(Resolution of the 1st C.C. Plenary meeting, October 1930).

The Association of Women for Emancipation, which was later called the Association of Anti-Colonialist Women, came into being with the found-

ing of the ICP. It carried out intensive propaganda work among women. The active participation of women workers and peasants in the revolutionary upsurge of 1930-1931 proved the correctness of these instructions.

In 1931, when the French colonialists tried to root out the Vietnamese revolutionaries by bloody terrorism, the ICP Central Committee held its second plenary session and adopted a resolution which, among other things, stressed once again the proletarian character of the women's organization.

RESOLUTION OF THE 2nd C.C. PLENARY SESSION (March 1931)

"III - Urgent tasks

1. Special attention to be paid to the organization of women workers.

The Party's basic political work concerning women is to be done among women workers. The tendency in the Association of Anti-Colonialist Women, the Alliance of women... to cut themselves off from women workers must be quickly corrected. The urgent task of the Party is to organize women workers in the Trade Unions, the women peasants in the Peasants' Associations, and women small traders in the Union of Traders; that is, to organize the masses of women workers and poor women."

For 15 years of underground activities (1930-1945) women struggled in these organizations side by side with men for national liberation and for their own emancipation. The mass-orientated line of the ICP in propaganda and organization work made it possible to rally a large number of women under the banner of the revolution. This significant turning point in the women's movement gave it new impetus.

From 1930 to 1940 the Association of Anti-Colonialist Women gradually broadened its organization to keep pace with developments in the country. It became the Association of Women for National Salvation.

The principles of organization and the objectives of the movement remained basically the same, but the alteration of the forms of organization and action made it possible to attract steadily more women militants who found that the aims of the organization corresponded to their own aspirations. In September 1940, the Japanese fascists invaded Indochina. In February 1941, Nguyen Ai Quoc convened the 8th Plenary Session of the ICP Central Committee. To rally more people from all walks of life in the struggle for national liberation, the plenary meeting decided to found the Viet Minh Front. This was when the Association of Anti-Colonialist Women changed its name to the Association of Women for National Salvation. The new rules enabled the Association to draw even more women into the struggle to "rally all Vietnamese women patriots in defence of women's basic rights and, together with other organizations, prepare to fight the French colonialists and drive away the Japanese fascists and found a completely independent Viet Nam''¹

In the feverish atmosphere of the pre-revolutionary years 1941-1945, the Tonkin (North Viet Nam) Conference of Cadres held from September 25 to 27, 1941 again reaffirmed the necessity of training women cadres and arousing the political consciousness of women of all social strata.

"XI. Political work among different social strata.

"With regard to women... It is necessary to train women cadres chosen from among members of the Party and the Association of Women for National Salvation. It is also advisable to launch an appeal to the urban women to use all appropriate forms of organization to rally the women from other walks of life such as tontines², the association of knitters of warm clothing for the militants etc."

(The Tonkin Committee of the ICP)

In February 1943, the situation in the country and the world was favourable for the national liberation, and the Standing Committee of the ICP Central Committee held a conference to prepare the revolution. A resolution from the Standing Committee stressed that participation of women in the movement was vital.

...

"V. Preparing for the revolution.

. .

"4. Political work among different strata of the population

a) With regard to women: the struggle for national liberation cannot succeed without women's participation. However, the number of women members of the Association of Women for National Salvation has so far been very limited, and especially that of members from the town and industrial centers. The Party section in each of the three zones (North, Central and South Viet Nam) must establish a women's commission to direct political activities among women and to draft the documents necessary to this work.

"Organizations such as trade co-operatives, consumption co-operatives, literacy classes etc. are necessary to raise the political level of women up to that of the Association of Women for National Salvation."

(February 25-26, 1943)

These organizations sprang up among the women workers in towns, and among school and university students. In some bourgeois and petty-bourgeois

^{1.} Article 2 of the Rules of the Association of Women for National Salvation.

^{2.} A form of financial mutual-aid group whose participants each contribute a fixed monthly subscription, and receive, in turn, the total amount subscribed for their own use.

families, women who had been dependent on their husbands, now went out to attend secret meetings to discuss independence and equality. Women workers and peasants who had led hard lives under all sorts of restraints were waking up to the realities of the struggle which gave them hope for a bright future. Nguyen Thi Minh Khai, one of the first fighters for women's rights gave revolutionary delegates from the whole world a vivid report on the Vietnamese women's awakening in her speech at the 7th Congress of the International in Moscow in 1935:

"It is the first time in the history of our national liberation movement, the first time since the founding of our Communist Party, that a woman, member of the ICP, has the honour not only to take part in this Congress but also to announce, from this platform, to workers all over the world that the women workers and peasants of the Far-Eastern countries, of the colonial and semi-colonial countries, women who are a thousand times more oppressed than our comrades in the West, have embarked on the road of revolutionary struggle. The women of heroic China, the women workers of Japan and India, the women workers and peasants of Indochina have become a tangible force in the ranks of revolutionaries of the colonized peoples in the Far East. For hundreds of years, the feudalist codes of conduct and behaviour have kept the women in the Far East mute and docile slaves to their

parents and their husbands. This has paralysed their will, weighed down, smothered and clouded their minds. Comrades! By taking the road of revolutionary struggle, we are ridding ourselves of this morality. Together with the workers and peasants of our country, we are struggling for equal pay for equal work between women and men; we are struggling against the colonialists who oppress us; we are struggling for the complete independence of our country... We wish to inform you that in Indochina, particularly during the years of revolutionary upsurge1, the contribution of women has been a worthy one: Women have taken part in demonstrations and shows of strength, standing in the front ranks. They have taken the floor in meetings. And we are glad to stress that in many cases, they have shown bravery in the struggle. They have headed demonstrations and not only forced soldiers to retreat but also known how to convert them. The women of Indochina participated in the Nghe Tinh Soviets in 1930-31, when they called on the soldiers to go over to the side of revolution. In recent years, their activities have intensified. They have joined in workers' strikes and peasants' demonstrations. The women workers and the working women in the towns are now used to these struggles.

^{1. 1930-1931.}

"Women play an important role in the common struggle for peace, for the creation of a united front against the warmongers. We should pay great attention to political work among women and develop it..."

Nguyen Thi Minh Khai's words reflected a new situation in Viet Nam, which had arisen when the working class took over the leadership of the struggle for national liberation. After centuries of isolation from social involvement Vietnamese women were beginning to take part in their people's struggle. The credit for this goes to militants of the women's movement for being able to evaluate and develop their strength and capacities.

1. The Story of Nong Thi Trung 2

During the years of underground activities, the revolutionary bases, set up in the most secluded villages, were protected and supplied by peasants and mountain people whom the colonialists called pejoratively "moi" (savages). The liaison work between these bases and the people was done mostly by women, for they were less likely than men to be searched by the police. To arouse their political consciousness, draw them into revolutionary activities, foster self-confidence and stimulate their fighting spirit, and instil in them confidence in the final victory while the militants were being hounded

everywhere, having no weapons to fight with... work had to be done systematically and with the utmost patience, an indication of the high esteem and class feeling the revolutionaries felt for women, the most miserable of the oppressed.

Nong Thi Trung was one of the first women to have contact with the revolution in its early days.

In 1941, the colonial police started a hunt for Bay (Sister Seven), a Tay woman peasant of Cao Bang, whose husband was deported for his patriotic activities. Her brother-in-law, a revolutionary militant, had long since left the family home. A year later, she was caught and put in prison by the regional police and sent to the security station of Cao Bang for interrogation: "Why do you live alone in this big house? You're in contact with your brother-in-law, aren't you?"... Bay succeeded in escaping the same night and made for the jungle where she came across a resistance group and was welcomed by the militants. Some time later, she was sent to meet an old man who lived in a hut on the bank of a stream:

... "I saw an old man in Nung clothing; he was reading. As soon as I greeted him, he said gently: Sit down and let's have a chat. Don't feel sorry about having to leave your home. You'd never be able to lead a peaceful and happy life in your house; you would never be able to earn enough to pay the taxes. You must bear in mind that you belong to a family of patriots. If our country is liberated, our families will be saved. If our country is occupied by foreigners, the separation of husbands and

^{1.} Document preserved at the Museum of Revolution.

^{2.} This story is taken from "Our President Ho", Lao Dong Publishing House, 1960.

wives, the division of families and the enslavement of our people will continue. We should have a broader and more far-sighted view of things. Don't be sad any longer. Don't abandon yourself to nostalgia. Instead try to get used to your new job!'"

From then on the Tay woman peasant was called Trung, the name given her by the old man in memory of the Two Trung Sisters¹. She worked with him for half an hour every day. He taught her the basic history and geography of the country, the names of the capital cities of other countries, about the people of different countries in the world. She learnt to read, to handle a pen. With patience and affection, he led her step by step to full consciousness of her situation. He talked of the life of her compatriots who also suffered from the cruelty of "Western and local mandarins". "The Viet Minh Front", he said, "is struggling for the independence of our country, the liberation of our people. We must carry out the national revolution. When our country is liberated, the mission of the Viet Minh will be fulfilled. But the Party will go on with the socialist revolution, that is to say it will work towards this objective to make it possible for everybody to have enough food to eat, decent clothes to wear, to get rid of all exploitation, so that people in the countryside will have electricity, physicians, and film shows as in the town."

Every day for six months, Trung discovered part of a new world through the simple, clear explana-

1. See appendices.

tions of the old man. At the same time, she started doing propaganda work among the peasants in the surrounding areas together with other cadres. The old man set her a time limit to get to know the inhabitants of the village of Pac Bo¹, to find out about every family, every villager. Trung chatted with young and old like one of the family. The following year, she left the old man and started working by herself. She established herself in Ha Quang (Cao Bang) and set up revolutionary bases there.

A group of militants formed a section of the Association of Women for National Salvation, every member of which became a nucleus for activity which spread to the surrounding regions. Nong Thi Trung threw herself tirelessly into the job that her "uncle" had taught her.

"Although I was living at some distance from him, I received affectionate and encouraging letters from my uncle regularly. Each one contained a profound and practical lesson for me. I also wrote reports to him. Every time he completed the translation of a study document ², he sent me a copy. Once, he sent me a translation of "Sun Tze's Strategy" ³ with this dedication in verse:

^{1.} One of the revolutionary base areas where President Ho Chi Minh stayed during the underground period.

^{2.} Historical and political documents of the fraternal Parties, notably the Communist Party of the Soviet Union and the Chinese Communist Party.

^{3.} Famous Chinese strategist.

This manuscript I dedicate to you, dear niece, With all my affection.

Study hard

So as to serve the country well later on.

My uncle's fatherly affection and his advice went deep into my mind and my heart and encouraged me in my work. I never lost heart during the underground period, despite the ruthless repression, the hunger, the thirst, the cold..."

The "uncle" who had shown Nong Thi Trung the true road of life became Ho Chi Minh, President of the Democratic Republic of Viet Nam in 1945. The Tay woman peasant is now Deputy Head of the Administrative Committee of Cao Bang and Chairwoman of the Union of Women of Cao Bang.

The story of Nong Thi Trung is the story of Vietnamese women's ideological and political maturity during the revolutionary years. This maturity, which was especially remarkable among the women peasants, proved the correctness of the policy toward women of the Workers' Party which educated a whole generation of women in the struggle for national liberation.

2. The First Women Militants

In the early days of the revolution, when the first militants were being harassed by the colonial police, daily faced the risk of imprisonment, deportation, or even death, women peasants and workers, girl students... embarked on the revolutionary struggle in a determined fashion. Those most

oppressed by misery and suffering were driven by love for their families, their native villages. They were mobilised to participate in the revolution by the first women militants, who aroused their national spirit, their consciousness and their sense of dignity. These sentiments which were latent in all women were at the root of a rebellious spirit which had persisted throughout the long night of feudalism.

The considerable number of conscious women who participated in the revolution and the growth of their movement went hand in hand with the awakening of their class consciousness. Women from well-to-do families, who had originally got involved on the basis of their national spirit, became entirely devoted to the cause of the proletariat when they had absorbed Marxist ideas.

Nguyen Thi Minh Khai was still a secondary school student when her teacher Tran Phu¹ introduced her to revolutionary ideas. Her mother was unaware of her underground patriotic activities, and suspecting her of leading a dissolute life, forbade her to go out. Eventually, the young girl had to leave her family so as to be free to do her revolutionary work. She was to be a delegate of the ICP to the 7th Congress of the International in Moscow, in 1935, as we have seen.

She was one of the leaders of the Insurrection in Nam Bo in 1941. Arrested and tortured, she did not reveal anything, and died a heroine.

^{1.} The first Secretary-General of the ICP. He was arrested by the colonial police and died in prison.

The first women militants like Minh Khai, had to brave the conflict, between their families and the cause of the revolution, between their personal interests and the interests of the fatherland. It was worst for mothers who, in order to avoid all possible encumbrances had to leave their children to devote themselves to their patriotic activities. Their very sacrifices meant a better future for their children.

In 1930, a revolutionary called Tu (sister Four), was jailed by the Hai Phong Police. Pregnant and expecting to give birth to her child at any moment, she offered her back to police clubs to protect it. But five days after delivery she had to abandon it — it was her first-child — in the maternity ward and escape to rejoin the revolutionary organization.

The revolution was born of the people, and lived in the care of the people: the children of the revolutionary militants found in the families of the sympathizers all the love and attention which their parents would have given them. Minh Khai and her daughter were separated very early. The little girl was adopted by a revolutionary family who brought her up. She saw the victory of the August Revolution, lived and worked in the socialist North, and has now seen the complete liberation of the whole country. Once freed of the concerns of daily life, the first women militants were able to devote themselves entirely to the cause of the revolution. During the worst trials, they proved their undauntedness and dignity, commanding respect even from the enemy. These women included simple peasants and students and they had immense inner strength which enabled

them to stand even the most cruel tortures. This strength derived from their ardent patriotism, their revolutionary organization and from the long tradition of struggle and endurance of Vietnamese women. It was the same love for their families and their homeland that had moved those who joined the army of the two Trung Sisters in the 1st century and established the link between them and those now engaged in the merciless fight against the colonialists. These feelings grew as the revolution progressed and were characterised by the new solidarity of the oppressed and exploited class. There were numerous heroines among this generation of women whose meeting with the revolution and the new ideology had clarified their thinking and given them self-confidence.

Nguyen Thi Nghia was a high-school student in Vinh, an industrial town which was one of the first hotbeds of workers' struggles. She went to a school that had been opened by the colonialists, and it was there that she learned that it was necessary to drive out the colonialists in order to wrest back the independence of her country and free her compatriots from slavery. She joined a group of ICP militants and took factory jobs in Vinh so as to be able to be among the workers and win them over to the cause of the revolution. Later on she was put in charge of liaison work between the CC of the ICP and the Party Committee of Central Viet Nam (the region stretching from Thanh Hoa to Binh Thuan). Nghia was arrested in December 1931 on one of her trips between Hanoi and Vinh. The police searched

her and found a confidential letter of the CC addressed to the Committee of Vinh in her bag. In spite of all their horrible tortures, she kept repeating "I don't know how to read and to write". After fifteen days of torture, she suddenly became dumb. She was taken to Hanoi for further interrogation but, despite even more savage treatment, the police was unable to get a single word out of her. At night, with the help of two other women militants kept in the same cell, Nghia organised literacy courses and political studies, and created an atmosphere of unity and mutual aid among the women prisoners. Even the common offenders adored her and called her respectfully "the dumb sister".

Nghia's health was failing fast. One night, after three months of imprisonment, she felt that she was about to die and she asked her two comrades to help her sit up. With her back leaning against the wall, she looked round at the rest of the prisoners and said: "Sisters, I'm not dumb! I've been pretending in order to protect the secrets of my Party and the lives of my comrades. I am a communist. The Indochinese Communist Party calls on us to unite for the struggle. Sisters! Only the revolutionary road charted by the Communist Party can save us and our country from slavery". All her cell mates listened to her respectfully. With an effort, she went on: "I cannot live much longer now. The cruel colonialists have subjected me to all sorts of tortures, including injections of poison. I am going to die now. I wish you, my comrades and my sisters, the best of health so that you may serve the Revolution. Long live the Communist Party!"

The "dumb sister's" last breath went to urge her compatriots to take up the struggle.

The personality of those first women militants, their heroism, and their patriotism, were representative of new-type women fighters, the "revolutionaries" as the people called them - resolute, disinterested, close to the poor, courageous and full of confidence in final victory. In vain did the colonialists try to discredit them, stigmatizing them as shameless, dissolute women shunned by their families. They were held in high regard and affection by their compatriots for having sacrificed the happiness of family life and motherhood for an ideal which exposed them to suffering and even death. They were seen everywhere, from the North to the South, in the countryside, the towns, the factories, the worker's quarters, and people's homes everywhere. They won over women peasants, workers and students, who eventually became ardent and enthusiastic militants themselves.

Nguyen Thi Hung, a peasant girl in Thai Binh, was forced to "marry" a little boy in her hamlet. She took refuge in a pagoda and became a nun. Her parents managed to find her and again she had to flee, this time to Hongai, the mining region, where she became a coolie. Her life was unbearable: working conditions were deplorable, and bad treatment at the hands of the overseers almost drove her to suicide. But then she was contacted by a teacher in

the town, and she began to take part in secret meetings where revolutionaries spoke of the two Trung Sisters, Lady Trieu..., of the liberation of the country, and they sang and taught her revolutionary songs... Some time later, Hung was given the task of distributing leaflets, and was subsequently assigned to several other underground jobs: liaison work, providing refuge and food for revolutionaries. She was given more and more important tasks: propaganda work among the workers, establishment of revolutionary bases, command of the revolutionary forces of a district... In 1945, as a member of the Thai Binh executive committee of the ICP, she led the popular insurrection in that province.

The progress made by Nguyen Thi Hung showed the efficiency of the organisation of the ICP. The Party had assigned excellent cadres to work within the women's movement. In the ranks of the Association of Anti-colonialist Women there were women peasants, workers, intellectuals, who all knew that their place was among the people in the struggle. Meetings, demonstrations, distribution of leaflets all increased during the revolutionary high tide of the years 1930-1931. The fact that the masses of women took part, often at the spearhead of the struggle, was an indication of the new character of the revolution led by the ICP. Women organised the struggle, were always present in the front ranks, and organized women's demonstrations and strikes. They were particularly active in the provinces of Nghe An — Ha Tinh (central Viet Nam) where the political struggles led to the founding of rural soviets which

lasted four months. The women peasants won their rights to freedom and equality, took on their share of the administration of their villages, benefited from the distribution of land to the peasants, followed study courses and joined the self-defence militia. Despite its brief life of barely five months, the Nghe An — Ha Tinh Soviets showed the people, and women especially, the model of a new society in which all were equal, where women were considered as full-fledged human beings and enjoyed rights no previous liberation movement had been able to give them.

The Nghe An—Ha Tinh Soviet movement was ruthlessly suppressed by the colonialists. Entire villages, and even "suspected" areas were bombed by airplanes. Puppet soldiers burned down thatched houses, drove the people into concentration camps and raped women. Workers from the Vinh match factory, peasants from Nghe An—Ha Tinh, cadres of the Soviets, where crowded into prisons and subjected to the worst tortures. Throughout this terrible ordeal, not a single woman gave way.

Ca Khuong ¹, for example, was arrested in Hong Gai in 1931. The regional police used her to test a new torture called the "flesh hammock": she was hung up on the branches of a mango-tree by her thumbs and big toes. She lost consciousness several times. But once back in her cell, she overcame all her pain to reassure her comrades.

^{1.} A cadre of the Association of Anti-colonialist Women.

After the defeat of the Nghe-Tinh Soviets, the women's movement and the revolution in general went through a period of regression. However, the cadres and the militants who weathered this ordeal were able to draw valuable lessons from it. The members of the ICP and the Association of Anticolonialist women who had succeeded in escaping from their prisons or avoiding police raids continued their political work among the masses. And thanks to the depth of the work in this period of recovery (1931-1935), the consolidation of the revolutionary bases ensured steady progress of the mass organizations.

3. Mothers and Wives of the Militants

The prisons were crammed with political prisoners in 1931 as a result of the repression of the Nghe-Tinh Soviets. In an interrogation room of Vinh prison (provincial town of Nghe An), the police confronted two persons: a "communist rebel" with his clothes in shreds, his face swollen and covered with blood and a poorly clad, old woman peasant wearing a white mourning turban. A secret agent said to them: "Now you are reunited, mother and son, after years of separation!" They both answered at the same time "I don't know this person!" — "Don't lie." sneered the agent, turning to the woman, "you are his mother. Would you deny your son? How can you be so heartless?" - Mrs. Hai, the old woman, shuddered imperceptibly. But she said calmly "You are mistaken! I'm only a peasant and I know nothing. And I certainly don't know this gentleman!" -

"You liar!" growled the man, "This wretched rebel is your son! Don't you recognize him? The prisoner, who had been looking away as if to avoid her eyes, turned round sharply to reply to the policeman's insolence. Mrs Hai could now see him full in the face. He was indeed her son. Le Viet Thuat, who had been missing for three years and for whom she was still in mourning as everybody believed him dead. He had returned to lead the struggle in his native village at the height of the colonialist repression. She had learned this barely half an hour before the thugs broke into her hut, bound her hands, brought her to prison and threw her into this room. Here she met her son again. This was for the last time for he was an important leader of the Nghe An ICP Committee and could not escape death once he had fallen into the hands of the enemy. She looked at him, trying to conceal her emotion, and repeated in an even clearer and firmer voice: "No, he is not my son!". The torturers cursed her and took the prisoner away. Before disappearing into the dark corridor, he glanced at the old woman, who remained there, immobile.

In refusing to recognize her son Mrs. Hai helped to hide from the police the nucleus of a revolutionary base whose existence was suspected by the Security Service. The police were bogged down in speculation as they could neither discover the exact identity of the political prisoner nor track down those who were still at large.

Mothers of "communist rebels", such as Mrs. Hai, lived under a perpetual threat of enemy terrorism

and oppression by the local despots. They often shared their children's ideal and they were their faithful, active and courageous comrades. Extolling the militants' mothers, Le Duan, a leader of the ICP since 1930, said:

"I think it is in women that we find the essence of our national characteristics. The fine traits of the Vietnamese character are first of all present in Vietnamese women. I noticed in prison that most of our revolutionaries had fine women as mothers."

The mothers were also faithful wives who bravely faced the scorn of colonial society as "rebels' wives". They held their heads high and brought up their children in the absence of the fathers. Their political consciousness further consolidated the conjugal bonds despite separation. Many revolutionaries, who were serving life sentences in the convict prison of Poulo-Condor, advised their wives to get a divorce and remarry. But few were those who acted on this advice.

The revolutionaries' underground activities required them to keep the secrets of their organization. Their wives respected this secrecy and often without their husbands' knowledge they strove to protect their base of activity. They made their husbands' ideal their own through their patriotic activities and the dangers to which they willingly exposed themselves.

4. When the Masses Rally to the Support of the Revolutionary Cause

The ICP recovered from the repression of 1931, and took advantage of the underground years (1931-1935) to consolidate its organization and to go more deeply into the masses with its political work. Reviewing the work of the first years and the Nghe-Tinh Soviet movement, the First National Congress of the ICP, held in March 1935, praised the capacities and revolutionary qualities of the movement highly. The delegates discussed the political work and organizational work of the women's movement in detail in preparation for a new stage. The advancement of women, including ethnic minority women, was one of the problems on the agenda.

At this juncture the world situation was tense under the threat of fascism and a second world war. And while the reactionaries in the capitalist countries tried to divide the world workers' movement, the colonialists in this country pursued their plan to weaken the revolutionary movement by rallying the upper classes, spreading white terror and intensifying the exploitation of the workers. The common danger this implied for both the proletariat and the people led the ICP to prepare for new battles.

^{1.} Speech to the National Congress of Cadres of Political Work among Women (Feb. 1959).

The home situation was favourable for waging semi-legal struggles, which broke out about 1936-1939 with the founding of the Indochinese Democratic Front¹. In the workers' and peasants' "Friendship Associations" women made up as many as $40^{0}/_{0}$ of the membership. They took part in demonstrations and strikes, and at times even organized these themselves, as in the case of the strikes of women workers of the Tonkin Coal Company in Hong Gai and Cam Pha, the Spinning Mill of Hai Phong and the Textile Complex of Nam Dinh. Even the women traders at the Dong Xuan Market (in Hanoi) went on strike demanding reduction of duties and abolition of arbitrary taxes. The women workers' strike in the Spinning Mill in Hai Phong in 1938 lasted thirteen days. The management had to concede a 50% pay rise, ten-minute breaks for nursing mothers and the setting up of an infirmary for women workers.

A Hanoi daily of the period reported: On May 24, 1937, the women traders of Dong Xuan Market struck in protest against heavy taxes. More than 300 demonstrators marched to the Mayor's Office. The police arrested five of them, which in no way intimidated them but only increased their wrath. They continued to march through the main streets of Hanoi, shouting: "Release the arrested!" Three

more were taken away. The demonstration went on. In the end, the Mayor had to order the release of all the women arrested.

These struggles attracted the women students, teachers, manual and brain workers, whose participation brought out the mass character of the women's movement at this stage. On May 1st 1938, the Indochinese Democratic Front organized a huge mass gathering in Hanoi which was really a show of strength of the new national union. For its first public appearance, the women's delegation gathered 5,000 representatives of women workers, peasants, intellectuals, traders and other working women from the North to the South of the country1. Their spokeswoman was dressed simply in a traditional tu than 2 tunic. She energetically condemned the oppression and exploitation of women and demanded their legitimate rights in the family and society; she demanded equality of pay, improvement of working conditions and abolition of the feudalist laws which encroached upon the dignity and the happiness of women. All those present realized that a change had taken place in Vietnamese women, that they had matured during ten years of combat, and were resuming their place among the people in the struggle, on an equal footing with men.

^{1.} Legal organization of the progressive forces of Indochina, of which the ICP was the core. Founded in 1936 with the revolutionary growth of the workers' movement in the country and abroad. Dissolved in 1939 by the fascists in power.

^{1.} Viet Nam was then divided into three Ky (Tonkin, Annam, Cochinchina). The IDF disregarded this artificial division and rallied delegates of the country, from the North to the South, in one single organization.

^{2.} Vietnamese woman's traditional tunic in four pieces (tu: four, than: piece).

After a few years of revolutionary activities in the ranks of the ICP, many women became leading cadres and members of zone, provincial or district committees. Everywhere, from the North to the South, new revolutionary bases appeared, set up by old mothers or by women whose children were still young. The greatest credit goes to those in the countryside or towns who hid, protected and fed revolutionaries, even risking their lives.

A woman peasant was cutting grass along the highway in Thanh Hoa when an auxiliary soldier ¹ went past, leading a securely tied prisoner. She recognized the latter as a revolutionary. The soldier sat down for a rest and fell asleep. Silently she approached the prisoner and swiftly cut the ropes with her sickle, then moved away as fast as possible. On waking up, the soldier was terrified to find the prisoner had disappeared. He never knew how the latter had been able to escape.

Despite raids and searches, the revolutionary cadres always knew where to find a refuge.

She was called "mother Luat", a charwoman in a hospital of the provincial town of Hung Yen ². Despite her poverty and her old age, she adopted militants and introduced them to the neighbours as her nephews and nieces. When some left, others came to take their place. Mother Luat gave them food and helped them. One of the revolutionary leaders of

Nam Bo, Nguyen Binh had been freed from the convict-prison of Poulo-Condor. Afflicted with tuber-culosis, he was taken in by her. She looked after him for months with patience and devotion as if he were her own son. "I am old," she said to the revolution-aries under her care, "I won't live much longer. Give me a mission. If the enemy arrest me, they won't be able to get a word out of me. You should take good care of yourselves. Your task is a long-term one and your lives are more useful than mine."

In the towns teeming with secret police and informers, housewives, school girls, ordinary-looking people acted as liaison agents for the ICP, did political work among the auxiliary soldiers. They mixed with the crowds and passed unnoticed.

In the years 1940-1941, the Japanese fascists' invasion increased the misery of the population. The two oppressors, French and Japanese, intensified their exploitation of the people. Women had to protect their property and defend their husbands and their sons against enemy raids. Empty-handed against armed troops, they managed to win the puppet soldiers over and to bring raids and plunder to a halt. Many times they had to fight, with rudimentary weapons. In Ha Dong (now Ha Son Binh), Hung Yen (now Hai Hung), Bac Giang, Vinh Yen, Thanh Hoa... the Japanese fascists and the French colonialists were confronted with crowds of women of all ages, most of whom had their small children with them.

^{1.} Vietnamese enlisted in the colonial forces.

^{2.} Now merged with Hai Duong and called Hai Hung.

Other women took to arms. In the Armed Propaganda Brigade for the liberation of Viet Nam¹, the first revolutionary troops, there were three women. They took part in the attack against the Na Ngan post which ushered in the stage of armed struggle for national liberation.

"The prisoners were assembled in the courtyard of the post. Our three comrades, Loan, Cam, and Thanh, spoke to them in the Tay dialect. They were astonished by these women militants, armed with rifles and grenades, who explained the situation in the country to them, reminded them of their duty towards the fatherland and urged them to turn their guns against the enemy" 2.

The platoon of women guerillas of Ba Be (Bac Can) and the women's self-defence units of the midland provinces made an efficient contribution to the defence of the revolutionary bases and the razing of enemy military posts. They helped the people to fight off raids and to smash rice requisitioning operations.

Events in the country began to move fast after the Japanese invasion and produced favourable conditions for a general insurrection.

From the first women militants of 1930 to the majority of women becoming politically conscious in the pre-insurrection years, a generation of women engaged in revolutionary activity had grown up. A

new phase in the history of the nation now began, of which one of the remarkable characteristics was the rehabilitation of women and their participation in the struggle of the entire population.

B. CONTRIBUTION TO THE AUGUST 1945 REVOLUTION

From the end of 1944 to the beginning of 1945, a terrible famine killed two million people in the northern provinces, while the stores of the Japanese occupiers and the French colonialists were bursting with rice. The peasants suffered most. The countryside was emptied; along the roads to the towns corpses lay; mothers, reduced to mere skeletons, sat begging with their children by the side of the roads... all this highlighted the crimes of the fascists and the colonialists. By fanning up the people's hatred, the enemy accelerated developments. The March 9, 1945, coup d'Etat, in which the Japanese overthrew the French administration, accelerated the process even more. Regional uprisings broke out everywhere, in the provincial towns and the countryside in which large numbers of women took part. The occupation forces' cruelty drove even the most hesitant people to decide in favour of taking up arms. Everywhere, the people were on the offensive, attacking the enemy's depots and stores of rice. Nguyen Thi Hung¹, the young woman peasant who had been married by force and had later been

^{1.} Set up in December 1944.

^{2.} Vo Nguyen Giap, People's Army — People's Army Publishing House, Hanoi, 1964.

^{1.} See above.

liberated by the revolutionaries, was one of the women organizers of such attacks in Hung Yen. She relates in her memoirs:

"Attacking a rice depot was a serious operation. We had to discuss in detail the whole field of battle: the morale of the people, the strength of the guard at the depot... Then we prepared for the mobilization. A staff took charge of the leadership of the struggle, the organization of the people coming from adjacent villages and the formation of specialized units for rice transportation, distribution and defence. And finally, the watchword and the time of action and the itinerary of the demonstration were decided and the final battle plan against the repression drawn up."

Apart from the attacks on rice depots, which had a triple objective (i.e. to relieve the shortage of food to some extent during the famine, to undermine the enemy's prestige and to usher in the phase of armed struggle), the demonstrators assaulted enemy troops to free young men who had been arrested during raids, and fought back against repression. In several regions the political struggle turned into revolutionary violence; the demonstrators succeeded in paralysing the enemy's administrative apparatus and setting up liberation and revolutionary committees, the preliminary form of people's power. Platoons of guerillas commanded by women attacked enemy posts. The most renowned of them, the women's self-defence platoon of Bac Giang, under

the command of Ha Que¹, a young girl of twenty, destroyed numerous posts, one after another, in the districts of Tri Cu, Yen The, Bo Ha... Success greatly encouraged the people and created favourable conditions for the general insurrection.

From Tan Trao (former province of Tuyen Quang), where the National Congress of the Viet Minh² was held, President Ho Chi Minh issued an appeal to the people:

"This is the hour the destiny of our nation is decided. Let the entire people rise up! With our own forces, let's smash our shackles".

The entire people was ready. On August 17 Hanoi was in a ferment. The pro-Japanese reactionary parties organized a meeting to bolster the morale of their clique. When one of them was about to take the floor, the flag of the Viet Minh, red with a golden star, appeared on the roof of the Municipal Theatre. The whole place shook with enthusiastic shouts from the crowd: "Long live the Viet Minh!" The revolutionaries mounted the rostrum. A woman spoke on behalf of the Viet Minh. It was Nguyen Khoa Dieu Hong³, a former teacher at the Dong Khanh secondary school in Hue. That the appeal

^{1.} Now President of the Women's Union of Viet Nam.

^{2.} Abbreviation for League for the Independence of Viet Nam.

^{3.} Later President of the Hanoi branch of the Women's Union.

for national salvation at this historic moment was made by a woman was evidence of the character of the new epoch: the epoch of a revolution which liberated the people, eradicated all social inequalities and restored women to their proper place in society.

From district to district, from province to province, wave upon wave of uprisings broke out. Everywhere, women cadres alongside the revolutionary militants mobilized the people to launch the insurrection for the seizure of power. Ha Que led the insurrection in Bac Giang (now Bac Thai). In Ha Dong (now Ha Son Binh) Truong Thi My gathered a two thousand strong revolutionary army which laid hold of Hoai Duc district in a bloodless coup. Nguyen Thi Dinh¹ gave the signal for a thousand demonstrators armed with knives and sticks and bearing flags and banners, to start marching on the provincial town of Ben Tre (Mekong delta). Many other women were members of the insurrection committees, such as Hoang Thi Ai in Quang Tri, Hoa in Ninh Binh, Sau Ngai in Sadec (Mekong delta...)

A new era was dawning for women.

In the Young Independent State

On September 2, 1945, Viet Nam, now freed from the colonialist yoke, proclaimed its independence and sovereignty. Faced with untold difficulties,— the threat of a new French invasion and famine,—the young Republic embarked on the consolidation of the new regime. A constitution was promulgated in 1946. It affirmed the rights of women in clear terms:

Art. 24: "In the Democratic Republic of Viet Nam, women have the same political, economic, cultural, social and family rights as men.

"For equal work, they have the right to equal pay. The State ensures to working women, manual and brain workers, the right to maternity leave with full pay before and after childbirth.

"The State protects the rights of mothers and children.

"The State protects marriage and the family." Women's right to vote and the right to stand for election are recognised in Article 23:

"Citizens of the DRVN, regardless of nationality, race, sex, social background, religion, or belief... have the right to vote from the age of 21".

It was 1946, and there were still several European countries where women had not yet obtained these rights.

On January 6, 1946, Vietnamese women took part in general elections for the first time in national history. In the first National Assembly six women, that is 4.1% of the deputies, were elected.

After fifteen years of struggle, liberation accorded Vietnamese women the legal exercise of their rights. However, the legacy of the old regime still

^{1.} Later Second-in-command of the PLAF of South Viet Nam.

weighed heavily on people's attitudes. It was necessary first to initiate women in the role assigned to them by the Constitution. The training of women cadres and the political education of women proved as indispensable as the measures to be taken for the improvement of their living conditions. A conference of responsible cadres, held from July 31 to August 1, adopted important decisions:

The Party's tasks

- ... D The political work among women.
- To train women cadres from all walks of life.
- To organize special political courses for women.
- To care for matters arising in their daily life.
- To adapt forms of organization to their political level and their living conditions... Such organizations as the Association of Knitters of Warm Garments for the Fighters, Mutual Aid... can also help the Association of Women for National Salvation develop.

This urgent political work in the wake of victory helped strengthen and broaden the women's movement. The number of members of various organizations grew quickly. Within a year a million women had joined the Association of Women for National Salvation. Several new organizations attracted other women: the Association of Caodaist Women; the Democratic Union of Women (in the South), the Association of Women Musicians, the Association of

Red Cross Women Activists (in the North) the Sports women's Association, the Association of Women for Promoting Housekeeping Skills (in Central Viet Nam), the Evening Club of Women Intellectuals of Da Nang...

The cadres of the women's movement, most of whom had followed a crash training course, took part in all the meetings of women's committees in the regions, districts, and villages in order to help the women there understand their rights and their duties better. These political meetings, in which the participants animatedly discussed the problems of the country or acquired the elementary knowledge of the revolution, attracted both young and old, who broke through family and feudal restraints to engage in social life.

Soon after the establishment of the people's power in the countryside 500,000 hectares of communal land were distributed to all adult inhabitants, regardless of sex. Women peasants had had no right to land before. The famine still threatened. A mass campaign for the increase of production encouraged millions of women peasants to overcome all privations and debility due to prolonged undernourishment to grow rice, tubers, edible herbs on all cultivable land, fields, gardens, hills and mountain slopes... The 1946 harvest yielded 1,935,000 tons of paddy—the winter crop accounting for 1,115,000 tons, twice as much as in 1945—and 617,000 tons of maize and tubers—three times as much as the

average subsidiary crop output in the years 1944-1946. Privations resulting from the 1945 famine were reduced and reserves stocked for the war of resistance.

90% of women, who had been illiterate up till then, attended popular education classes, in the front ranks in the struggle against hunger and ignorance of which they had always been the first victims. Everywhere, in the fields, at the market, they learned to spell words, to write letters. In 1946, two million Vietnamese were freed from illiteracy. Among them were women who, in the first general elections held on January 6, 1946, were able to write themselves the names of the deputies they had chosen.

At the same time, numerous cultural and social activities aimed at initiating women in their new responsibilities. A new French invasion threatened before the aftermaths of famine, misery and ignorance had been dealt with. The people came to the aid of the State by collecting gold, silver and rice, helping the victims of famine and floods and taking care of the children...

Chiang Kai-shek's troops, who came to disarm the Japanese, colluded with the reactionaries to remove the young people's power; French troops landed in Saigon under the cover of the British Army; the people prepared to defend the country; mothers sent their sons to the South and young girls joined the self-defence or guerilla forces. In Ha Dong (now

Ha Son Binh), the gateway to the capital Hanoi, each district organised a women's guard of a hundred members.

Our young partisan of Thai Binh,
Is graceful and small.
The forage cap sits boldly on her head,
And if anyone asks her about marriage
Gently she will say "Fight the Tay 1 first!"

(Popular song)

C. THE TRIAL OF THE FIRST RESISTANCE (1946-1954)

The resistance against the new French invasion started in Nam Bo (South Viet Nam) on September 23, 1945, a few weeks after the victory of the August Revolution, and spread throughout the country on December 19, 1946. The Vietnamese people had had little time to enjoy the happiness brought by their reconquered freedom. A new patriotic war broke out while internal difficulties resulting from a century of colonization and from the 1945 famine, remained numerous. The building up of the new regime had hardly begun. The Constitution of the DRVN promulgated in 1946 recognized equality between the sexes and the rights of women in the family and in society. Most of the old feudal habits and customs persisted however — dead weights on the attitudes and behaviour of many people. Feudalist ideology could not be eliminated overnight. In the countryside, although the August Revolution had

^{1.} Derogatory term meaning the French colonialists.

toppled the power of the ruling class, its most prominent, tyrannical representatives, the mandarins and the colonists, and the feudalist relations of production still persisted during the first years of the resistance¹. Women peasants, though emancipated by law, remained subject to a patriarchal power that the administrative measures could not fully eradicate. Meanwhile, the national danger relegated these internal contradictions to second place. Patriotic ardour and national spirit after the victory of the revolution stimulated the entire people's determination to fight in order "never to return to slavery".

I. Thorough and Active Participation

The young Vietnamese republic waged a people's war in which women constituted a decisive force. When the men left on a mission or for the front, a front which spread and extended wherever the enemy dared to come, the women replaced them in the rear area, helped them in the fight and established a very efficient rear base. Women's life underwent thorough changes. Women in the towns gave up the comforts of their homes and the convenience of urban life to take their children to the countryside, to regions far from the battle-front. As their husbands had to follow their offices in the State apparatus scattered in the jungle and the mountains, the

women became entirely responsible for their families. Breaking out of the narrow confines of their old environment, they settled among the peasants, did production work and lived a new and independent life which facilitated the maturing of their self-confidence. Apart from agricultural work, women peasants dug trenches, built earthworks around their villages and the young girls trained as guerilla fighters. School and college girls joined relief teams and other resistance organizations. Women accompanied their sons, their husbands to the front. Everywhere they took part in the struggle without more ado, as if they had been preparing for it all along. They represented the best traditions of their people, thanks to the Party of the Vietnamese working class and the new regime which had accorded them their rightful place and enabled them to contribute to the fight for national salvation.

1. The Sickle and the Gun

At the beginning of the resistance the roads were adorned everywhere with posters bearing the motto of the Vietnamese Women's Union:

"Women replace men on the front of the rear area."

There the most important task was production and supplies for a protracted war of resistance. After a century of slavery, agricultural production, which had already been enfeebled, was furthermore exhausted by the famine of Spring 1945, then again by the big flood of August. From December 19, 1946 to the end of 1947, the area left fallow because of

^{1.} The land reform had not yet been carried out in this phase of the national democratic revolution, but the DRVN government had issued a decree on the reduction of rent and interest rates.

the war increased to 1,500,000 hectares. The enemy bombed the dykes and dams causing droughts or floods over hundreds of thousands of hectares. They launched a continuous series of mopping-up operations which the people still remember with horror.

"During two mopping-up operations in the district of Tien Lang and on the banks of the Luoc River ¹ in 1947, the enemy slaughtered 300 draught animals and took away with them 885 buffaloes, 14,872 pigs and 90,000 fowls. Armoured cars crushed 2,000 mau of ripe rice; 1,262 persons were shot, 2,033 wounded, 3,833 imprisoned, most of them women."

Obviously, tremendous efforts had to be made so that "the army and the people could have enough to eat to defeat the enemy" (mobilization campaign for the increase of production during the resistance). Each grain of rice, each cassava root and sweet potato was obtained at the price of much sweat and, in many cases, blood of millions of women peasants who toiled, planted, harvested... mostly by night to avoid the enemy's bombings and raids. Bloody "rice battles" took place around the enemy posts and on the fields bordering the no-man's land where the women peasants and the guerillas, rifles on their shoulders and sickles in their hands, fought hard to save the crops and prevent the enemy from plundering the rice and starving the resistance. At the 1st National Congress of Elite workers held in 1950 in

Viet Bac ¹ women peasants were honoured for the first time. Quach Thi Tuoc (of the Muong ethnic minority, Dao Thi Soc, Nguyen Thi Thuan (women peasants of the plain) were poor peasants who, without the revolution, would still selling their labour to the landlords, living and working like beasts of burden.

The ICP's directive to "Rely on our own strength" was practised in all fields of activity, in national defence as well as the economy which had to meet all the needs of the resistance. In the free zones, which had been isolated at the beginning of the resistance, the production of foodstuffs, clothing, military equipment, and everyday articles were of primary importance in the rear area. Women grew fibrous plants (hemp, jute...) and wove cloth for the army and the people. During the nine years of resistance, the 5th zone (now Quang Nam, Quang Ngai, Binh Dinh) defeated all enemy attempts at invasion. Here 400 women weavers increased production from one million metres of cloth in 1946 to ten million in 1954. Their production of "sita" black fabric — was enough to clothe the fighters and the guerrillas of the 5th zone and Nam Bo. Truong Thi Xim who was employed in the army chemical workshop, and Nguyen Thi Giao Tien, who worked in the pharmaceutical laboratories, were delegates to the 1st National Congress of Elite Workers. The Vietnamese women workers of the revolutionary generation had to overcome a great shortage of basic equipment and materials and raise production using local and scrap materials...

^{1.} Canal which links the lower parts of the Red river and the Thai Binh river.

^{1.} Resistance base set in the mountainous provinces in the far north of Viet Nam.

2. To overcome Ignorance

The resistance brought many changes to the mountain regions, even to the most remote villages. In preparation for the struggle, the resistance had the people organize themselves on the basis of class unity and spread education and culture.

In 1948 four million women were freed from illiteracy. By 1949, 70% of the women in the free zones knew how to read and to write. Girls of peasant stock made up one-fourth of the total school enrolment ¹.

"People's classes" in the evening became part of daily life. Every day after work women of all ages, carrying small kerosene lamps and spelling books, could be seen going to the communal house or a thatched hut lent by a villager. Young women evacuees from the towns helped the local administration with the teaching. In these people's classes, patriotic songs were also taught and daily papers read. Little by little a change took place in the people's thinking, as shown in this popular song composed during the resistance:

Young lass so pretty, so graceful, You don't know how to read, nor to write! Who will marry you then?

The desire to read newspapers to know the news of the front, the pleasure of reading themselves the letters from their husbands, their sons, their fiances at the front spurred many women to go to school and to persevere in their studies.

Sisters, let's go to learn b... a...

We shall read the letters of our husbands ourselves.

(Popular song of the resistance)

Education and their awakening political consciousness armed women with new weapons with which to struggle against the vestiges of feudal oppression and backward customs. Social relations improved when the women peasants' contribution to the resistance was at last recognized.

3. Armed Struggle

The people's war also mobilized women in the armed struggle in defence of the villages, for the protection of the crops and production.

From North to South, in Nam Bo, southern Trung Bo, Binh Tri Thien, Tay Bac, on the left bank of the Red River ¹, and in the occupied delta provinces, all the able-bodied men had left, and many women, mostly the young girls, joined the guerrilla forces. They clung to the land, and took part in production and the defence of the villages. Armed with rudimentary weapons — tam vong spears in the South ² and bamboo sticks in the North — they fought off

^{1.} Report of the Vietnamese delegation at the Asian Women's Congress in 1949.

^{1.} Main battlefields of the resistance.

^{2.} Tam Vong is the name of a southern variety of bamboo.

enemy raids, with the help of regular army units: it was they who held the enemy down, harassed their rear areas, and lured them into booby traps, mine-fields and ambushes. In villages situated in the enemy rear, women guerrillas maintained liaison between the underground resistance bases, dug shelters for the cadres and communication trenches for the regional and regular units. They gave refuge to wounded soldiers, took care of them at the risk of their own lives

Nguyen Thi Hong, an eighteen year-old guerrilla in Dong Ngac village, Tu Liem district ¹, was standing guard one day for a conference of resistance cadres when a detachment of legionaries led by an informer took her by surprise. Having no time to warn anyone any other way, she opened fire as a signal to the guerrillas. A battle ensued and one of the guerrillas was seriously wounded. Hong didn't want to leave him and tried to carry him to a shelter. She fell under the enemy fire.

Hong was posthumously decorated with the title of "Fighter of Merit" and she now rests in the cemetery for heroes who died for the Fatherland, in the village of Dong Ngac.

These struggles were spontaneous and local at first and grew into a mass movement from which hundreds of heroes and heroines emerged. Nguyen Thi Chien, a Thai Binh guerilla and a heroine of the people's army, commanded a platoon of women post in her village. She captured a French captain single-handed. When she was arrested in one of her missions, she was put to savage torture but didn't say a word and in the end succeeded in escaping. In Nam Bo, the enemy themselves named Ho Thi Bi, a Ben Tre guerrilla, "heroine of the eastern zone" 1.

guerillas which succeeded in wiping out the enemy

Whenever the enemy launched a mopping-up operation, a group of women guerillas would confront them while another section would organize the evacuation of old persons and children and help the people hide their paddy and draught animals. Women did liaison work for the undergound cadres working in the enemy rear and worked with them to set up resistance bases.

In the North, there were 840,000 women guerillas in 1952 and in Nam Bo,140,000 in 1950. The famous Hoang Ngan ² brigade of women guerillas in Hung Yen, started the movement to "push back enemy's raids even with bamboo sticks". A total of 6,732 women fought in this brigade, and during the nine years of resistance they fought 80 battles in the occupied zone, killed 54 enemy soldiers, captured 102 and wounded 108. For their exploits, they were decorated three times with the order of "Meritorious Feats of Arms".

^{1.} Suburb of Hanoi.

^{1.} Name given to the provinces on the eastern bank of the Cuu Long (the part of the Mekong which runs through the South).

^{2.} Name of a Vietnamese woman revolutionary.

After the victory of the resistance against the French, the people of one district in Vinh Phu erected a highly symbolic statue depicting a woman peasant standing upright and brandishing a rifle. Behind her were some rice stalks and a small child reaching up to her with raised hands.

The women guerillas had sisters-in-arms in the liaison agents. The latter passed through "the white zones" to maintain the links between the resistance bases. They knew of secret passages and led cadres on their missions. They confronted the soldiers, the police, went past enemy posts with newspapers and documents of the resistance hidden in their turbans, the flaps of their tunics, a bunch of vegetables... Disguised as hawkers and coolies, they approached the posts, and got in if necessary, in order to study their lay-out, and then transmitted the information orally later. From 1950, the credit for the continual harassment of the posts, and the attacks which sapped enemy strength in the plain was due in great part to these women.

Nguyen Thi Dien, an "Elite Fighter" of the liaison agents in the enemy rear areas, was responsible for transmitting documents and communiqués. She also led cadres and soldiers moving from one region to another. She even entered the occupied cities and provincial towns to study the situation and the morale of the enemy troops. She was arrested, and shot for refusing to talk. Hao, a woman peasant of Cho Chay (now Ha Son Binh), got herself hired as a coolie in a post under construction. She wounded herself in the foot in order to be taken to the post

dispensary, and there, she took advantage of the soldiers' absence to measure the thickness and the height of the defence works and later drew a complete plan of them.

4. The Dan Cong

"Dan Cong" was a term coined during the anti-French resistance war. With the exception of those in the regional forces or regular army, and the guerilla forces, every inhabitant voluntarily took turns in the supply service to the front. Two-thirds of these dan cong were women.

From North to South, from the plain to the mountain regions, from the enemy-occupied zones to the free zones, as soon as night fell, line upon line of dan cong resumed their long march which they interrupted during the day, following a labyrinth of invisible roads leading to the front. For nine years. food and munitions were transported continuously to the front, to the hot spots of the resistance. The dan cong brought the wounded back to the rear, and removed the war booty. They took part in the whole series of offensives following the victorious Cao Bang — Bac Can — Lang Son border campaign. They fought in Dong Thap Muoi (South Viet Nam), Tay Nguyen (Central Viet Nam) Tay Bac (North Viet Nam), in Ha Nam, Nam Dinh, Ninh Binh, in the plains campaign, in Hoa Binh 2.

^{1.} Civil porter during the resistance.

^{2.} Scenes of the major offensives of the Viet Nam People's Army during the resistance.

The women peasants of Bac Ninh¹, which had been occupied by the enemy from the beginning of the hostilities, managed to transport 8,200 tons of paddy to the free zone within a very short time. The women of Vinh Yen and Phuc Yen (now merged and called Vinh Phu) in the plain travelled as far as the mountain regions of Tay Bac, and women of Thanh Hoa hundreds of kilometres to supply the fighters at Dien Bien Phu... In the Cao Bang - Bac Can -Lang Son border campaign (1950), the dan cong contributed a million work-days altogether. One woman in this campaign braved the enemy fire to make seven trips to the front line on the battlefield to bring the wounded to the rear. She tied the wounded on her back with her waist-band. Several dan cong were decorated at the 1st National Congress of Elite Workers. Among them was Trieu Thi Soi (a Zao), Vo Thi Quan (from Binh Dinh, central Viet Nam), Nguyen Thi Thanh (from the North). All received Resistance Diplomas of Honour.

5. Economic and Political Struggles

"Resistance by the whole people in all fields"—
the motto launched by President Ho Chi Minh—
was aimed at frustrating the enemy's aim of "pacifying and stabilizing the political and economic
situation in the occupied zones". There the enemy
pursued a shameless policy of exploitation to make
up for a budget exhausted by the war. In the
countryside, apart from the struggle against crop

plunder at harvest time, women peasants often had bloody confrontations with enemy soldiers who came to steal their rice stocks. Despite enemy sieges and strict control, women peasants in the occupied villages managed to pass through the "white zones" after each harvest to bring rice to the fighters.

In addition they organised market strikes, sabotage of the occupied factories and tax evasion, all of which increased the economic difficulties of the enemy. Pupils' and students' strikes, demonstrations against cultural enslavement, in all of which women teachers and intellectuals took part, were a constant headache to the enemy in the occupied zones. The political struggle against raids and sweeps contributed significantly to the disintegration of the colonialist and puppet troops by weakening their sources of reinforcement and frustrating their aim of "making Vietnamese fight Vietnamese". This struggle took various forms. On some occasions women staged mass demonstrations against the pressganging of their husbands or sons; on others they confronted the enemy troops directly. They lay on the ground to block roads, mingled with the soldiers in their ranks, got onto the vehicles which were to take away the victims of sweeps. Thua Thien, a province of Central Viet Nam, initiated this movement in 1950, when 1,850 women managed to halt a convoy of vehicles which were taking 2,800 youths to a concentration camp. In Khanh Hoa (Central Viet Nam), a women's demonstration turned into a show of strength in

^{1.} Now merged with Bac Giang to form Ha Bac province.

which the women marched up to the provincial authorities' offices and installed themselves there with their children and refused to move until their husbands and their sons were returned. The most remarkable battle was that fought by 2,000 women of My Xuyen (South Viet Nam) who seized a concentration camp by force, smashed the fences and freed a thousand young men. Platoons and battalions were scattered by bare-handed mothers and wives.

The struggle against enemy raids caused them serious setbacks, particularly from the beginning of 1950 when the resistance went over to the offensive and developed into a broad movement. Of special note was the persuasion work done among the puppet soldiers to win them over to the side of the people, and among the African soldiers of the French expeditionary corps to rally them to the cause of the enslaved peoples and national liberation. Women spoke to the puppet soldiers or the African soldiers not as enemies but as fellow victims of the colonialist war of aggression. They talked to them about their homes, their wives, their children, the suffering and mourning caused by the enemy... Towards 1953, the general disintegration of the puppet army and the awakening of many foreign soldiers contributed to the enemy's failures. The Viet Nam Women's Union set up a "Committee of Political Work Among Enemy Soldiers" in every province. Every region worked out the most efficient forms of struggle and increased activity on the basis of them. In Central Viet Nam,

the women of Binh Tri Thien ¹ organized "Brigades of Evening Singers" who approached enemy posts at nightfall and sang songs calculated to arouse the puppet soldiers' nostalgia for home and family life.

When the water goes down, I fish for crabs in the ricefields,

When it rises, I pick wild berries on the mountainside.

We are living dark years, my dear,
But even in poverty, don't you work for the Tay!

(Song from Binh Tri Thien)

Whole platoons of soldiers abandoned their posts to return to their villages.

There were hawkers and coolies who having won the puppet soldiers over to the national cause got information, documents, plans of military campaigns and maps of enemy positions from them. Many soldiers mutinied and refused to obey combat orders. Successive defeats on the battlefields weakened the soldiers' morale and increased the effects of the women's political work.

6. Foster-mothers

"We can fight the enemy however old or young we are". These words from President Ho Chi Minh

^{1.} Abbreviation of the names of three provinces: Quang Binh, Quang Tri, Thua Thien, a region which formed one of the main bases of the resistance.

were acted upon by thousands of old women who sought to play their part in the resistance by taking care of the fighters. This was at first spontaneous work. In Binh Tri Thien mothers whose sons enrolled in the army lavished all their affection on the young fighters who passed through their villages. They called on them, gave them small gifts as evidence of their solicitude: fruit, rice wine, rice cakes. "The Association of Soldiers' Foster Mothers" was created and had branches throughout the provinces from North to South.

These old women made clothes, pooled rice and other food, firewood... to send to the front. Each foster-mother gave lodging to a group of three soldiers during their transitory stays. Mutual affection sprang up fast between the foster mothers and their charges. They cared for them as if they were their own sons, and the young men gave them a hand with the housework and farm-work just like "sons of the family". Mother Cuong of My Hao (Hai Hung province) hid a fighter in a shelter she had dug under her house. The enemy suspected it but could not find the entrance. Her three children were tortured before her eyes to force a confession from her, and when this failed, they shot the whole family.

The fighters of the peoples' army were born of the people and lived among the people. On all the battlefields and wherever they went, they bathed in solicitude and affection. The role played by the foster mothers in the war of resistance can thus be considered one of the factors of our victory.

II. Resistance and Women's Emancipation

The contribution of women to the national resistance led to an improvement in their social status and validated the equality of the sexes that had been won in the revolution. The imminent liberation struggle raised many problems, that had to be solved; with regard to assistance to women, improvement of their living and working conditions despite the war, and above all raising their political level. The great tasks incumbent on the Resistance Government did not prevent them and the ICP from pursuing a policy towards women along the general line formulated in the 1930 theses. They advocated a series of realistic measures to help labouring women cope with the demands of the new period, and the struggle for women's emancipation continued to develop throughout nine years of resistance.

French aggression caused innumerable difficulties in the beginning, the greatest of which concerned bringing up the children of many women cadres whose work was hampered by this task. A conference of cadres responsible for political work among women held in 1974 proposed the following measures:

- 1. Women cadres, especially Women's Union cadres should help mothers to set up crèches:
- a) They should encourage families of sympathizers to bring up the children of women militants;

- b) They should make women's organizations responsible for taking care of their cadres' children. Creches should receive from three to five children only;
- 2. Pending the full implementation of the system of salaries for cadres, recently worked out by the Government, the clauses relating to maternity subsidies, family allowances for women cadres should be put into effect immediately.

Up to then there had been only one organization that dealt with women's affairs in the whole country—the Viet Nam Women's Union. As the number of women workers was increasing steadily, the Central Committee of the Party decided that they should find their place in specifically proletarian organizations:

"From now on the Trade Union and Association of Peasants for National Salvation are the main organizations of women workers and peasants."

(August 6, 1950)

It was through these organizations that they raised their political level and their class consciousness, vital to their genuine and complete emancipation. The Viet Nam Women's Union nevertheless remained the only women's organization which defended the rights of women from all walks of life. Its first national congress, held in 1950, marked a new development in the women's movement. "The Association of Women for National Salvation", the Party's women's organization, which was founded before the

August Revolution and whose activities had remained separate until then, now merged with the Viet Nam Women's Union in one organization under the same leadership.

Despite the predominance of the feudal mode of production in the country and its influence on thinking, especially attitudes to women, Vietnamese working women who were members of trade unions and peasants' associations took an active part in public life. A decree issued by the Government of the DRVN in 1950 abolished all old laws and regulations which forced women to live within the confines of their families and forbade activity which was not considered compatible with their role as wives in feudal terms. The parallel struggle against feudal and bourgeois ideologies went on. President Ho Chi Minh wrote an article in support of this campaign on the occasion of International Women's Day (March 8) in 1952 when the war reached a turning-point. This article on equality between the sexes was published by the daily newspaper Nhan Dan (The People), and reads as follows:

On equality between the sexes.

Many people think that the problem of equality between the sexes is a simple one. One day it is the husband who prepares the meals, does the washing up and sweeps the floor; and the next day the wife will sweep the floor, prepare the meals and do the washing up. And that is equality! A serious mistake!

What equality really means is a thorough-going and difficult revolution, because contempt for women dates back thousands of years. It is deep-rooted in the thoughts and attitudes of everyone, in family life and in all social classes. It cannot be done away with by force... If this large-scale revolution is to be successful, progress will have to be made in every field — political, economic, cultural and legal. This revolution must involve heart-searching by each one of us and it must involve the whole people.

This is a big task and a difficult one, but our success is certain!

Land reform, which in popular parlance "shook the heavens and the earth", broke the age-old chains which had tied women to the feudal mode of production. The law on land reform recognized their right to own land. As a result of the peasants being mobilised to carry out the land reform, many women became cadres and were promoted to leading positions in the countryside. In most cases, however, they played secondary roles; as members of executive committees and deputy-heads of section for example. This was due partly to the old attitudes to women which lingered on and partly to the women's still limited abilities. Their emancipation was to continue to make headway with the victory of the resistance and the beginning of socialist construction in the North.

It was a changed Vietnamese woman who emerged from the war: more self-confident, more combative and above all better educated, at least as far as women peasants and workers were concerned. They had had to learn a lot to cope with the demands the war made on them. Political and general knowledge acquired during the war of resistance helped women to assert themselves, to be more conscious of their rights. In this way the war of resistance accelerated the process begun with the August Revolution. Although the goals set could not be attained due to the war conditions, the first foundations for eventual success had now been laid. A generation of "resistance women" succeeded their revolutionary elders who had blazed the first trail to genuine emancipation of women...

D. THE STRUGGLE AGAINST US AGGRESSION (1954-1973)

In 1954, combatants from southern Viet Nam regrouped to the North after nine years of resistance to the French colonialists. They had to leave their families and villages, supposedly for two years pending the reunification of the country. One old woman who went down to the village landing-stage to see her son off handed him a handful of earth when the time to part came, and said:

"You will miss the land of the South,

The land I love

The land so dear to us

Much blood has been shed on it, on both banks 1

^{1.} Of the Ben Hai river which follows the 17th parallel, the demarcation line. (Ed.)

Farewell! Convey our greetings to Uncle Ho. Tell him that only the gold-starred red flag Flutters on the land of the South.

Those who left the South entrusted their mothers and wives with the task of looking after their children, their families and the southern half of the fatherland where they had lived and fought. Then came the Americans, under the cover of the Diem administration, itself set up by them and its members trained in the United States. A campaign of ruthless repression against the population ensued. Patriots were jailed and former members of the resistance assassinated. The enemy tried to stamp out the Vietnamese people's revolutionary movement, and from the 17th parallel to Cape Ca Mau the population was persecuted, massacred, tortured and subjected to an unprecedented campaign of terror. There was not one river, one stream in which the blood of patriots and former members of the resistance did not flow. All those who had lived under the democratic regime fell under suspicion. Families of those who had regrouped to the North had to nail a sign bearing the inscription "Communist family" on their doors and had to keep away from the rest of their village communities. Patriots who managed to escape persecution by the US-puppet regime had to live in underground hide-outs. The majority of women now faced the most cruel enemy in history. There had been no breathing space after the long war of resistance before they now met new, even more painful trials.

I. Face to Face with the Enemy

The presence of the US imperialists, and their henchmen from Diem to Thieu, meant that the most contemptible people turned up in positions of power at all levels - mercenaries in the US expeditionary corps, old colonialist agents, deserters, traitors, rapacious landlords, trafficking compradores, former "auxiliary soldiers" in the French colonial army whose hands were stained with the blood of their fellow-countrymen... Now their shamelessly and cruel actions bolstered a rule imposed on the people which rode roughshod over both moral and national traditions. The most ordinary citizens in the South, even if they had not fought in the revolutionary ranks, had lived happily during the days of the revolution, basking in the country's regained independence and freedom. The people's power had given back to the people their rights, to the peasants their land, to the workers their work, to the intellectuals their fatherland... All had had a taste of a new life, a life which was free, frank, attractive and full of brotherly feelings, even in times of danger and hardship.

The US-puppet policies of "denouncing" and "exterminating Communists," of concentrating the population in strategic hamlets, of pressganging men for a 500,000-strong army, were the source of suffering in every family and deeply affected every mother, every wife. Could they really go back to living as they had done in the old days, and consent to their becoming slaves once again? Could they

willingly sacrifice their dear ones? No, they had to go on fighting. There was no alternative.

1. A Mat of Hair

Soon after they had seized power, the Diemist puppets tried to force all women whose husbands or fiances had regrouped to the North to sue for a divorce or break off their engagements. Mothers were forced to disown their sons and daughters who had gone to the North. This measure was part of a psywar scheme aimed at sowing discord and creating contradictions among the people and within the families concerned. The puppets resorted to every means to achieve this end - including terror, blackmail and seduction. Our women had to go through the most atrocious ordeals as the enemy tried to make them sign the prescribed documents. Each time a woman filed such a divorce suit, it was announced in public. And the poor woman more often than not felt obliged to collaborate with her torturers rather than endure the shame of facing her family and community; the only way out was to marry a puppet officer or soldier. Those who refused to comply were jailed or tortured to death.

The refusal of thousands of women to disown their husbands cannot be explained by love alone: it was due also to their revolutionary ideal and the new meaning their lives had taken on in the struggle for the liberation of their country. In one Saigon prison 104 women were summoned to file divorce suits. When they tore the papers up and threw them in the warders' faces, they were beaten unconscious

and thrown into solitary confinement cells. There they cut off their hair and wove it into a mat which they succeeded in smuggling out of prison together with this letter:

"Dearest husbands, you are now in different parts of our country. Whether you are in the far-away North, thinking with affection of the suffering South, whether in deep forests or rugged mountains, among those who are fighting for the cause of national salvation... Wherever you are in our native land, dearest ones, accept this mat made of hair which is familiar to you as a symbol of our fidelity. We have woven our hair together to consolidate this fidelity as a reflection of the unity among our fellow-countrymen from South to North. We pledge eternal loyalty to the revolution."

Many preferred death to infidelity and betrayal. At Ben Tre Mrs. Muoi Van was tortured by US puppets looking for her husband. She told them nothing. But before she died she pointed to her chest and shouted to her torturers: "You will have to tear open my heart to find my husband: that's where he's hiding." The enemy tried in vain to separate women from their husbands, and the population of the South from the 'revolution' — the term used for the fatherland and all those who had fought during the war of resistance and were now fighting against the US aggressors and their henchmen. Children too learned to contain their fear of the enemy in order to protect the revolutionaries. Once Le, a woman cadre of the Revolutionary Committee of Quang Ngai province, was hunted by the police and took refuge in an

orchard, Binh, a fifteen-year old girl, was the only one in the hamlet who saw her. The police arrested Binh and tortured her. Even when they had broken one of her arms she refused to tell them where Le was hiding. Later she told the fighters who managed to save her: "I was afraid at the thought of dying. But I knew that if I died, it would only mean that my father would lose a daughter. But if Le died the whole village would suffer from the atrocities of the traitors."

In Ben Tre, the enemy spread leaflets bearing the picture of Mrs. Nguyen Thi Dinh¹ and this notice on it: "A sum of 10,000 piasters ² will be awarded to whoever can capture Nguyen Thi Dinh, a dangerous female Viet Cong."

Nobody took them up on the offer.

The world may change and a star may fall; The sunflower always turns to face the sun. To the Revolution the people offer A faithful, iron-willed, vermilion heart.

(A poem from the South)

2. The Long-haired Army

Mo Cay is a lush green district in Ben Tre province with tall coconut-palms and vast expanses of ricefields. There was a popular rising here on January 17, 1960, in which the people seized power. All

the insurgents were women and their leader was Mrs. Nguyen Thi Dinh.

The Ngo Dinh Diem regime's atrocities reached their climax with the promulgation of the 10-59 law which outlawed all those who protested against the puppets' abuse of power, irrespective of age and sex. One group of women put their reactions this way: "Should we sit idly with our hands in our laps and look at the stars in the dark night and weep? No! That won't get us anywhere. We must rise up, and turn these sparkling dots into a sea of flames to light up the sky and burn out all the misery of our life of slavery."

The hour for a series of uprisings had struck. Thousands of women in the Mekong delta took part in armed insurrections, besieged enemy posts and captured one hundred rifles. At Go Cong, all strata of the population rose up, armed with sticks, spears and scimitars, and in the space of one week they liberated twenty communes. Many old women who were too old to fight themselves, urged their children and grand-children to take part in uprisings while they collected money and rice and organised supply lines. All of Mother Be's nine children joined the insurgents' army. Mother Be was a member of the Rac Lay ethnic minority in the province of Ninh Thuan.

This was how the long-haired army 1 came into being. From a group of ten women at Mo Cay, it

^{1.} Leader of the women's movement in Ben Tre at the time: later deputy commander of the Liberation Army.

^{2.} South Viet Nam currency under the puppet regime.

^{1.} Vietnamese women wear their hair long or in a bun (Ed.)

grew into an army of thousands of women fighters. And all over the South there were two million women fighting the enemy in an organized way.

3. Political Struggle and Co-ordinated "Three-pronged Attacks"

The Ben Tre uprisings were followed by others which spread from village to village, from district to district, each one bigger than the last. They swept away enemy military posts and local administrations like a tidal wave. The majority of those taking part were women and in most cases they led the fighting. The bases of the Ngo Dinh Diem administration collapsed. As their henchmen seemed unable to cope with the situation, the American hurriedly appeared on the scene: 25,000 American advisers were dispatched to South Viet Nam and the Kennedy administration launched its "special war" against the unarmed population, supplying the puppets with modern war material — jet planes, helicopters, amphibious vehicles, armoured cars, heavy artillery and toxic chemicals. It deployed the 500,000-strong puppet army in a campaign of sweeps of unprecedented intensity and size. On the orders of US advisers puppet troops attacked villages all over the South, burned down houses and herded the population into so-called "strategic hamlets" which were really concentration camps. Those who put up any opposition were killed on the spot. The finishing touch was put by bulldozers which razed everything bearing the mark of man's labour including houses, orchards, vegetable gardens and ricefields. Bombing raids and artillery attacks increased. The US-puppet

plan of systematic destruction was aimed at wiping out the smallest resistance base and completely cutting off resistance cadres from the population. The peasants were not even given time to pick up their belongings, but were herded from their land and thrown behind thick barbed wire. Here they eked out a perilous existence depending on food rations supplied by the US-puppets and were condemned to a slow death.

Millions of women and children were reduced to complete destitution and lived in constant fear. They had to fight back if they were to survive.

The day was just dawning on Giong Trom hamlet, Tan An province on May 2nd, 1961, when shells started falling on huts where people were still asleep. Many were killed or wounded. Grief and anger stirred those peaceful peasants, and a young woman in mourning proposed that her dead mother's body be carried to the province capital and damages be exacted from the Americans and their puppets. A demonstration which included many women, old people and children quickly lined up behind two demonstrators carrying the body. On their way to the provincial capital the demonstrators told friends and acquaintances and passers-by: "Fellow-countrymen! You will not escape death even in your underground shelters. We must smash the enemy's guns to stop the massacres". The demonstration grew. At one place it was stopped by puppet soldiers with rifles levelled at the crowd. Some women went forward, turned the rifles aside and told the soldiers: "We are looking for the man who ordered

the shelling of our village. We have nothing against you. If you stop us, then we shall entrust you with this body!"

The puppet soldiers were nonplussed and allowed the demonstration to continue on its way to the residence of the province chief. The demonstrators forced the local puppet administration to send military vehicles to Giong Trom to transport the wounded to hospital, to pay damages to families of victims and to promise to cease all shelling.

The success of the Giong Trom demonstration was a great encouragement to other hamlets. Wherever the population fought back the enemy had to withdraw. Political struggle had proved very effective during the resistance against the French; it now grew in size and was better organized during the struggle against US aggression. The long-haired army played an especially important role in this struggle and was made up of women who had no other weapons than love for their native land, devotion to their families and an indomitable fighting spirit. Imagination and creativeness blossomed as our women adopted various forms of struggle. They would put on deep mourning, and carry their children and household utensils to town to meet puppet officials and demand that damages be paid for the loss of their property and the death of their parents. Just before the enemy launched a mopping-up operation, big columns of demonstrators, involving tens of thousands of women would march to the staging area of the enemy troops and call on them to stop abetting the crimes and return home; they would

denounce the cruelty and villainy of the officers and US advisers and might succeed in this way in forcing the enemy to cancel the mopping-up operation. Many enemy sweeps never got off the ground.

When the enemy arrived in a village on a raid, a signal brought the village women on the scene carrying their children. They advanced on the enemy in an orderly way, each group having been assigned a specific task: one group lay down in front of the vehicles, a second encircled the puppet soldiers and tried to get their weapons off them, and a third started working on the officers demanding that their husbands and sons be sent home before harvest time. Sometimes they would occupy a commander's quarters and threaten to leave their children there.

Once when the enemy sprayed toxic chemicals on a village in My Tho province, five thousand women from the affected and neighbouring areas gathered immediately in the province capital and started telling the population and puppet soldiers: "The Americans have poisoned our hamlet. We are here to demand that the government intervene and stop their crimes." They showed them the dead bodies of poisoned men and animals, corpses of children covered with purulent blisters, and withered leaves and plants. The evidence was so convincing and impressive that one puppet soldier shouted out in anger and called on the crowd to show solidarity with the demonstrators. An order was given to repress the demonstration, and the enemy MPs were about to rush on the demonstrators when one of the tankdrivers started to talk to his men and convinced them that they should transmit the women's petition to the province chief.

It was through these various forms best suited to local conditions and peculiar to the people in the South that the political struggle was closely linked with the armed struggle and caused heavy losses to the enemy, in the political as well as military field. The aim of the long-haired army was not only to check the enemy's offensive, but to bring the enemy to a standstill by crippling the puppet army's and administration's activity.

When the 7th division gathered in the province capital of Ben Tre for a mopping-up operation, thousands of women and children from the neighbouring villages were mobilized to block the advance of enemy troops. A great commotion broke out all over the town and the bulk of the enemy forces had to be used to restore order. Meanwhile, units of the PLAF (People's Liberation Armed Forces) wiped out the supporting "Black Eagle" battalion at Ba Tri and Mo Cay.

After the battle in Ap Bac (January 1963), women from My Tho ran out and stood in the way of enemy vehicles demanding that damages be paid for the losses of life and property incurred in the fighting. They succeeded in slowing down the retreat of enemy forces: the puppet soldiers were physically and morally exhausted after their disastrous campaign and had not the courage to face the women many of whom happened to be relatives and neighbours.

Preparations were being made in 1961 for a mopping-up operation at Cao Lanh, a district of Kien

Phong province 1 and the long-haired army launched a two-pronged offensive: two columns converged on the province capital, one along the Cao Lanh river, the other along the highway. Warned of their approach by paid informers, the US puppets had all access to the province capital blocked. Orders were given to repress the demonstration on the spot without waiting for a decision from higher up. Boats decked with posters and banners gliding down the river took the first enemy volleys. Some of them sank and the water ran red with the blood of old people, women and their children who had come to demand the right to live in peace. The boats which were not hit speeded up. A woman standing in the first boat showed the body of her dead son to the people who were gathering on the banks of the river and appealed to them: "Fellow countrymen! Soldiers and officers! We are honest people, we have committed no crime. What have the Americans and traitors got against us? How many of these dead are relatives of people like you, who have taken the wrong road? Don't you realise that the Americans and puppets are using you to exterminate your own families?" The soldiers wavered and slowly lowered their rifles. Meanwhile the column of demonstrators coming by road had reached the province capital. The planes called in dropped grenades; they flew so low that they nearly brushed the tops of mangotrees; guns on the gunboats anchored at the mouth of the

^{1.} A coastal province in south western Viet Nam. (Ed.)

river opened fire. The two columns of demonstrators continued their advance towards the centre of the town. When they arrived, tens of thousands of the inhabitants poured into the streets to join them and among them were many puppet soldiers. There was such a commotion that the province chief had to come out of his residence to order a stop to the firing. He even agreed to apologize to the demonstrators and to pay damages. The demonstration was very successful: the enemy's attempt to repress it had failed completely; the solidarity between the rural and urban population had been strengthened; and many puppet soldiers went over to the revolutionary forces. But it was most successful in stirring up dissension within the ranks of the puppet administration by severely damaging its prestige.

In the fire of struggle where they risked death at any minute, Vietnamese women displayed great heroism and intelligence in coping with enemy soldiers armed with deadly weapons. Some political battles involved a million or more women fighting in a broad front covering many villages, districts and sometimes a whole province. Led by a veritable general staff, they had many specialized units all under unified command. The plan of each offensive was worked out in detail beforehand. The women leaders proved very quick-witted when up against unexpected circumstances. Many of them later became Party or Government leaders whom President Ho Chi Minh called "talented generals".

The long-haired army was in one respect no different from a regular army. It needed good organiza-

tion of the rear, i.e. food supplies, attention to family affairs, preparation of meals and child-care. Most of these tasks were carried out by men and old women who even came from neighbouring villages to help when mothers were away for up to weeks at a time. Thus family life was maintained in their absence.

The special war was a fiasco and the Americans launched "limited war" in 1965 to beat the rising tide of the revolution and the simultaneous uprisings which were shaking the very foundations of the puppet regime. They intervened in South Viet Nam directly with their most famous and unvanquished units which they scattered throughout the South, from the 17th parallel to Cape Ca Mau—the "Big Red One", the Marines, the "Americal Division" and others. They also requisitioned help from satellite countries such as Australia and South Korea. For the population of the South, this was the beginning of direct confrontation with the enemy.

One day in early 1965, four American jets took off from Da Nang and flew over Hoa Vang, a district close to the city, dropping 180 1,000-lb bombs. About sixty houses were destroyed, the district primary school was razed and 49 pupils were killed. Experience gained in the political struggle against the US puppets had taught the people that their reaction had to be prompt. Women, old people and children were mobilized at short notice. Coffins and mourning clothes were made available and mourning turbans were distributed to the population, including people who lived inside the city. At 4 o'clock

the next morning 49 coffins were placed in two-motor-boats and an advance party of 300 women in a dozen sampans sailed down the Da Nang river as far as the Su landing stage. From there the demonstrators filed into the city. Meanwhile 8,000 people from 4 neighbouring communes in the suburbs of Da Nang joined the demonstration and marched on Da Nang in 4 columns.

American G.I.s stationed in Da Nang were ordered to put down the demonstration. Big guns from the airport, from Cam Le and from warships off the coast started intensive shelling of all access roads to the city. A battalion of marines occupied the landing stage and a battalion of puppet soldiers the Cam Le bridge. The four roads leading into the outskirts of the town were blocked. At the landing stage the marines waited arrogantly in battle formation, their sub-machine guns on their shoulders, ready for action. The women in the advance party advanced slowly and calmly. When they were a short distance from the landing stage they stopped and put down the coffins with white shrouds on them. Then one of the women spoke in English: "Where do you come from? There is no hatred between us. Why then did you come and bomb our village and kill our children? Haven't you got families of your own? Haven't you got children at home?"

These words in English had been learnt by heart so that the marines themselves could hear and understand the women. The US marines made way for the funeral procession. Meanwhile the 4 columns of demonstrators from Vinh Cat braved the heavy gunfire to reach the gates of the town. When they got there the puppet soldiers shot into the air to frighten them off. This lasted until the morning when 7,000 women who had managed to get through a police cordon arrived at the gates from inside the city. Slogans were shouted as the huge procession accompanied the 49 coffins through the city: "Save our children from the assassins", "Yankees go home!", "Long live independent and free Viet Nam!"

The Americans and their puppets dared not open fire on such a big demonstration of more than 10,000 people. They took refuge in their blockhouses behind barbed wire. The long-haired army and the inhabitants of Da Nang — Hoa Vang were the masters of the city for several hours.

This first direct confrontation with US troops showed the population that the Americans and their henchmen were not invincible. True, the corpulence of the G.I.s, their beards, their swagger and their weapons were intimidating for women and girls of the South, but the hatred engendered by the massacre of their parents and relatives, by the destruction of their villages helped them get the better of their fear.

In the fight for national liberation, the political struggle turned up trumps strategically and, as in Hoa Vang, allowed the patriots to get the situation under control. The courage, the initiative, and creative intelligence of the people carried the day over the enemy's most cunning manœuvres.

While the women of the South took part in the political struggle, they also had to defend their villages against bombing and spraying of toxic chemicals, and fight against mopping-up operations as well. The villages were organized into "fighting villages". Bamboo-spike traps were laid all around them, shelters were dug for old people and children, and a labyrinth or paths strewn with mines and spike-traps ran among the peasants' huts: deadly traps for enemy soldiers. Young women and girls, who ten years before had bid farewell to their fathers who were leaving for the North, now took their place in the guerilla war, and developed it to a higher level. A life of sacrifice and privation imposed on them by the US invaders had tempered them early and century-old traditions of people's war flowed in their veins. They had no training, but the urgent need to defend their villages forced those women into active participation in the guerilla war in which as guerilla fighters they inflicted heavy losses on the US and mercenary units which wore down both the occupation army and the puppet army.

When enemy troops came to her village to pressgang men into the army, Kan Lich, a Pa Ko minority girl living in the Tay Nguyen High Plateau, decided to drive them out and got in touch with LNF cadres. With their help, she built up a resistance base in the village. Soon she was head of two platoons of regional forces and more than one hundred guerillas, who managed to encircle the A Luoi post and force the enemy to abandon it after they had stormed the air strip. It was this PLAF heroine who started the movement of "shooting down enemy planes with infantry rifles". When US planes flew low over fields and forests it required great courage to wait until they came down within range and low enough to be vulnerable.

In addition to the political and the armed struggles were all the combat-support tasks: liaison, work among the people, and transport of munitions over a longer route and under more difficult conditions than during the first war of resistance. In occupied towns women worked as runners or scouts and formed clandestine cells. During the 1968 general insurrection not a few Americans were surprised to see bar-girls, laundresses and girl-students using machine-guns and hand-grenades to attack them.

During this period, in spite of the constant threat of B.52 bombing, rice and cassava continued to grow and cattle herds increased. Children were brought up to love the fatherland and to be proud to carry on the fight against the aggressors.

Nguyen Thi Ut, alias Ut Tich, PLAF heroine and mother of six, is the symbol of this generation of women who were a bulwark of the struggle for national salvation.

II. For Dignity and the Right to Live

The presence of the US expeditionary corps made . prostitution a lucrative trade. One Saigon officer

put it this way: "The Americans need girls and we need dollars. Why should we stand in the way of such an exchange! It's an invaluable source of dollars for the State." ¹

This business was a very profitable one for the generals and senior officials, who fought amongst themselves for as big a share of the market as possible. According to a report by the Minister of Social Affairs of the puppet government in 1969: "Businesses dealing in prostitutes had many branches and operated in all towns and cities in South Viet Nam. They organized prostitute convoys, even using air transport between the towns and the American bases in order to maintain a brisk trade." 2 Wherever American troops and their Australian and South Korean allies were stationed, snack-bars, tea-rooms and night clubs abounded. Da Nang, Cam Ranh and Saigon became big American brothels. Before the simultaneous uprisings of the South Vietnamese people in 1968, there were 70,000 "legal", registered prostitutes in Saigon - Gia Dinh and, like other traders, they paid the authorities for their licences. which meant they had a card allowing them to practise prostitution. But policemen and officials responsible for supervision of moral standards took large bribes to ignore the activities of 300,000 "illegal" prostitutes, of "street walkers" and "junior girls" whom pimps drove along the streets on their motor-bikes and offered to American clients after some haggling. As the prostitute business grew with the increasing number of American G.I.s, the traffic and kidnapping of young peasant girls from refugee camps reached serious proportions. The price of a girl ranged between 250 and 300 dollars.

AFP reported from Saigon on August 13, 1969 that a report to "a conference on the fight against venereal diseases" held in Saigon, mentioned that 40 per cent of the City's prostitutes suffered from venereal diseases. (Three years later, April 1972, the New Yorker gave the figure as 65 per cent). There were various reasons for women turning to prostitution:

1. Unemployment	30 percent
2. Financial difficulties	25 percent
3. Family problems often	
caused by war	15 percent
4. Unrequited love	15 percent
5. Widows with children to	
bring up	8 percent
6. Victims of pimps	7 percent

Forced urbanization, sweeps and massive bombings had forced a large part of the rural population to leave their homes. Young peasant girls were separated from their villages and could find no work in the cities and towns: panders and street-walkers introduced them to prostitution which seemed to be the only alternative to starvation.

Many young war widows left without means even went as far as selling their bodies to their departed

^{1.} Thanh Nam, In the shadow of the American Embassy in Saigon, Hanoi 1973.

^{2.} Saigon News (1968).

husbands' officers. The following are two lines from a poem published in a Saigon weekly:

"I have failed my exams and am welcomed by the army.

Farewell darling! Sell yourself to feed our child"1

(Message from a student to his wife)

As the economy was entirely dependent on US aid, the greed of government authorities led to the complete pauperization of workers and minor officials, and forced many young women and girls to sell their bodies to G.I.s to earn their living and support their families. Many others worked in American offices or snack-bars, the most lucrative jobs. Before the withdrawal of American troops in 1973, 300,000 women were earning their living in that way. Due to the circumstances in which they lived, contaminated by the depraved environment, most of them became mistresses of Americans or "prostitutes de luxe". There were also young girls and women who were seduced by the "American way of life" and left their families and children to "reap dollars". One often saw young girls lying unconscious on the pavements in Saigon, their hair dishevelled and their clothes mud-stained. They were victims of heroin, of "scag", a practice imported by American G.I.s in 1965.

Never before had national culture been undermined so deeply and so cruelly. Never in history had Vietnamese women been so flouted and humiliated. Neo-colonialist slavery was harder on women than on men. The whole population of the South was up in arms about this state of affairs. Many committees, associations for the preservation of women's dignity and the defence of their right to live, united women of all social strata, of all political tendencies and religious creeds. In 1970, a congress of women dealing with "the misfortunes of Vietnamese women in present-day life" was held in the heart of Saigon, and issued a manifesto calling on the whole population to unite in order to:

"Defend the rights and improve the lives of Vietnamese women,

Preserve their dignity, alleviate their sufferings, and heal the wounds caused by the war"

(Manifesto of the Congress of Women, October 18, 1970)

The leaders of this movement, such as Mrs. Ngo Ba Thanh, a lawyer, and the Buddhist nun Huynh Lien, were among those intellectuals from the South whose patriotic feelings were deeply hurt by the more and more humiliating submission of the puppet authorities to the US and by the systematic destruction of national traditions. They were persecuted and condemned by the Thieu government. This ruthless repression led to violent debate and gave rise to more movements of struggle. Many women's organizations such as the "Association of Mothers"

^{1.} Puppet authorities failed many high-school students at their graduation exams in order to force them to join the puppet army.

of Political Prisoners" and the "Association of Young Buddhists", worked together with the "Movement for the Defence of Women's Rights and Dignity". Conferences, gatherings and demonstrations were held, and through these and other forms of political struggle, the women in the South denounced the Thieu regime's submission to the U.S. and corruption as the causes of their misfortunes. The struggle involved national bourgeois, intellectuals, social activists and women who, before the American intrusion, had been "neutral" and "above political differences". The Thieu regime's anti-communism reached its climax, and it outlawed and jailed many militant women professors, lawyers, journalists, religious believers and members of Congress. This movement showed up the true colours of the Thieu government which turned out to be no more than an apparatus of repression set up by the Americans. Nobody could keep aloof from the struggle of the whole population, for everyone's life and happiness were threatened. Girl students made up the core of the movement and fired the patriotism and heroism of young women in the South. The examples set by Le Thi Hong Gam ¹, Tran Thi Tam ² and Vo Thi Thang 3 blazed a trail for the youth to follow, and showed them that the only way to ensure their dignity and happiness was to join the front of struggle for independence and freedom.

The enemy's bloody repression only added more fuel to the urban population's struggle. Many mothers who had led secluded lives as housewives until then now took to the streets to stay the hands of the butchers. And when the latter assassinated Quach Thi Trang, a girl student, during a student demonstration, Saigon people from all walks of life joined the other students in their march to the puppet parliament to demand that the culprits be punished. Frightened by the anger of the demonstrators, the puppet authorities had to officially admit the "error" of their subordinates and comply with the students' decision to call the place where the young patriot was killed by police shots "Quach Thi Trang Square". Vo Thi Thang, a girl student in Saigon who was condemned to 20 years' imprisonment, told her prosecutors: "I am sure your regime will not last long enough to keep me in jail for the length of my sentence." This was in 1967, when the neo-colonialist regime set up by Washington was at its height.

Women workers, waitresses and even fully "Americanized" prostitutes were involved in the struggle.

Our cadres considered them as victims of US neocolonialism and gave them a chance to recant and take the right path. Many of them became members of the underground force and fulfilled dangerous missions with great courage. They had been among the dregs of society, and now found their resurrection in the struggle for the preservation of the dignity and rights of women. Their considerable and active part strengthened the struggle of the urban

^{1,} and 2. Members of the PLAF killed by the enemy.

^{3.} A Saigon student who killed a dangerous traitor and was senteneed by a puppet court to 20 years' imprisonment.

population and shook the enemy regime in towns and cities to its very foundations.

III. The South Vietnamese Mother

The first Congress of the Union of Women for the Liberation of South Viet Nam was held on March 8, 1965. 150 women delegates from Quang Tri to Ca Mau, from the cities to the countryside, gathered to sum up the activities of their organization since its founding (1960-1965). Many South Vietnamese mothers - fine images of the struggle of the South Vietnamese people - were given citations. The names of Mother Seven 1 from Ben Cat (Dinh Tuong province), Mother Eight from An Tinh (Tay Ninh), Mother Ten from Cai lay, Mother Five from Hau My (My Tho) and Mother Three from Cau Ke (Tra Vinh) were linked with the history of struggle of each region, with the sufferings and repeated uprisings of the population. They had been through the nine years of resistance against French aggression (1946-1954); and now they continued to fight without respite against the new aggressors, the American imperialists. Years of sufferings had prematurely whitened their hair and bent their backs. But they stood firm on their native soil full of bombcraters. Their villages were razed, their straw-roofed houses burned down, their sons and grandsons

either were in the army or had been killed by the enemy. So they stayed on in deserted hamlets, built their huts among mangled coconut trees and bamboo groves defoliated by US bombs and toxic chemicals. The fight went on under their roofs. Right under the nose of G.I.s and puppets, they dug underground shelters at night and patiently waited for the return of revolutionary cadres. "I knew that you would return!" they told the liberation soldiers and cadres who came and knocked discreetly at their doors, at night. They showed them their shelters, the fruits of many years of work under the constant threat of death. They adopted those soldiers and cadres and cared for them as they did their own children, protecting them at the cost of their lives against enemy searches. "Cadres are more precious than gold." they said. "If one loses a jewel, one can find it again. But if one allows the enemy to arrest cadres, one loses one's country". While our cadres stayed hidden underground, it was through these old mothers that they kept in touch with patriots, gave them instructions, and led the political and armed struggle. It was the women who watched the enemy troops who had occupied their villages and studied their activities. They rallied patriots and organized resistance cells... They collected information, and were the liaison agents between clandestine cadres. All this was done in a masterly manner in enemy-occupied areas, and was a great help in the launching of simultaneous uprisings, and in the powerful attacks by liberation soldiers, who would suddenly appear as from nowhere to encircle

^{1.} According to South Vietnamese tradition elderly people are called by an ordinal number, in accordance with their rank in the family, except the figure 1 (Ca, first, eldest) reserved for religious priests.

the terrified enemy. A young poet has written about the South Vietnamese mother as follows:

"Our native land is so vast.

The enemy cannot discover all the shelters.¹

Mother, your boundless love

Can hide a whole division underground.

In the darkness of the shelters

The light of Viet Nam shines brightly.2"

The enemy imitated our revolutionaries: they tried to win over the people. Puppet soldiers also called South Vietnamese women "Mother". The latter took this opportunity to persuade them to take the right path. They invited them into their homes, talked to them about their native villages and their families and tried to arouse their national consciousness. A great number of puppet soldiers who decided to desert the enemy turned to the mothers for help, and they supplied them with food and pocket money for the journey to liberated. areas. Despite their age, old mothers appeared on all fronts. They made up a special unit in the longhaired army, and often this "old mothers' unit" was in the vanguard of the political struggle. Whenever it looked as though the enemy was about to open fire on the demonstrators, old mothers rapidly advanced to the front lines and faced the puppet

soldiers' rifles. Often they knew the soldiers and called out to them by name urging them to disobey the orders of their commanders who were forcing them to commit fratricide. The soldiers were of peasant stock and were attached to their land and families. They became indignant at news of the destruction of their villages, of the death of their children or parents, killed by American bombs. Anger and grief aroused their patriotic feelings in the absence of which the aggressors and traitors had been able to use them in massacres. Repressive measures against the population often failed because the old age, dignity and courage of the mothers commanded respect. Even the cruellest officers winced before those old mothers who talked back to them using convincing arguments. These confrontations with enemy troops were the most redoubtable weapons used by the women in the political struggle.

The following took place in a workers' quarter in Saigon in September 1969, soon after the death of President Ho Chi Minh. One morning everybody was surprised to see a black-lacquered wooden plaque 1 on the door of an old abandoned temple. On it were these words in vermilion lacquer: "Temple of the Venerable One" (Den Tho Cu). Candles and lamps had been lit inside, and on the altar were vases of flowers and trays of fruit. The local people started streaming to the temple, bringing

^{1.} Americans and puppets used long iron sticks to probe the ground in search of underground shelters where our revolutionaries had taken refuge.

^{2. &}quot;Dat que ta mong menh" (Vast Is Our Native Land) Duong Huong Ly, 1967.

^{1.} A lacquered rectangular plaque, bearing a laudatory inscription is usually hung up outside the temple of a national here to whom a cult is dedicated.

flowers and joss-sticks with them, and they all observed one minute's silence in front of the altar. The news of the "Temple of the Venerable One" spread very quickly throughout the city. During the week of mourning in honour of President Ho¹, an uninterrupted file of people from other districts — workers, students, newsboys, shoe-blacks, house-wives, pedlars, teachers, journalists and even soldiers in uniform — passed in front of the altar, each bringing a bunch of flowers or joss-sticks. Mother Seven who lived next door volunteered to perform the daily rites.

The local police superintendent was soon notified. A brigade of field police was dispatched to the place and the temple was encircled. Police with fixed bayonets lined up in front of the temple. One of them jumped on a table and tried to take the plaque down. Mother Seven shouted for help: "The police are destroying the "Temple of the Venerable One" People came rushing from all corners. Old men and children hurried to the temple where they gathered facing the policemen. The commander of the brigade, a second-lieutenant, cried: "Fix bayonets! Charge!" The crowd advanced in the direction of the policemen ready to open fire. In the impressive silence Mother Seven stepped forward and faced the policemen. She slowly

took off her head scarf showing her white hair and said: "My boys! When I started life as a worker my hair was jetblack and I wore it in a big chignon 1. As you see, it is now white and thin! Never in my life have I eaten my fill! Year in year out, Mr. Diem and then Mr Thieu have clamoured about independence and freedom, but we have never been able to live in independence and freedom. On the contrary, we watch the heaps of garbage grow higher in Saigon. We must look for independence and freedom in another world. We believe there is a world in which our aspirations can be realised; we believe in those who can help our dreams come true. It is all quite simple! The gentlemen who rule over us order you to come to kill us. We have only joss-sticks in our hands and no weapons at all!"

The policemen started to lower their bayonets. The second-lieutenant said nothing. Many mothers came to stand beside mother Seven and talked to the policemen about freedom of belief and a citizen's right to choose his or her own religion. The second-lieutenant finally had to withdraw his men after having said to the mothers: "I don't know! All I have done is to obey the orders of my superiors. If you want to stay in the temple, go and see the district chief."

^{1.} The National Mourning for President Ho Chi Minh lasted a week and this decision by the DRVN government was broadcast to the whole country. Our southern compatriots managed to mourn President Ho in all sorts of ways, both legal and clandestine.

^{1.} Long thick hair is an important element of female beauty in rural Viet Nam.

The next day a delegation went to the residence of the district chief, and Mother Seven was appointed spokesman. The district chief had bodyguards armed with machine-guns to protect him, and he started by severely reprimanding the women.

"Who gave you permission to celebrate the cult of Venerable Ho, right in the heart of the capital of the Republic of Viet Nam?"

Mother Seven slowly went up to him:

"Your Excellency," she said in a calm soft voice.
"Have you set foot in the temple to see what is in there before asking us that question?"

The district chief spluttered. then said haughtily:

"I haven't been there yet, but I know what you're up to. I know that the VC have had you fix up the temple to worship the Venerable Ho. You have inscribed "Temple of Venerable Ho" on the plaque. Remove it at once, or you will be arrested. I will have you jailed for life."

The mass of demonstrators shouted their opposition. The district head was taken aback. Mother Seven went on as calmly as before:

"Your Excellency! You are the most high-ranking official in this area. Yet you know nothing about the people's life. Please come and visit our temple! You will see for yourself that there is no such "Temple of Venerable Ho".

"Who are you worshipping then if it's not the Venerable Ho? Who else in the country apart from Mr. Ho Chi Minh could be called "Venerable"? There never used to be anyone saying prayers

in that deserted temple, but as soon as Mr. Ho died the decrepit old temple suddenly attracted everyone imaginable! You watch out! Don't go too far. And if you do, don't complain about my being too severe!"

Noticing that her interlocutor was soft-pedalling the issue, mother Seven went on more softly still.

"Excellency, you are the worthiest representative of the Government in this area. You are a real executor of the law. We would be grateful if you would condescend to understand our intentions. We practise the cult of the Venerable, that is of a person who has dedicated his life to the happiness of the people and to the independence of the country. And if you work for the good of the people, for the glory of the Fatherland when you die, we'll worship you too."

Another mother added:

"The government has been clamouring for a long time about freedom of belief, but where is this freedom? We had hardly lit our joss-sticks when a brigade of policemen rushed at us! Oh, this is the end of the world!"

The district chief slowly filled another pipe and said through a puff of smoke.

"I'll find out whether there are VC in the temple. The government does not forbid any cult. But this temple is different from the others, so we had to intervene. For the moment I consent to leave it as it is while I try to find out whether any VC has infiltrated it. Now, disperse at once."

One old mother smiled and turned to the other demonstrators saying:

"Now, obey the orders of the district chief! Let's all go home, compatriots!"

Mother Seven said loudly:

"Yes, let's go home! Let him search the temple for VC. We are told that the Viet Cong have been driven out of Saigon completely. But somehow they are supposed to have infiltrated the Temple of the Venerable One! Isn't it incredible!"

The district chief stood stock still, looking in bewilderment at the dispersing crowd, at the children who shouted joyfully: "Let's go home! and light joss-sticks and pray to our Venerable One!"

As the enemy's attacks on the population became more and more ferocious, incidents and stories of this sort became legion and constituted an epic of the South Vietnamese mother in this twenty-yearlong resistance.

In many families when a son came of age, his mother would manage to get him a rucksack and a rifle, and a wrist-watch and a hammock into the bargain, and take him to meet the revolutionaries. "Here is my son", she would say. "Now that he is grown-up I entrust him to you. Let him join the liberation army. Let him drive the last American out of the country!" One mother told a recruiting cadre as she came up to him with her son: "I offer my son to the Revolution and I've made him three suits of clothing to wear. As for a rifle, don't worry about it. You just train him in marksmanship and

I'll manage to find him one!" And she did. One day when an enemy patrol happened to come to her hamlet, she invited the puppet soldiers to her house and entertained them with a copious meal. They emptied one bottle after another, and finally the commander and his men were dead drunk and lay where they keeled over in her straw-roofed house. She hurried away to inform the guerillas of the presence of the patrol and they got there in time to disarm them. The woman asked the guerillas for a reward. "A sub-machine-gun", she insisted. "To arm my son with. He has just joined the liberation army."

Many old mothers have cared for three generations of militants and soldiers; their husbands, militants of the 1930s¹ had to live in clandestinity if they managed to escape death or prison. Wives took care of the children alone, and these in turn left their mothers to join the people's army when the war of resistance against the French aggressors broke out. And as grand-mothers, they fed their grandchildren when their daughters-in-law were jailed or killed by the US-puppet torturers. As the fight went on, its flame fanned by these old mothers whose lives were tapestries of sacrifices and for whom separation and mourning had become matters of necessity in the life-and-death struggle.

^{1.} Years which followed the founding of the Indochinese Communist Party (now Communist Party of Viet Nam). These years were marked by a revolutionary upsurge, by Workers' and peasants' struggles in both North and South (1930-1932).

The purpose of US policy was to defuse the national feeling of the youth in the South and to embroil them in the American way of life, in order to keep them out of the struggle. The mothers of these young people who were born and grew up under the neo-colonialist regime took care of them and saw to it that they were not contaminated. The example of Nguyen Thi Lien, an "honorary fighter" who was given a citation at the Ist Congress of the Liberation Women's Union was typical. She spent her childhood in a strategic hamlet in Quang Ngai province. Her father had been a member of the resistance, and had been killed by Diemist troops. Her mother brought her up with courage and selfsacrifice while the family lived under constant threat of torture and imprisonment. She often told Lien stories about the revolutionaries, of how her father had lived and died. She had a hard struggle to prevent her daughter being tempted by luxury and the US depraved culture. Lien grew up, prematurely tempered by the sufferings and privations in the strategic hamlet they lived in. Soon she was entrusted by her mother with revolutionary missions, making contact with the patriots in the hamlet and ensuring secret liaison among them. With her daughter's help the mother managed to set up resistance cells. She taught her daughter lessons from the experience she had gained in the struggle. When a series of people's uprisings took place in the '60s, it was Nguyen Thi Lien who led the uprising in her hamlet. Under her mother's training Lien had become a worthy successor of the older generation of patriots.

These mothers were descended from families of South Vietnamese settlers and inherited from their ancestors a fighting spirit and courage typical of pioneers. There is a legendary aura about these stories of national heroines, that one recognises in genealogical annals preserved in the temples dedicated to Vietnamese mothers of the past. In the days of Le Loi and Nguyen Trai in the 15th century, there were boatwomen and inn-keepers who helped the liberation army cross a river or wipe out a unit of invaders. In our times, during the struggle against US aggression, there were women peasants, workers and city-dwellers all over the South who fought the enemy with their bare hands.

Mother Eight was one of these mothers who took part in the fight in their own way, always showing great presence of mind. One day, some guerillas asked her to allow them to hide in her house; they wanted to lay an ambush for an enemy platoon. The old mother showed them a shelter under her bed and said: "Get into it, and I'll lure the pirates as close as possible. Don't open fire until I give the signal!"

Then she sat on her bed calmly grinding her betel ¹. Moments later some puppet soldiers and G.I.s went past her house: "Hey, old woman, what

^{1.} To chew betel old Vietnamese women use a small pestle and mortar usually made of copper to grind an areca nut, a piece of bark and a leaf of betel before putting them in their mouths.

are you doing?" they asked. "Are there any Viet Cong in your house?"—"Can't you see? I'm grinding my betel. And there is nobody in here." Distrustful, the soldiers approached the door. Mother Eight waited calmly, then suddenly she shouted: "Fire!" Bursts of sub-machine gun fire came from the underground shelter and wiped out the whole enemy platoon.

Everywhere the liberation fighter found mothers who shared his dangers, alleviated his hardships, dressed his wounds and even took part in the fight. They were the living image of the close relationship between the army and the people. Just as the fish lives in water, so the army lives among the people. More exactly, they are bathed in the affectionate care of the mothers. Mother Ten lived in a strategic hamlet in Long An. Though very old, she was still an active member of the guerilla platoon of her hamlet, and was known among the young people as "head of the transport brigade" and "scout commander". She knew all the puppet soldiers stationed near her hamlet, and was on first-name terms with them. When the post was sent reinforcements she managed to find out from the puppet soldiers what new weapons they had and how to use them, as well as the number of recruits. She did not know how to read and write, so she made verbal reports to the cadres of the resistance. Every morning she took vegetables and fruit to the market and sold them to feed her "adoptive children", the cadres and soldiers whom she hid in her shelter. On her way home, she went slowly past the enemy post, her two baskets full

of food. But under the rice and potatoes she hid cartridges, hand grenades, and taken-down arms for resistance bases in the forest. Mother Ten was at this revolutionary task for many years and was arrested, jailed and beaten by the enemy many times. But as soon as she was free and healthy again, she would go on with her activities. The names of Mother Ten. Mother Eight, of countless other mothers in the South who defended their native land and fed the members of the resistance, have gone down in the history of the people's patriotic war as true victory-makers.

The enemy not only divided our fatherland; they dispersed countless South Vietnamese families as well: a father who stuck to his village to lead the struggle and his elder son who fought in the liberation army often found themselves face to face with the younger son who had been brought up in the occupied zone, and had been forced to join the enemy army. These painful confrontations tore the heart-strings of many a Vietnamese mother in the South. Her deep and boundless maternal love, and her determination as a revolutionary mother would succeed in bringing the strayed child back to the family fold. And in doing so she calmed the anger and alleviated the shame of others. She had vanquished the enemy's worst schemes. The final victory of the whole people brought her joy and made her happiness complete: the reunited family is at the bottom of the policy of national concord and she is the main factor bringing it about.

WOMEN IN THE NEW SOCIETY

A - BUILDING SOCIALISM

The victory of the war of resistance against French aggression marked the completion of the national and democratic revolution in the North whose population started on a new revolutionary stage: the building of socialism.

Nong Thi Trung, of the Tay national minority, ¹ was just one of many peasant women who had followed Uncle Ho's advice and taken part in the struggle. She was now freed from oppression and exploitation and she could take either of the two roads open to her. She could either return to the plot which the land reform had allotted to her and simply resume the back-breaking rudimentary farm work which yielded very little for her months of toil. In an agricultural society which would remain unchanged as long as small individual production persisted, she would lead just as wretched a life as in the past, chained to intractable feudal customs and habits.

1. See above.

Or, together with her people, she could get ready for the socialist revolution in which a new, equitable, and advanced society would be built, and everybody, without exception, would "have adequate food and clothing and education" (Ho Chi Minh). She herself would be freed from unjust laws and regulations, freed from the old moral and spiritual constraints which had been like weights round Vietnamese women's necks for centuries.

The building of socialism involved the basic transformation of small individual production into large-scale collective production, which would meet the growing needs of the population. It offered Vietnamese women the chance to fully exercise their right to work, which was of capital importance for the conquest of social equality. By their participation in common productive work, they would be able to win their economic independence, basic to complete emancipation, realization of genuine equality with men in all domains of social life and to ensuring their cultural development.

Nong Thi Trung, like her many sisters throughout the country, had come to know the revolution during the most difficult years. She had witnessed the triumph of the August Revolution of 1945, and she had fought for nine year against the French colonialists. Now on this path, she did not hesitate in her choice: only socialism responded to the centuries-old dream of her people as well as her own aspiration to liberty and equality.

1. For Real Equality and Complete Emancipation.

The first six years of rehabilitation and economic transformation after liberation (1955 — 1960) led to the appearance of new features in the rapidly changing Vietnamese society.

Cooperativization of agriculture meant that Vietnamese peasant women, 90 per cent of the female masses, gained complete freedom both in their work and economically: when she entrusted her individual plot of land to the collective the Vietnamese peasant woman became an active member of the agricultural cooperative, on an equal footing with men and first and foremost with her husband. Gone were the days when she did the field work, raised domestic animals, did the household chores, cared for her children and other activities single-handed while her idle husband relaxing in the central room of the house was nonetheless considered the "main pillar" of the family. Work was paid separately from now on, and provided eloquent proof of the contribution each of them made to the joint income. Often the patient hard-working woman earned more work-points than her husband 1. This evalutation of work based on a system of points gave the lie to biased ideas about women's "weak legs and soft hands" whose "intelligence is no

deeper than a betel tray" 1 and exploded the deeply-rooted myth of men's inborn superiority over women.

From now on women workers could have a say through their trade unions about the running of their factories and the application of policies concerning their lives, work and rights. When still illiterate, they had been barred from any better job than coolie. Now they attended complementary education and vocational courses.

Women of the former exploiting classes did not remain aloof during these deep changes. They took part in political and social activities. The Viet Nam Women's Union and the Labour Office in the city districts provided them with jobs, helping them to give up their former way of life in which they were dependent on their husbands.

When peace was restored, the Government of the DRVN and the VNWP were able to put into practice concrete policies aimed at the emancipation and liberation of women, a goal set by the Party at its founding. The women's question now arose in all its complexity in a country with an agricultural economy just emerging from subjection to a colonial and feudal regime.

Women's right to work, promulgated in the Constitution (of 1959) can be ensured only when the great difference in status between men and women due to centuries of obscurantism has been removed. Women have to catch up where they lag behind

^{1.} Pay is worked out as a system of points. At harvest time the products are divided up according to the workpoints each cooperative member has earned.

^{1.} An old Vietnamese saying,

in the political, cultural and professional fields in order to be able to take up professions hitherto considered as men's preserves. Only then can they fully take part in social work on an equal footing with men. Women's progress is more pressing in the context of socialist construction which will require increasing numbers of women workers. Women's participation in public activities and in the management of State affairs is indispensable to the building of the new society as well as to the complete abolition of inequality. Lenin said "We want the woman worker to win equality with the man worker, not only before the law, but also in life. To this end, women workers must take an ever greater part in the management of public enterprises as well as in the administration of the State. While doing this, women will make rapid progress in their apprenticeship and will catch up with men". 1

The achievement of this equality in life, which distinguishes socialist from bourgeois democracy, constitutes a difficult, complex, all-embracing problem for the leaders, for those responsible for the women's movement, and for the women themselves. It calls for meticulous ideological work as well as for the building of indispensable material bases. It requires sustained effort by those concerned and the goodwill of those who shoulder the greatest responsibility.

In February 1959 a congress of cadres doing political work among women was held, during which a thorough study of the women's question was made. This question is an integral part of the class question and "must be studied from the viewpoint of the proletariat," said Le Duan, then a member of the Party Central Committee. His speech was an important theoretical document which mapped out the prospects for the solution of the women's question in the context of Vietnamese reality. Women were the most exploited and oppressed persons in the old society, the most unhappy members of the proletariat, and they had to be liberated first. The political cadres directly responsible for the women's movement had to not only grasp the importance of the women's question in the whole of the revolutionary work, but also be thoroughly aware of the class line in their work.

The emancipation of women had to be achieved among the working masses first, the most oppressed and exploited stratum of the old society. Equality of the sexes will be achieved only when women are really conscious of their duty to take part in running the country and the management of State affairs, as real mistresses of society. Political cadres must first of all make contact with women workers, women peasants, and women working in the city.

According to Le Duan, only a political cadre with a high level of class consciousness could devote himself wholeheartedly to the women's question, rightly appreciate the true value of the masses of women and understand the origin of the still limited development of their thinking and behaviour.

^{1.} V. I. Lenin — Collected Works. p. 30.

Women themselves understood their rights better if their class consciousness had been awakened. The socialist revolution which toppled the old order of values and the ideology of the former ruling class, had a great effect on women who, being in the lowest echelon of the feudal hierarchy, had suffered from all negative aspects of feudal education. Shortcomings in the women's movement, particularly the lack of mutual comprehension, stemmed from petty-bourgeois ideology, from individualism, in short from insufficient class consciousness among women.

"Under the feudal regime women were cloistered, completely isolated. Men could engage in public activities, and work together with others. For thousands of years women's activities had been confined to the narrow circle of their family. To encourage the women's movement it is necessary first to undertake a great ideological revolution among women. They must have a clear class position, take part in public activities, and think more collectively. Isolation constitutes a big obstacle to their emancipation."

The arousing of class consciousness in Vietnamese women is a delicate question while they are struggling against the inequalities and harassments they are subjected to as women.

"Contempt for and oppression of women both stem from the ideology of the enemy classes. But who is it that looks down upon and oppresses women? Their husbands and their fathers, their dear ones. The problem is not simple, as filial and conjugal love remain women's deepest sentiments, and sentiments which they do not want to change. However to preserve them in a feudal framework is to maintain inhuman social relations...

... These relations must be changed, but how? Unsuitable methods may hinder development of the women's movement and women's progress. Those concerned would not dare to face the struggle."

Le Duan concludes that it is necessary to awaken the revolutionary consciousness of women so that they increase their resolve to break all the ties that bind them: the thinking of the past, old customs and habits and the narrow-mindedness in themselves born of private property which prevents broad, deep solidarity among women.

Decrees and laws are the bases and conditions for the application of the principle of equality, particularly the "Law on Marriage and the Family" on which work began soon after the liberation of the North.

In December 1959 the Party Central Committee called a congress of leading cadres at all echelons of the Party to study this law. President Ho Chi Minh addressed the congress, saying:

"The Law on Marriage and the Family which we are going to submit to the National Assembly is a revolution, an integral part of the socialist revolution. That is why it must be studied from the viewpoint of the proletariat. From a feudalist, bourgeois or petty-bourgeois viewpoint, it is impossible to understand it. This law aims at the emancipation of women, of half of society, that is. It is necessary to liberate women, but it is equally necessary to destroy feudal and bourgeois ideologies in men.

For their part, women should not sit and wait for Government and Party decrees. They must struggle.

The Party must take the lead, in this campaign, from the elaboration to the promulgation and application of this law, because this is a revolution. The leadership of the Party manifests itself in the example of Party cadres and members as well as in the determination of such organizations as the Youth and Women's Unions to put it into practice."

The Law on Marriage and the Family was promulgated early in 1960 and is based on four principles: free choice of marriage partner, monogamous marriage, equality of the sexes, and protection of the rights of women and children.

The sacrosanct patriarchal family regime of the Hong Duc Code (XVth century) remained almost unchanged until only some years ago. This brings out the real significance of President Ho Chi Minh's evaluation "This law (on marriage and the family) constitutes a revolution, an integral part of the socialist revolution."

Chapter III of this law established women's right to make their own decisions regarding their marriage: "Art. 4. Men and women who have reached legal age are fully entitled to freely choose their marriage partner. Neither party can impose his or her will upon the other; nobody can force either party to get married, nor prevent them from getting married."

"Art. 7. Mourning does not constitute an obstacle to marriage."

"Art. 8. Widows have the right to remarry. In this case, their right to their children and their property are guaranteed."

Chapter III established the legal equality between husband and wife, allowed women their economic equality, and allowed them to choose a profession and earn a living independently. It abolished the old customs which ordained that a good wife had to be content with doing housework and bringing up children. On liberation there were thousands of "housewives" in every town living in dependence on their husbands. Article 29 of Chapter V accorded the wife's household work equal importance to that of the husband.

"Art. 29.—... the sharing of property shall proceed in consideration of the part brought by each party, of the state of the property and the effective conditions of the family. Housework is considered as equivalent to productive labour."

The Law on Marriage and the Family also protects the rights of children born out of wedlock, their mothers, "natural children" and "unmarried mothers", who were outcasts in the old society.

"Art. 22. — A child born out of wedlock has the right to demand that the people's tribunal establish its paternity or maternity. The mother has the right to establish the paternity of a child born out of wedlock on its behalf during its minority."

The young people and the majority of the population, won over by progressive ideas, warmly welcomed this law, but there were still numerous difficulties connected with its application, especially in the countryside, where it ran into old feudal customs and habits. Not a few maltreated or abandoned wives continued to bear their tribulations without complaining. Some husbands forbade their wives to take part in village meetings for fear that they would "make revolution" in their own families! For some time child-marriages continued to be practised in the countryside without the knowledge of the local authorities.

The Viet Nam Women's Union, mainly through its grassroots organizations, intervened in these cases, and with the help of local administrative committees protected and insisted on the women's rights. Meanwhile patient explanation work was carried out among women to help them understand the new law correctly and apply it strictly.

Organizations were set up to help women gradually relieve themselves of their back-breaking household chores, and to make sure they had favourable conditions in which to study, learn a trade or profession, and really take part in social activity. The national economy was in the process

of rehabilitation and post-war reconstruction, and could not meet all the people's needs. Besides the organizations for which the State was directly responsible, the first nurseries, creches and canteens set up by the people came into being. Both in the countryside and in the cities, Women's Union sections took the initiative in propaganda work and in collection of money, building materials and equipment for these projects... An old communal house newly done up, the rearranged residence of a former local landlord, or a new little house built by the parents, with new furniture also made by them, became the pride of a village whose population took part with enthusiasm in this emulation for the "education of the young generation".

When the 1959 school-year began, the first nursery schools opened their doors to their little charges. It was quite an event in the countryside, which was then in the process of agricultural collectivisation. From then on no little children were left uncared for to wander along the village lanes and sometimes venture close to the ponds. with tragic consequences. In the fields near their class-rooms, their mothers worked away listening to their clear voices singing songs which were gayer and more optimistic than the sad lullabies which generations of mothers and they themselves had sung. This generation of "little masters of the country" — as President Ho called them — rapidly got used to the new life style. Before going to class and on their return, they would greet their parents politely. Before each meal, they asked for water

to wash their hands. When they were thirsty they asked "Mummy, can I have some boiled water?"... They no longer used abusive words and when they heard grown-ups use them, they gently reproached them, "Don't say that, Auntie wouldn't like it"—The teacher, one of the thousands freshly graduated from short-term courses, was their beloved model, an inexhaustible source of joy and good examples. Happy changes took place in each peasant family.

By the end of 1958 illiteracy had been more or less wiped out in the North: several million women under 50 had learned to read and write and were continuing their schooling in complementary first (primary) level courses. The local authorities and the education service opened first and second-level classes, run free of charge by high-school and college students, whose participation in this social work was prescribed in their all-round training at socialist schools. Six years of persistent efforts, from 1954-1960, had led to Vietnamese women rapidly asserting themselves in both their work and their studies.

They made practical contributions to the successful economic transformation of the country, which paved the way for the building of socialism. 89.34 per cent of the women in the North were peasants and they made up 60 per cent of the agricultural production force. They had their say in the unanimous opting for socialism aimed at developing the Vietnamese countryside. From the eight cooperatives set up during the war of resistance in the old liberated areas, the figure soared to 4,824 in 1958

and 40,000 in 1960, covering 76 per cent of the cultivable land in the North and involving 85 per cent of the rural population. The following figures from 33 communes of the former province of Phu Tho ¹ testify to the considerable contribution made by women peasants to agricultural production:

Women worked:

14% of the	work-days	spent on	ploughing
35%			harrowing
65%		_	loosening soil
			and weeding
98.3%			transplanting
			ri c e.
98%		_	harvesting
75%			tea growing
85%			maize growing.

The number of women workers, skilled women workers and women functionaries in factories and State organs increased considerably during the six years to 120,000 in 1960, representing 20 per cent of this work force, six times as many as in 1955. In the first school-year after liberation (1954-1955) there were 1,200 students in higher education in North Viet Nam, with only an insignificant proportion of women. In 1960, girl students numbered 1,318 and were studying at almost all establishments of higher learning. They would reinforce the body of scientific and technical cadres necessary

^{1.} Now merged with the former provinces of Vinh Yen and Phuc Yen into Vinh Phu province.

to socialist construction. The new development of the women's movement and economic development had highlighted women's indispensable role and their ability in managing State affairs. But they still occupied few leading positions compared to their global work. The legacy of history was the objective obstacle, and the deep-seated cause of this problem was to be solved in the next stage.

In 1961 the DRVN started building the technical and material bases of socialism, in accordance with the goals outlined by the Third Congress of the Viet Nam Workers' Party (September 1960). On women, the resolution of the Third Congress stipulated that the Party:

"... has a great responsibility with regard to their emancipation and the bringing out of their capacities with a view to building the new society. It is necessary to help them make progress ideologically, raise their political and cultural level, and help them gradually lighten the burden of household chores so that they can take part in production and in social activities. It is necessary to make rational use of their labour, thereby giving them a steadily greater role to play in production and in the management of State affairs. The Viet Nam Women's Union must continue to rally women of all social strata, educate them and encourage them to contribute to the revolution."

In December 1960, a conference of political women cadres was held to discuss the main tasks of the women's movement in socialist construction and the struggle for national reunification.

The conference reviewed women's great contributions to the victory of the Revolution, to the war of resistance against the French colonialists, and the rehabilitation of the country. Women had gradually brought about their own emancipation during the various stages of the Vietnamese revolution. Their increasingly important role in the management of production and their more frequent promotions to leading posts were tangible assurance of their social equality with men, the essence of equality of the sexes. Social projects, nurseries, creches and canteens partially freed them from arduous household chores, and provided more favourable conditions for them to study and improve their professional qualifications.

However, six years' work (1954 — 1960) was not enough to erase all vestiges of the past. Shortcomings, some of them serious, had to be made good.

The various sections of the Party had not yet been able to fully develop the revolutionary potential of women. In factories and other economic enterprises, women still had to do work that was too hard for them. In some cooperatives, women were paid less than men for the same work.

Contempt for women still prevailed, as was evident in wage-scales, certain statutes and regulations and discrimination against women in promotion. As a result, although they constituted an important work force, women played only a secondary role in the management of production

and in State organs. The Law on Marriage and the Family was not yet applied fully. Women themselves were not yet acting in consciousness of their rights. The burden of their families prevented many women from studying, and their political, technical and cultural level did not meet the requirements of their trades and professions.

Their lack of self-confidence and their resignation limited their spirit of independence and their will to struggle. Objective difficulties, slow economic and social development and lack of experience in organization prevented good solutions to these complex problems. But the conference also recognized the responsibility of leading organs and leading cadres who were not giving due attention to these problems.

The resolution of this conference, approved by the Secretariat of the Party Central Committee, made it the job of all responsible cadres to:

"Mobilize women and develop their capabilities for the socialist transformation of the economy and the building of the material bases of socialism."

This required bold promotion of women, especially in production, and at the same time a rapid and steady training of women managing cadres. In the first five-year plan, a number of complementary general education and refresher courses had to be organized to raise the cultural and technical level of women workers and peasants. Admissions to higher learning establishments and technical schools had to include a high proportion of young

women, with priority for those from labouring classes. The same guidelines were to be followed in branches of activity suited to women's aptitudes, such as medicine, education, trade, and light industry. A women's commission was set up in each factory or enterprise, whose job it was to work within the framework of the trade union for the protection of women's rights.

The second task was:

"2. To help women assert their economic and political rights, protect the rights of women and children, and organize social work."

The first five-year plan (1961-1965) instructed all responsible organs, with the help of grassroots organizations of the Viet Nam Women's Union, to take concrete and efficacious measures to abolish injustices and inequalities in matters of pay, management, employment, technical training, Serious offences against the Law on Marriage and the Family, child marriage, concubinage, maltreatment of wives or children, were to be severely sanctioned in the Party and the mass organizations and the culprits brought to justice. A large number of nurseries and creches were to be created by the State or people's organizations to look after children after office-hours as well as during the day-time in the cities, at harvest-time or in the day-time in the countryside. The Viet Nam Women's Union and the health and education services cooperated in organizing talks and practical courses to teach "the basic elements of child-rearing and education."

The third task was:

"3. To mobilize women to participate actively in the struggle for national reunification".

It involved a vast job of explanation and thorough-going political education among the masses of women. In talks, exhibitions and film shows organized in city quarters and rural hamlets, political cadres would expose the crimes of the US imperialists in the South, their aggressive designs against the North and the heroism of our southern compatriots.

These cadres would explain to the women the close relationship between the building and defence of socialism in the North and the liberation of the southern half of the country. Thus, women understood the importance of their work in this context. Their primary task was to unceasingly increase their labour productivity, a constant motivation in their daily efforts. It was in this spirit that a Son Tay woman peasant (northwest of Hanoi) said in 1963: "To increase the rice yield of a sao (360 sq. metres) by two kilos is to give concrete support to our southern compatriots."

The Third Congress of the VNWU held early in 1961 called on women in the North to show their patriotism by developing their latent ability in the

socialist construction of their country. Their active and full participation in this revolution would bring deeper and more radical emancipation for themselves. Their concrete tasks were defined by the five objectives of an emulation movement launched following the Congress: the "Five-Good" 1 movement. The socialist revolution required that everyone make renewed efforts to carry out the transformation of society, form a new, united and democratic family and provide all-round education of the citizens. The "Five Good" movement encouraged women first to fulfil their duty as citizens toward the Fatherland, mainly by working well in production, the basis of the transformation of society and individuals, and vital for the future of the country. Ideological and general education would help women to a consciousness of their new role in society and help them to acquire new knowledge indispensable to their work. While it was made easier for them to attend schools, they had to cope with daily difficulties in throwing themselves into study, the only way to improve their work and to assume the managing role entrusted to them by the new regime.

Socialist construction opened up a broad field of activities to women and gave them access to leading positions. It was the most vivid and the most con-

^{1. 1.} Good work. 2. Good studies. 3. Good participation in management. 4. Proper observance of the laws and policies of the State. 5. Getting on well with others in society and in the family, and good education of children.

centrated manifestation of the emancipation of women and of social equality. The "Five-Good" movement encouraged them to overcome subjective limitations, especially those of a moral and psychological order, and to maintain their new position in spite of numerous social obstacles at the early stage of this revolution—for the promotion of women was a real revolution which upset the old social order founded on male hegemony and contempt for women. Leading officials at various echelons who are directly responsible for the application of the policies of the Party and the Government are also responsible for actively supporting women entrusted with leading roles and to help them exercise their functions effectively.

Women's new social role does not prevent them from fulfilling their function as mothers. They must reconcile their tasks in society with their responsibilities as mothers and mistresses of their homes, the most important of which is to educate their children. On the initiative of the VNWU, mothers undertook to "bring up healthy and good children." The WU committees and the education and health services held joint conferences on education of children, taught mothers elementary psychology, child-care and preventive hygiene, and occasionally sent specialists round the communes to give women peasants guidance in child-care or family planning.

It was this generation of young mothers, workers and peasants, who were educated and conscious of their responsibility to the future of the people, that was the first to apply their scientific know-

ledge to the education of their children. The family burden in the new society requires that all mothers have a basic educational grounding to help them run domestic affairs and bring up and educate their children well.

Aided by the general enthusiasm the first fiveyear plan aroused, the women's "Five-Good" movement strengthened socialist emulation in the population and contributed to a marked increase in production and to speeding up the building of the new society. Progress was most visible in the countryside where women peasants made up 60 per cent of the work force. The Third Congress of the WU set the norm for women at from 200 to 250 workdays per year. At the cooperative farm of Thuy Huong commune (Hai Phong) for example, where women made up two-thirds of the work force, the yearly average of work-days went up from 130^{4} in 1961 to 230 per person in 1963. As a result, the cooperative was able to avoid the food shortage which in the past had been unavoidable in the period between two harvests, and to sell 34 tons of paddy to the State. This progress was a triumph for the socialist path of economic development in the Vietnamese countryside.

The promotion of women advanced visibly, especially. in the countryside where most women were engaged in production. For example, in Dien Chau

^{1.} This very low average was due to the frequent absence of women peasants who supplemented their income from farm work with small trading.

district (Nghe An) four women were on the managing committees of cooperatives in 1961. Two years later in the same district there were 30 women managers, members of inspection committees, and heads or deputy heads of production brigades. The same advance could be seen in the people's councils from commune to province level, where an 11% membership in 1961 rose to 20.8 per cent in 1965.

The number of women heads or deputy heads of departments or offices, directors of factories, and deputies elected to the national assembly has increased visibly.

Each woman, whatever her social situation, had to make the same efforts to rise to the times. A new woman developed and quickly asserted herself in socialist revolution, which was to radically transform society and the lives of all living in the country.

2. New Women Are Formed

Nguyen Thi Duyen, a young woman peasant of Binh Luc, in the lowland area of Ha Nam¹, was 14 years old when her province was liberated from French occupation and peace was restored. Old customs and habits still prevailed in her village and the was one of the last victims of them. She was being forced to marry a man younger than

herself, the only son of a rich family. She wept, and implored her parents to keep her at home so that she could go to school and attend Young Pioneer meetings. But her parents would not budge. The new regime was being organized, post-war reconstruction kept the administration busy, and the Law on Marriage and the Family had not yet been promulgated. Nobody intervened to save the young girl from her misfortune. Once Duyen ran away from her husband's and came back home but her parents chased her away immediately, for fear of being considered their daughter's accomplices.

She was 18 years old when her village was involved in collectivization and organized itself into a people's militia platoon and an irrigation brigade. "This time I'm going to join the cooperative. Nobody can stop me," Duyen declared. She was involved in work on embankments for a month. On her return her parents-in-law cut her rice ration and took her best clothes. Duyen went back to her parents, and told them that from now on she would earn her living at the cooperative.

The managing committee went to see her parents-in-law. The chairwoman of the cooperative persuaded them to let their daughter-in-law work in full liberty for the cooperative, and she explained to them that Duyen, the sole productive worker in their family, had a right to part of the food that she had grown for them. The recalcitrant parents-in-law finally had to accept that life had changed. The Law on Marriage and the Family was made

^{1.} Ha Nam has been merged with Ninh Binh and Nam Dinh to form the present Ha Nam Ninh province. It used to be lowland area continually threatened by floods in the past, poor and backward.

public that year, and allowed Duyen to free herself from the bonds of the forced marriage she had had to put up with. Duyen began to enjoy life and work anew. Collective work, public activities, youth meetings, new friendships, then complementary classes, and military training in which she took part... so many new elements metamorphosed the "poor forced wife".

Duyen quickly distinguished herself by her industriousness and intelligence. The military authorities found she had a remarkable aptitude for carrying arms and an ability to command. She was promoted deputy head then head of platoon, then leader of the village people's militia brigade. She was in charge of the defence of a commune of some 5,000 inhabitants and her unit was several times cited for its part in the fighting (against U.S. air escalation) in her province.

The socialist revolution changed the life of many women like Nguyen Thi Duyen and freed much talent that had been smothered by feudal society. This veritable resurrection did not take place without obstacles. It was a struggle, among the people and in everybody's innermost thoughts, between progress which strove to affirm itself and regressive ideas which still lingered in society and in each individual. Through this struggle women brought about their own transformation.

As an active member of society a woman acquired a broader and higher notion of the aim of her work which had to provide first of all for the maintenance of the collectivity to which her life was to be closely linked from now on. This consciousness of her own responsibility toward the collectivity and this spirit of collective mastery have developed continuously and naturally, and there is no sharp conflict between the "individual" and the "collective".

Solidarity had been established years before in the struggle against the foreign aggressors. Dao Thi Hao, a weaver at the Nam Dinh Textile Mill. agreed to work in a group whose productivity was low to help her fellow-workers correct their work style. Her salary was reduced but she succeeded in motivating her team-mates to surpass the production norms. She went from one team to another, helping members of her workshop to break the record of the factory, passing her own experience on to them all. She was called "the young girl who weaves flowers" because as the teams of her workshop surpassed the set norms one by one a red silk rose was tied to their machines: the workshop looked like an embroidery, of which Hao was the artist. Her work took on great significance: it inaugurated a socialist labour movement in her factory based on the spirit of mutual help, joint responsibility and efforts to constantly increase output for the well-being of all. A new style of work which was characteristic of the spirit of socialist cooperation was sparked off by Dao Thi Hao's initiative of encouraging workers to "assume the more difficult jobs for oneself and reserve the easier ones for the others."

During the 60's the socialist labour movement at the Nam Dinh Textile Mill spread like an ink blot to other branches of activity and many Dao Thi Hao's emerged in the countryside and the towns, drawing women workers, peasants, functionaries and intellectuals into an enthusiastic drive to fulfil the first five-year plan.

But the old work-style born of small-scale production and the regime of private property which had prevailed for many centuries was not done away with so quickly everywhere. In agricultural production, where from time immemorial the peasants had accumulated much practical experience, the introduction of science, technology and new methods was hampered by routine, superstitions and the habit of working without plans, according to whims and circumstances. At meetings women peasants listened passively to the technical cadre who explained new methods of sowing and transplanting rice, but back to work they did as they liked, unwilling to venture into innovations. The new method of transplanting which facilitated and speeded up the ripening of rice plants was the object of many an ironical comment among seasoned women transplanters.

"We've been transplanting rice all our lives, wearing away our fingers, and now a greenhorn must come and tell us how to do it", they said.

Young people became a shock force in this technical revolution in the countryside. Young women who had graduated from rural schools formed the technical and scientific teams of cooperatives. Their initiatives were subjected to sharp questioning by conservative minds, and they had to face discourag-

ing opposition on their efforts to have science and technology applied to agricultural work. In the end the correct behaviour of these pioneers as well as the results of the crops prevailed over doubts and scepticism. But one must mention political work and ideological education, the basis of the training, which was linked to the realities of productive labour and carried out at conferences on production and at women's meetings. This helped women to raise their political consciousness, their spirit of collective mastery, and to acquire the knowledge necessary to improving their lives and their work. Complementary classes were opened in the towns and the countryside, the content of the programme being closely linked to the productive work of various branches. Here the women peasants and workers received not only their basic education but also scientific knowledge useful in their work. Sluggishness and superstitions were gradually done away with thanks to education and the acquaintance with applied science now within reach of the masses. Following the young people's lead, women adapted themselves to a new style of work which required discipline, observance of scientific and technical norms and ever higher output. A new generation of socialist workers who were free, conscientious and disciplined emerged.

The rehabilitation of the social role of women ran into numerous obstacles — social prejudices, feudal and bourgeois theories on women's lack of ability, on their innate sole functions as wives and mothers... — which stopped women assuming positions of leadership. At first "Women in breeches"

found difficult acceptance in the family, the last bastion of feudal ideology. A woman who is chief of a production brigade, cooperative chairwoman, or self-defence militia platoon leader, has a number of men under her authority, among them her own husband or her elder brothers. Scandalous!

People whispered, "This is against the order dictated by Heaven!" or "Those ladies are going to rebel against us!" One man said to his wife "Even a woodcutter is master in his own home. You may be boss of the cooperative, but at home I'm the boss."

At first the village community did not take easily to this reversing of roles. Those whose wives were promoted to leading positions were subjected to cruel sneers, which also hid some resentment. "O.K.! Let's just see how these ladies work!" they said.

People waited for them to blunder so as to "prove" the inborn incapacity of women. This reversing of roles was part of the class struggle on the ideological plane. It was a direct attack on the old hegemony of men and the ingrained contempt for women, one of the pillars of feudal law. The cultural and ideological revolution is a continuing one. People who have grown up in a thousand-year-old feudal society cannot rid themselves overnight of this old ideology which has permeated every aspect of life and infiltrated the mind. Cadres opposed promotions of women colleagues, husbands hampered the progress of their wives, worrying lest the latter overtake them. Women needed as much courage

as in armed struggle to assert themselves in their new role. They themselves had to battle to get free of the traditional oppression exerted by the old morality over generations of women, which was echoed over in themselves.

Under the new regime, which allowed neither the return of former social relations, nor the resurrection of the old morality, women enjoyed the support of the leadership whose task it was to carry out the policies of the Party and the Government. The promotion of women to leading positions and assistance to them in the exercise of their function were tasks mainly assigned to leading cadres. However, in spite of much persuasion and pressure, there was only a slow increase in the promotion of women. At the beginning of the first five-year plan, a resolution of the Party Central Committee had set 30 per cent as the proportion of leading posts that should be filled by women. But on the eve of the struggle against US aggression, the proportion stood at only 11 per cent.

This slow progress had several causes, but it was basically due to narrow-mindedness and lack of confidence in women among executive cadres. It was generally recognised that women managed domestic affairs well, but people were sceptical as to their ability to manage the affairs of a larger community. There was an amusing story told at the time of a discussion between a director and a delegate to the women's committee of an administrative organ. This delegate proposed that the post of office

manager be filled by a young woman she had selected for her excellent production work and the way she got on well with her colleagues. The director was flabbergasted.

"That girl? But she's too young; we have older comrades, haven't we?"

"But isn't youth an important criterion, comrade director?"

"I know, I know, but that's only theory. Old comrades have been tried and tested in struggle and their loyalty to the revolution is unquestionable."

"Well, aren't the excellent results of our colleague's work sufficient to prove her loyalty and her revolutionary ardour?"

"I don't deny it. But... she's too young to be a leader!"

"We have confidence in her. She is still inexperienced, but she must be allowed to exercise such a function if she is to make progress!..."

This was enough for the director. He could contain himself no longer.

"I will not argue any more. I just don't agree with you. Why make a fuss about her? Even my wife, who is old enough to be her aunt, is not yet a head of department!"

It was in this sort of atmosphere that the first chairwomen, deputy chairwomen, women chiefs or deputy chiefs of office, women's team and brigade leaders, women's section chiefs and other women cadres were nominated. They were not yet numerous, but each of them strove to succeed in her new task, supported by the Party and Women's Union organisations. A specifically feminine style of leadership emerged. Women were hardworking, thrifty and dedicated, and knew how to win hearts and minds, acquire prestige by their own example in work, by their competence and their integrity. Cases of corruption were rare among women. "They don't drink, don't smoke, and don't indulge their stomachs as men do."

They were honest, and more determined in fighting offences against the law and public property. One of the images of our epoch is that of the self-confident, simple, modest woman in her new social role going about her work quite naturally with the same air of competent responsibility as when she is seeing to things in her own home.

A journalist once went to a village to interview a woman production-brigade leader who was famous in the area. Some women and young girls were gathered at the communal house, and he asked a middle-aged woman who was sitting on the steps wearing an old-fashioned headcloth and chewing betel.

"Please, madam, could you show me the co-op chairman's house?"

"The chairman is busy in the drying yard," she replied.

"May I see him?"

"He'll be coming soon. Just wait here a moment." The journalist tried to start a conversation. "Have you finished harvesting?"

"More or less", she replied laconically.

"Is the crop good?"

"Not bad", she replied, smiling shyly.

Somebody called her from some way off. She replied at once, stood up, said good-bye to the journalist and hurried away, taking another chew of betel from the bag in her hand.

The journalist whiled the time away watching the girls and women bustling back and forth, trying to guess which of them was the heroine of his future story. The cooperative chairman finally arrived.

"I'm very sorry to keep you waiting, comrade journalist. I was discussing allocation of work with the secretary. I hope you haven't been waiting too long."

"Not at all, comrade chairman. I know that you're very busy at harvest time and I don't want to abuse your kindness. May I meet Mrs. Lat, head of the fourth production brigade. The responsible cadres of the district have been telling me about her."

"Yes, Mrs. Lat is a real treasure," beamed the chairman. And turning toward the young women who were looking curiously at the journalist, he called out "Hey, girls, where's Mrs. Lat?"

"She was here just now," replied one of them, "the comrade journalist has been talking to her!"

"Was that her?" the journalist exclaimed. "The woman with a headcloth chewing betel?"

The co-op chairman burst out laughing. "Yes, that's right. She looks a bit old-fashioned, our comrade Lat," he told the journalist. "If she's no longer

here, she must have gone to help another brigade to finish harvesting in time. You'll have to wait until this evening!"

"A whole day lost!" the journalist thought. But perhaps his real regret was not to have realised earlier that a woman of very ordinary appearance could be the chief of the renowned fourth production brigade, an outstanding worker commended so often by the district committee.

The population rapidly accepted such leaders, especially those at grassroots level, whose work was exemplary, who were full of understanding toward the people, close to everyone, and who kept their natural gentleness in their style of leadership. But they were adamant and energetic in defending the law and the rights of citizens, especially of women and children. It was in the 60's that the first women presidents of people's courts and the first women judges were appointed. Until then it had been taken for granted that only men had the gift of weighty arguments, especially that of being a judge. Now, each time a case involving the rights of women and children came up, at least one woman was on the jury.

Let us attend a Hanoi people's court hearing chaired by a woman. The accused has been charged with having taken a second wife even though polygamy has been forbidden under the Law on Marriage and the Family. The people's tribunal in his city quarter has annulled his second illegal marriage, but the bigamous husband has appealed to the Hanoi Court, pleading in these terms:

"My first wife is sterile! I had to have a second wife who would give me children."

"Did you both consult a specialist?" the chairwoman of the hearing queried. "No? And if it were your fault, you would allow her to take a second husband, wouldn't you?"

These women have not studied law but have surprised us by their prompt replies and their solid arguments, and have cornered quite a few culprits.

Some people prophesy that women who run social affairs will neglect those of their families, and will lose their gentleness and their femininity. This is one of the more subtle feudalist reactions. The femininity and the gentleness referred to have in the past been expressions of submissiveness and passivity. The new woman retains and develops her traditional virtues, enhancing them with revolutionary qualities acquired in the struggle for liberation and through their education by the Viet Nam Workers' Party and its mass organization, the Viet Nam Women's Union. The new, socialist women's virtues are summed up in the "Five-Good" campaign which replaces the "Four Virtues" and the "Three Obediences" rules of feudal ethics, and reflects the new situation of women in society and in the family.

The family as a living social cell requires of a woman, who is wife, mother and mistress of her home that she steadily increase her knowledge and awareness of her tasks. In her capacity as co-builder of society, she must ensure the happiness of her

family which is necessary for their morale and a decisive factor in the quality of their work. The children, future citizens who are born to and grow up in the family, need a family education that trains them as worthy successors of their fathers and elder brothers and sisters in the management of a democratic and prosperous state. The mother's task is orientated toward this higher goal and wider perspective which goes beyond the family framework. A woman who runs her domestic affairs badly cannot be expected to fulfil her social functions properly.

To ensure their children a good education, mothers had to improve their own education and cultural level, and acquire scientific knowledge concerning child-care with the help of organizations in charge of mother-and-child care. Socialist structures in the countryside enabled these organizations to introduce women peasants to the scientific methods of child-care and education. For women of mountaindwelling minorities, pre-natal care, childbirth in maternity homes, and recourse to physicians instead of consulting sorcerers were new contributions by the socialist revolution to their transformed family life. This education was a second liberation for women, peasants in particular: liberation from obscurantism. Education strengthened women's economic independence and constituted a basis on which to develop a democratic and united family.

The new social role of women was quite compatible with their habitual roles as wives and mothers: they are complementary. A woman in a leading position whose children behave badly, loses a lot of

prestige. In the course of a few years people witnessed a rapid change in Vietnamese women, especially among women peasants who ran their own personal lives and those of their families successfully while managing to fulfil their social functions in the cooperatives and on village or provincial administrative committees well. Women peasants who take part in social activities and who manage the village community are for the most part good wives and good mothers. A woman who is fully conscious of her social task, will also take her responsibility as mother and mistress of her home seriously. The story of Nam, chairwoman of a cooperative farm, is vivid proof. Her husband worked far away and only came home on holidays and at Tet (Lunar New Year Festival). She alone looked after their three children, the oldest being a fifth-grader at the village second-level (junior secondary) school.

Young women peasants who happened to be the eldest children in their families, now went to school instead of staying at home to help their mothers with the cooking and care for their younger brothers and sisters as had been the custom in peasant families. This was something quite new in the Vietnamese countryside.

Mothers came to realise the value of learning and Nam was not content with just having her daughter learn how to read and write. One day as the girl sat pensively before her open book, Nam asked:

"What's worrying you, darling? Can I help you?" (She had often helped her daughter when the latter was still at primary school).

"No, Mum, you can't. Oh, how difficult mathematics is!" the daughter sighed.

Nam saw at once that her low cultural level made her a less valuable mother and educator. She had given up her complementary studies a year before, when she got too busy with the affairs of the cooperative and her family tasks. But now, every night, after a full day's work and while her children slept, she would open her books and study in the light of a kerosene lamp. She had to make up fast for the time lost.

One school year went by and without her daughter knowing it, Nam finished the fifth then the sixth forms of complementary education ¹. She was now ready to help the girl.

One day she picked up her daughter's maths book, pointed out mistakes and explained them to her. The girl was overjoyed. "Thanks, Mum, You're wonderful! You know everything!"

"No, darling, I don't know everything. I learned this at the complementary school."

As Nam the coop-chairwoman replied gently to her daughter, she felt relief and joy at having won back her confidence.

Education, and the cultural and technical achievements of a woman also ensure for her equality with her husband, and make them true companions in

^{1.} Complementary (adult) education consists of basic subjects only: literature, mathematics, history and geography. The school-year is therefore shorter than that of general education.

marriage. Ideological education gained at meetings and courses and through the mass media has popularized the revolutionary concept of the family, which is based on unity and equality, on mutual affection, and on husband and wife helping each other to work and study so that both make progress. They share the responsibilities of family life and the education of children. Ideological education must be given to both husband and wife. Fostering the new family is part of the cultural and ideological revolution and in this domain women advance more rapidly than men, for the latter free themselves only with difficulty from patriarchal ideas.

When President Ho Chi Minh visited Ha Tay (west of Hanoi) in 1962 and dropped in on a conference of leading cadres of the province, he asked the participants, "Do any of you still beat your wives?" The whole audience was silent; nobody dared either to deny or admit to this conduct.

The President went on "It's very bad to beat one's wife. How can you talk to her affectionately today and pummel her tomorrow? You simply must put an end to this behaviour. Beating one's wife is a savage act and it's a violation of the law."

Following President Ho's visit, the provincial Party committee called a meeting of cadres to look into and make self-criticism on this question. Not a few men admitted to having treated their wives brutally. And this was two years after the promulgation of the Law on Marriage and the Family.

As President Ho put it, "Building socialism requires socialist people." The fostering of new women

is an integral part of the cultural and ideological revolution aimed at a radical transformation of man, and his continuous betterment. The mass organizations of the Party and the Women's Union are training centres. The Women's Union cadres, vanguard fighters of the movement, got to know each village and each town quarter thoroughly when making contact with the women's movement in the region. They rally women, mobilize them for productive work, in the creation of the new family, and to improve their political, cultural and professional standards. They are close and reliable advisers to wives who find themselves in difficulty, and they defend the victims of ill-treatment. It is their responsibility to reveal cases of violation of women's and children's rights to the authorities and to public opinion. The weekly review "Women of Viet Nam" is a rostrum from which to deal with the women's question, a means for spreading and explaining Party and Government policies on women, providing material for theoretical studies and for an exchange of views concerning the women's movement and the fostering of new women.

The Viet Nam Women's Union plays an important role when affairs touching women's rights are brought up before people's courts.

The work undertaken under the first five-year plan aimed at fostering new women, and the efforts of women themselves to rise to the times were typical features of the new society under construction. The Vietnamese people greeted the first five-year plan enthusiastically as laying the foundations of

a socialist society of which they had dreamt during the dark years of colonialism. They also warmly welcomed the changes in Vietnamese women during this construction. They were engaged in the most varied activities but all followed the same course and had a single goal; whether they were peasants, city dwellers, or members of minority nationalities, women everywhere became mistresses of the community, competent, cultured, politically mature, and always the sweet valiant companions of their husbands, fully conscious of what their new life meant, and always ready to defend it.

B — FACE TO FACE WITH AMERICAN ESCALATION (1965-1973)

It was on August 5, 1964, that the first American pilot, Everett Alvares Jr., was captured (during the first US air strike on North Viet Nam). Hardly had he landed and freed himself from the straps of his parachute when he saw rifles being pointed at him by young women peasants of the region.

Vietnamese women were already prepared to face American aggression.

1. Facing American Aggression

The first systematic raids on the North began toward the end of 1964. US aircraft bombed cities, villages, bridges, roads, dikes, factories and ricefields, sparing neither schools nor hospitals. The rhythm of the new laborious and creative life, which

had been developed during the eleven years of restored peace, was upset. Work was now often interrupted by air-raid alarms. It was necessary to evacuate schools and colleges to areas less exposed to air raids. The factories once again took the road to the forests. Countless families were split up. The father and mother each followed his or her office which were often evacuated to areas far apart; town children were evacuated to the countryside and were lodged with peasants families or in houses rapidly built for them.

Peaceful construction had to give way overnight to the general mobilization for national defence. Demobilized members of the anti-French resistance rejoined the army, and young people enlisted. At the factories and research institutes, technicians and specialists were mobilized for tasks connected with national defence. Wives and mothers took out from the bottoms of their cupboards the knapsacks of the resistance years which had been kept as family souvenirs, and put into them the khaki or dark green uniforms of those leaving for the front. They did this so naturally that one would think they had constantly been preparing for departures of their husbands and their sons. In the big yards of the cooperatives, at the administrative offices in the town wards, in the yards in front of apartment blocks, the people gathered to fete the departure of the conscripts. Mothers, wives and flancées sat on the benches of honour. Following a custom dating from the first war of resistance (against French

colonialism), one of these women took the floor to speak on behalf of the families of the new recruits. They might be women peasants or workers, teachers or laboratory researchers, young mothers who were called upon to take over the work of husbands who had left for the front, or fiancées who as they stood on the rostrum dared not look at the benches where the young men were sitting for fear of being put off by teasing grins. What they all said was inspired by the same idea, the same will: "National salvation above all else. Go with peace of mind, win victory after victory, for the glory of our village, our factory, our ward.... for the honour of our family. We will summon all our strength, we will take over, and we will stand at the posts that were yours."

Of course, each of these wives and mothers felt quite understandable anguish at seeing their dear ones go to war. But President Ho Chi Minh's teaching that "Nothing is more precious than independence and freedom" struck a particularly deep chord in them. Hence the atmosphere of optimism and intimacy at these popular meetings which turned into so many "send-off parties". The more so as people here all knew one another. They lived in the same hamlet, the same ward, or the same apartment block. Present on these occasions were old acquaintances, class-mates who had studied together for a dozen years at the same schools. Those who went to fight the enemy would retain from these meetings the unforgettable and comforting memory of their families, of their smiling relatives and friends. It was a reassurance. A mother who sent her only son off to the front was not alone. The cooperative, the women's committee, the local trade union saw to it that she did not suffer from her solitude. A wife who had little experience in the new task which she assumed in place of her husband would receive help from the village women's union, or from the trade union of her factory or her office.

Combatants' children would receive scholarships from the State. The faithfulness of the young wives and fiancées, their patient wait, and their courage in the trials made them still more beautiful in the minds of those who were fighting at the front. And what greater comfort for them than to know that the great rear area — North Viet Nam — was building socialism at an accelerated tempo in response to President Ho's call: "Let each of us work for two!"

To carry abreast the two tasks of anti-imperialist struggle and production was a directive of the Party in the new situation. A soldier could leave with an easy mind: his wife would replace him in the fields or at the factory. He could also be confident that she was not left alone: a united and strong collective would support her when necessary. Five years of socialist construction had provided the new society in the North with solid economic and ideological bases. Each of its members, old men and schoolboys alike, thanks to their education by the Party, knew perfectly well what his task was in the patriotic struggle of the entire people.

For the new generation of Vietnamese women. their conscious mastery of society prevailed over personal considerations and preoccupations. Stronger and more pressing than the sorrow of separation was hatred for the enemy who was savagely destroying the fruits of eleven years' labour; and the pain of seeing children maimed and crippled by bombs cried for vengeance. To the men who had gone, women promised as their contribution to replace them and to work much harder in the rear. One must see here a concrete, revolutionary manifestation of their love. In the new people, feelings expressed themselves through actions: to put an end to the mourning and destruction sown by the enemy on their native land, to reunite separated couples and dispersed families, so that the people could live in lasting peace from North to South, there was no other way than to fight and defeat the enemy.

As far back as 1960 when the Third Congress of the Viet Nam Workers' Party analysed the national and international situation, it warned the people against the aggressive design of US imperialism. The thought of the South still under the heel of the Yankees spurred every Vietnamese to contribute to the urgent task of liberating it. In each cooperative, self-defence or people's militia units continued to train. Young workers and peasants who replaced their elders in these units, now had the cultural level necessary to learn how to handle modern weapons. The Party's line was to arm the entire people. Each cooperative, each enterprise,

and each factory became a fighting unit ready to face the enemy. The presence of young women in these units, from the start of the first five-year plan, was only a continuation of the tradition of women's participation in armed struggle, which dates back to the war of resistance against French imperialism. A new sight for the urban population, however, was that of tiny young city women, workers, students, and office employees, who gave up nothing of their smartness, even when they rode their bicycles, dressed in coarse fabrics, guns across their shoulders, toward the training grounds where they learned the rudiments of guerrilla warfare and how to command a defence post. The US war of escalation came at a time when these para-military organizations were already functioning regularly, their activities already integrated in the daily life of each community.

Five years had gone by since. In the intensive socialist construction carried out by the people in the North, the country life, and people themselves had changed. US imperialism was blind, saw nothing of this prodigious change which had consolidated and strengthened the North, rejuvenated and enriched the life of her population, making each inhabitant a competent citizen while all were conscious of being masters of their own destiny and that of their country. Vietnamese women too experienced this wonderful change. How could they fail to link the aim of their lives to the future of their country? Whether she was a worker, a peasant, or an intellectual, each of them understood at

once and assumed the responsibilities which were to fall on women is this great trial of the Motherland.

2. The "Three Responsibilities" Movement

On March 19, 1965, the Viet Nam Women's Union launched the "Three Responsibilities" movement aimed at mobilizing women to assume responsibility for:

- 1. Production and other activities in place of the men who had gone to the front;
- 2. The running of family affairs as encouragement to men to join the army;
 - 3. Support to the front and the fighting.

US imperialism was the last aggressor to be fought. This was a unique opportunity to achieve the total liberation of the Fatherland and the reunification of the country, and to finally restore peace after a century of struggle and sacrifice. Vietnamese women, who all through the resistance had shown themselves worthy of the traditions of their people. would finally be able to build a happy life in full security, take responsibility in peace for the affairs of their communities as well as of their families. The "Three Responsibilities" movement thus respended to the aspirations of Vietnamese women and their resolve to take an active part in the common struggle. It was a vivid illustration of the communion between the will of the Government and the Party and the wishes of the people, of their determination to fight.

The war required a better deployment of the productive and the fighting forces so as to fulfil

the two tasks of building and consolidating the rear area simultaneously. In spite of the upheavals in daily life caused by the war, in spite of the senseless destruction sown by the enemy on their native soil, workers in all branches had to increase production and ensure the functioning of the various services to meet the needs of production as well as the multiple requirements of the front. It was only then that the rear area could be consolidated, the people's daily lives stabilized — an inspiration to the fighters. The accelerated development of the people's armed forces and the urgent training of the "Young Volunteers' Brigades" (for transport of supplies to the front, repairing roads destroyed by bombs, and so on), mobilized most of the young men, leaving vacant places in all sectors of economic and administrative activity. The "Three Responsibilities" movement helped the State to stabilize the productive and administrative apparatus and to strengthen them with new forces.

The US war of destruction had neither definite rear nor front line. The important economic centres and the strategic areas all became so many fighting points where our armed forces had to concentrate on defence against air or naval attacks. No aspect of life, not even the most peaceful or the most innocent, was spared by enemy shells, rockets and bombs.

Women replaced the men in all sectors of production, making up for the shortage of manpower; they were thus exposed to the worst dangers. At the call of the VNWU, five million of them took

on productive work, in the fields and collective farms as well as in the factories and State enterprises. In most cases, they replaced their own husbands. who had been called to the front, and they turned their love into ardour in the accomplishment of their new tasks. Take Nguyen Thi Giuong for example. She was just an ordinary member of the Xuan Thuy cooperative (Quang Binh province), when her husband, deputy leader of a production brigade, was called to arms. She went to the managing committee and offered to replace him. Before long her qualities and her ability were recognised by the population. The esteem and trust of her brigade earned her rapid promotion to brigade leader, then to deputy chairwoman of the cooperative. Shortly afterward, at a plenary meeting of women members of the Xuan Thuy cooperative, she was elected chairwoman of the cooperative. She took on the management of a cooperative with 400 households and fulfilled her duty with remarkable dedication and competence.

The courage and dedication of Vietnamese wives during war time soon became the theme of many popular songs. Wall posters in the countryside as well as newspapers reprinted the couplets most keenly appreciated by the people:

Darling, we are still near each other

Though separated by a hundred mountains and a thousand rivers.

Our family affairs, as well as those of our village.

Whatever they may be, I will attend to them in your place.

It was in this spirit that women peasants, 60 to 80 per cent of the labour force, tackled agricultural production. Theirs was a fierce battle against both enemy destruction and natural calamities to maintain and develop production, protect the crops, and ensure food supplies to the population and to the front. Each grain of rice sent to our fighters at the front was thus a symbol of their love and their sacrifices.

One new phenomenon must be mentioned: in replacing the men, women peasants had to train themselves to do work which had traditionally been men's work. In Tan Thuat commune, in Thai Binh province, 70 young women learned how to handle a plough. Their first furrows were not quite straight; and the buffaloes would not obey them at first. Seasoned farm hands sat on the edge of the ricefields and watched for every awkward move. But that did not stop them.

These young guerrilla women carried guns and defended their village and were not to be discouraged by such trifles. They started a real emulation campaign among women of Thai Binh to learn to plough. Women harrowing, raising dykes, doing masonry and joinery, repairing farm implements and other jobs were soon common sights in the countryside in the North. There was no doubt that this image of "Women handling ploughs" went quite counter to custom and habit and at first aroused disapproval, especially among the ethnic minorities whose women were not in the habit of taking part in field work at all. Some fathers even threatened to

turn their daughters out of the house if they learned to plough. But women continued to do this hard work; after all, who else could do it? Almost all the able-bodied men had gone. The elderly and invalids were assigned other tasks better suited to their age or physical conditions, such as tending the nurseries, teaching complementary education classes, etc. The force of events, coupled with a current of social opinion favourable to innovations of the young, finally brought acceptance.

Women workers were busy mastering their trades and learning other jobs. They were separated from their children who were evacuated far away, and they bravely stuck to their factories, in spite of the bombings. Cu Thi Hau, weaver at the March 8 Textile Mill in Hanoi, had to bring up her two little children as her husband was at the front. For eight years, she held the factory record in the number of days worked and surpassed the norm of 80,000 metres of fabric per year. For these achievements she was awarded the title "Labour Heroine".

It was not unusual for units mostly composed of women to achieve their production norms for many years running in spite of enemy bombings, evacuation conditions and consequent shortage of essential materials and technical facilities. The Nam Dinh Textile Mill was bombed several times, but the weavers of Team A in Shop I braved many dangers and difficulties to contribute a large number of work-days and to surpass their production norm of 122 tons of yarn per year. For this, the Government conferred the title of "Hero Unit" on them. Women

workers in other industrial sectors — building, mining, electric power — which were all targets of enemy bombings, showed the same courage and ardour in following the "Three Responsibilities" movement and pushing ahead socialist industrialization of the North in spite of the war.

The enemy savagely destroyed hospitals, schools and other public utilities. Most men physicians and teachers had been mobilized, but their women colleagues, 60 per cent of the public health personnel and 52 per cent of the teaching personnel 1 none-theless maintained the regular functioning of their services, even when evacuated far from their normal places. Sometimes operating rooms and creches were situated in underground shelters, as in Quang Binh province. Study centres and universities were installed in the forests. These women worked with a limited staff and with equipment which was reduced to a minimum.

Nevertheless the health service expanded, and the educational service at all levels continued to develop to meet the needs of production. Moreover, an evacuated school or clinic constituted a nucleus of cultural or health activity in the area. Besides treating evacuated patients, physicians took time to care for local inhabitants.

The personnel of evacuated schools reinforced the local educational service. They helped the authorities to organize complementary classes for

^{1.} Figures for 1968, when the US war of destruction reached its height.

adults and to educate the children. Thus the tasks of physicians and teachers doubled while their numbers had been reduced. This deployment of services necessitated by the war made no small contribution to the improvement of the general cultural level and of people's health — an important task in a protracted war of resistance. It enabled the mountain regions to make headway towards catching up with the plains in these domains.

The "Three Responsibilities" generation of women already had the necessary level of education not only to tackle modern science and technology, but also to apply them to their work. This helped increase output and labour productivity and this was particularly evident in agricultural production where women made up the bulk of the work force and where young women peasants who had finished their second or even third-level (junior middle school and senior middle school) general education took on almost all technical work, such as sowing and transplanting rice, cultivating azolla (a kind of green fertilizer), preparing manure, etc. A report by the Ministry of Agriculture underscored this change in the Vietnamese countryside as follows: "...In the intensive cultivation of rice, technical renovation has spread rapidly, contributing to increased output and to making Vietnamese ricefields more beautiful. This is due to the new method of transplanting, this work being done entirely by women", 1

The number of women workers soared from 170,000 in 1965 to 500,000 in 1969. They made visible progress in their trades and could operate even the more sophisticated machines. Women accounted for 33 per cent of the army of skilled workers and scientific cadres. This new and important development of the women's movement was accelerated by the mobilization of women through the "Three Responsibilities" campaign. No profession — worker, teacher, engineer or physician — was closed to them now. This cultural and professional advance was particularly noticeable among women of the ethnic minorities.

The primary tasks of the rear, production and keeping the various services functioning, were now assumed mainly by millions of women. On their initiative broad emulation movements for production were launched, and this was how, during the war years, the North managed to produce five tons of paddy per hectare per year, and surpassed other production norms set under such slogans as "Ten Million Metres of Cloth for the South", "A Hundred Tons of Medicines for the South", and so on.

These millions of women were also wives and mothers. In the absence of their husbands and their children, they had to assume other family work, for example, replacing their fighting husbands in looking after their parents-in-law. During the war, on the occasion of International Women's Day, March 8, awards were made to women who had fulfilled their family duties best. Many of them received these awards for fulfilling their duties

^{1.} Year-end report of 1968.

toward their parents-in-law well. Bad relations between "mothers and daughters-in-law" were a foregone conclusion in the old society. Today this situation has considerably improved, the perpetual conflicts giving way to real affection and mutual understanding founded on the basis of the new relationship between them. In spite of their advanced age, combatants' mothers helped their daughters-in-law with their housework and with looking after the children, freeing them for the affairs of the community.

Though deeply concerned with family happiness, and loving their husbands and their children more than they loved themselves, the women did not hesitate to encourage their husbands and sons to go and fight when the Fatherland was threatened by foreign aggression. Mothers with enlisted sons agreed to let their grand-sons too join the armed forces when they came of age. Combatants' wives agreed to the enlistment of their sons, who thus went to relieve their fathers in the long patriotic struggle. Is there any more eloquent manifestation of this determination of an entire people than these words by President Ho Chi Minh: "If our present generation does not succeed in driving out the enemy, our children, and our grand-children will continue our struggle."?

We reprint here a letter from Tran Thi Tinh, a woman peasant in Dai Tap village in Hai Hung province, mother of six and leader of a people's militia platoon. She wrote to her husband who was fighting at the front:

"...If we have to fight the Yankees one more year, our eldest child Tien Duc will reach service age. Our family will then have two men in the armed forces. As for me, I also take part in the struggle in our village militia. If we have to fight six more years, then our daughter Thu Ninh's turn will come. In nine years, it will be our second son Hai Quan's turn. In fifteen years, eight members of our family will be fighting the Yankees."

As the North fought on against US aggression, there were many examples of mothers whose sons had gone to the front and who tried to be useful in their villages and towns by joining the supply unit or by helping the artillery units build their gunsites. The Vietnamese army was able to be fully mobile and face the enemy in all circumstances. Wherever it went, it enjoyed the help of the local population, and especially soldiers' mothers, who helped with its installations, and provided its food supplies, first aid to the wounded, and so on. A very popular song in Quang Binh dating back to that time goes:

Does it matter if our home is destroyed? Let us fight the Yankees! Unhappy today, We'll be happy tomorrow.

This song was inspired by a true story. Late one night, the people in a hamlet of Vinh Linh area (south of Quang Binh) were called on to help an artillery unit cross the beach; there was a danger that the heavy pieces would sink into the sand.

Neither the bamboo poles nor the wooden beds offered by the population proved sufficient to stabilize the ground under the armoured vehicles and the batteries. One soldier's mother removed the doors of her house that were made of solid ironwood planks, and offered them to the artillerymen. Many others hastened to do the same, and the unit was able to cross the beach over the timber offered. The song was composed on the spot by the militia women and combatants' mothers whose help had proved so precious. They sang this joyful refrain all that night while pushing the heavy guns, and it later became a ho 1. Combatants' mothers often patched artillerymen's uniforms. They also made plaited straw hats and jackets for them, which were effective protection against steel-pellet bombs. An artillery unit in Ha Bac (north of Hanoi) had a tough fight against US war planes, and afterwards an artilleryman discovered that some pellets had deeply penetrated his plaited straw jacket, without which he would have been seriously wounded. Quite a few artillerymen owe their lives to these straw iackets.

Foster Mother's Associations were a tradition handed down from the anti-French war of resistance. They were set up in all provinces and cities of North Viet Nam, and were joined by 500,000 combatants' mothers. Their tasks included seeing to the education of the soldiers' children, instilling into

them love for the country and dauntless courage in the face of trials and perpetuating in them the traditions of patriotism and heroism of their elders. These Foster-mothers' Associations contributed much to the consolidation of the rear by their help, support and affection for the families and wives of combatants. They made a special point of going to comfort and help the families of the soldiers who fell for the Fatherland. It is no exaggeration to say that this encouragement to their families made the weapons in the hands of our combatants ten times more efficacious. President Ho Chi Minh praised the combatants' mothers in these terms: "Many mothers not only encourage their sons and grandsons to fight the enemy and save the Fatherland, but also take care of cadres and soldiers with the same devotion as they do their own children. Our Fatherland is proud to have thousands, tens of thousands of such admirable mothers."

Women also played a very important role serving the front. The strength of the people's war was increased a hundredfold by the imaginative and diversified support activities of the people. Women devoted all their stamina and ability to the organization of civil defence, security of the rear, transport of the wounded, capture of spies and downed US pilots and to making good the damage caused by the bombings. Young women peasants, workers, students, or office employees showed an astonishing capacity for assimilation of military science and techniques. All-women units in Thanh Hoa and Ha Tinh provinces cooperating with the regular army helped

^{1.} Popular air whose rhythm accords with the movements done in some manual work.

it shoot down many US planes and capture their pilots.

Never before in national history have so many heroines been born as in this generation. Heroism became commonplace in this ruthless fight against a ferocious enemy many times stronger than our people. Nguyen Thi Suot, a 60-year-old woman, ferried troops across the Nhat Le river in Quang Binh province even during enemy air raids. Tran Thi Ly, a young militia woman of Quang Binh, ensured liaison between various combat units during fierce battles and on many occasions participated in the fighting while on a mission. The all-women artillery unit of Ngu Thuy district inflicted heavy losses on five occasions on US warships that dared venture into the territorial waters of Viet Nam.

Day and night, without respite, the enemy bombed our communication lines in the hope of stopping supplies to the front. But units of young volunteers, mostly composed of young women, stuck to this battlefront, heroically defending the highways and untiringly repairing them immediately after each bombing raid. In spite of all dangers and difficulties, rice and ammunition continued to flow to the front. The ten young women of a volunteer squad in Dong Loc stuck to their post at this key road junction, the target of savage enemy bombings, for 200 days running before heroically laying down their lives. They were posthumously awarded the title of "Hero Unit".

Addressing the Conference on Political Education Work among Women, in February 1971, Le Duan, First Secretary of the Viet Nam Workers' Party, said "Vietnamese women not only take charge of their family affairs but also take part in the struggle for national salvation... In Viet Nam, men are not alone in defending the fatherland; women also take part in this struggle. Thus, to say that Vietnamese women are pillars of the nation is only to confirm an appraisal which finds justification throughout our history."

3. Revolutionary Importance

That this mobilization of women under the "Three Responsibilities" slogan was a mass movement of great revolutionary importance was proved time and again in the ideological, political, economic, cultural and social domains. It speeded up the implementation of the task of political education of women set by the first five-year plan. The urgency of the struggle against US aggression and the building of socialism which had to continue even in war time, brought to the fore problems concerning Party policy toward women that had been neglected until then, and exposed certain weaknesses or shortcomings which required prompt dealing with.

More rational mobilization of the revolutionary potential of Vietnamese women still ran up against narrow-mindedness and prejudice. While women found themselves called upon to assume tasks formerly assigned to men, particularly in the sphere of economic management of the State, there were some people who still doubted their management ability and scientific and technological aptitude. Others held that it was in the order of things that

women naturally do less productive labour than men. They regarded the "Three Responsibilities" movement as a stopgap measure to cope with manpower shortage. As a result of their lack of confidence in women, men held a plurality of jobs that ought to have been assigned it part to them. A directive of the Party Central Committee reminded Party cadres and members to "overcome the vestiges of feudal ideology and contempt for women which still linger in their minds and their behaviour." As for women, they had first of all to overcome their lack of self-confidence, which could paralyze their first steps.

The U.S. war of destruction gradually spread to the whole of the North and everyone became involved in the resistance to US aggression. The "Three Responsibilities" movement became an immediate necessity in its sweeping away of all reticence. Perseverance as well as physical strength and courage were required in agricultural production, capital construction and the repair of communication lines. But the majority of the workers were nevertheless women, and nobody any longer thought of discussing their presence or their aptitude for the jobs. Moreover, the results of women's work in these different domains were so satisfactory as to give the lie to preconceived ideas to the contrary.

The "Three Responsibilities" movement brought with it new measures aimed at creating more favourable working conditions for women. In

agriculture for example, women peasants now took on ploughing, harrowing, and transport jobs, all of them hard work formerly done only by men. The implements they used were old, heavy and cumbersome. It was necessary to adapt the ploughs, harrows carts and other means of production to suit the women better physically. Necessity inspired initiative, and innovations "blossomed like flowers". Improved farm machinery appeared on the ricefields, which were reshaped and accommodated to their use. Mechanization advanced further, sparing women the heaviest work and increasing agricultural output.

The replacement of men by women in all fields—agricultural, industrial, scientific, technical and managerial—was not done mechanically. Women had to make an intense effort to reach the necessary professional and cultural standards rapidly.

It was the Party organization and the Women's Union of Kim Dinh district (Hai Duong province) who received the credit for initiating a new formula of professional training, at the "Three Responsibilities" schools and classes they set up. These complementary classes of an entirely new kind were adapted to the new circumstances. Women were called upon in large numbers to attend short courses which prepared them for tasks with which they were unfamiliar. Those who had not done so could also finish their general education there.

The organization of these part-time studies enabled women to carry on working and apply immediately what they learnt. Thus at the end of such courses, it was not rare that women of Kim

^{1.} Directive No. 99 — June 9, 1965.

Dinh were promoted heads or deputy heads of production brigades, or members of the managing committees of cooperative farms.

Many of them were soon able to take on work that involved some knowledge of science and technique, like sowing rice, growing azolla, or operating farm machinery. Kim Dinh's success was rapidly imitated by other provinces. In 1967, 25 towns and provinces of North Viet Nam opened 4,662 "Three Responsibilities" classes attended by 97,500 women. The training of women cadres according to this formula improved, and in only two years Hong Thai commune of Thai Binh province, for example, organized four "Three Responsibilities" classes enrolling women chosen on merit to be trained for leading and managerial functions.

In industry, the "Three Responsibilities" campaign led to the same problem: training women. Before 1965, 80 per cent of the women workers and employees at the Thang Long cigarette factory in Hanoi did work which required no professional qualifications. The factory leadership had to open crash training courses: two grade-2 women apprentices were under the charge of a worker and taught to handle more sophisticated machines. This enabled grade-2 workers to replace most of the grade-3 male workers who had been mobilized. Numerous women workers were promoted heads of production groups or teams.

In peacetime, these practical, economical and rewarding measures might have been applied or not, according to the whims of the responsible cadres.

But thanks to the "Three Responsibilities" movement, they were soon applied by the various authorities and enjoyed close cooperation with the regional education services. From the plains to the mountain areas, in agriculture and industry, as well as in the administrative offices, a whole army of women workers, formerly of only modest cultural level, unskilled and with only secondary functions, proved equal to their new tasks thanks to the "Three Responsibilities" complementary classes.

The US war of destruction caused women numerous difficulties. Deprived of their husbands' help, they had to deal single-handed with the numerous household chores in addition to caring for their children.

The socialization of these tasks was indispensable to freeing women for productive work, ensuring that women workers benefited from refresher training and improved their health. During the peace years, the creation of nurseries and crèches had run into many difficulties. Women themselves did not have a very clear idea of the necessity of these establishments; and for the responsible cadres of the cooperatives, of factories and State organs, these projects only figured as an appendage to their work plans most of the time. But now, in spite of the war escalation, the canteens, nurseries and crèches not only kept on functioning but also multiplied rapidly. For example, in Quang Binh, the province the most exposed to bombings, the number of nurseries and kindergartens increased a hundredfold. They were organized in the form of small groups in each village.

A creche attendant of Duc Bui in Ha Tinh, Nguyen Thi Thao, received the title of "Labour Heroine": she had overcome numerous difficulties caused by the war to continue holding her class and helped organize classes in several other communes. She did especially well educating children whose parents were absent, fulfilling admirably her double role of teacher and second mother.

The mobilization of women in the "Three Responsibilities" movement was also a way of protecting and improving their health. It facilitated the popularization of family planning among the masses. A network of health stations set up at commune and village levels gave women free medical examinations and basic treatment in case of illness. After an intensive training drive, almost 16,000 new midwives had been assigned to maternity homes by the end of 1966. Before the outbreak of the US war of destruction in 1965, women still thought that a large family was a criterion of happiness. "As God created the elephant, he also created grass to feed him", is an old Vietnamese saying. The popularization of family planning was started in 1963 and gained steadily more acceptance as the war went on The new responsibilities that fell on women made clear the importance of birth control, and how much their health depended on it. The very idea of family planning still aroused opposition from elderly people, and some husbands were against it. But the realities of the struggle and war-time production were winning arguments.

The mobilization of women in the "Three Responsibilities" movement has really triggered off a revolutionary process the extent of which is best expressed by Lenin's formula: "one year equals twenty". The wider and more rational use was made of women workers in place of the men mobilized to the front, the greater was their contribution, and the better their social position became. There were only five agricultural cooperative chairwomen in Hai Duong province before 1965. In 1966 there were 73. In Ha Tay province, 10,000 women cadres were promoted to new responsibilities in 1966. Thousands of women workers were assigned to various posts of group, shift, team and shop leaders. The Ministry of Light Industry, assisted by the Hanoi Labour Service, increased the proportion of women employed in this section to 70 per cent. The provincial committees of the Viet Nam Workers' Party in Ha Tay, Hung Yen and Thai Binh provinces set targets for the training of women cadres in 1966 and 1967: 10-20 per cent co-op chairwomen, and 30-40 per cent women production brigade leaders 1.

The number of women cadres increased considerably. Besides political cadres there were now tens of thousands of specialist women cadres in all domains, scientific, technical and cultural, as well as women leading or managing cadres. We should add

^{1.} Mrs. Nguyen Thi Thap, now Honorary President of the Viet Nam Women's Union: "To strengthen the Party's leadership in the 'Three Responsibilities' Movement" (Nhan Dan, Sept. 26, 1965).

the grassroots level cadres, at village, ward, and office level, who constituted an inexhaustible reserve.

The "Three Responsibilities" movement was a continuation in an accelerated and magnified form of the women's movement that had been progressing since 1930 under the leadership of the Viet Nam Workers' Party. It marked the maturation of Vietnamese women, who now displayed a heroism unprecedented in our national history. ¹

4. The Advancement and Emancipation of Women

The "Three Responsibilities" movement gave a strong impetus to the utilization of women in productive work and the advancement of women in various State sectors and branches. These two tasks were vital to the emancipation of women. However, in spite of the increasing participation of women in all domains of activity, — scientific, technical and cultural, — they were not yet really "mistresses of the country". In 1966, in the 7,000 communes of North Viet Nam there were only 119 chairwomen and 245 deputy chairwomen of administrative committees. Only one of the 25 provinces of North Viet Nam had a deputy chairwoman — Thai Binh. The percentage of women holding leading posts remained low:

Heads of commissions	1.6%
Deputy heads of commissions	2.2%

^{1.} Mrs. Nguyen Thi Thap's speech on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the founding of the Viet Nam Women's Union, October 20, 1971 (Nhan Dan, Oct. 20, 1971).

Heads of departments	2.3%
Heads and deputy heads of offices	1 %
Women peasants had little power over	the distri-
bution of crops. Witness these figures:	
Cooperative chairwomen	3.3%
Women members of managing	
committees	18.3%
Heads of work brigades	9.65%

Socialist industrialization drew numerous women workers into factories and enterprises. But the whole of the North had only five women factory directors.

In the cultural and social branches of activity, though regarded as particularly suited to women's aptitudes, the advancement of women was still limited, as these examples show:

In Education:

Women cadres promoted to leading posts	28% of the total
Women heads and deputy heads of education services	7 out of 30
In Hanoi:	
Women deputy directors of 1st-level (primary) schools	15%
Women deputy directors of 2nd-level (junior middle) schools	14%
Women deputy directors of 3rd level (senior middle) schools	8%
In the Health Service: Total number of women cadres	40%

Women promoted to leading posts 8% Women heads of health services 6%

Narrow-mindedness and contempt for women are usually the root cause of this lingering inequality. Of course, after two years of struggle against US aggression, opinions had changed. The reality of the work women had done could not be ignored, and people began to assess their capacity more accurately. But to progress from this to thinking that it was also fit for women to take part in the leadership and economic management of the State, and that women were capable of doing so, would still require a long process of ideological struggle. This reticence often manifested itself in very subtle forms. There were heated debates about women's real capabilities, of their leading and managing ability in particular.

To make a laughing-stock of this first batch of chairwomen and deputy chairwomen... born of the war, there were some who delighted in referring to them by the nickname of "slug commanders of snail soldiers", implying thereby that women are slow, weak and incapable. In discussions in grassroots Party cells or at the various echelons of the administration, there were cadres who showed some understanding of the directives of the Party and strongly attacked prejudices and conservative ideas; but when it came to actually appointing women to responsible positions in their offices, they often proved reticent, and failed to give clear reasons for such about-turns. They would try to justify their refusal by stressing the cultural limitations of women, and their inexperience in leadership.

"You have to be imaginative and resourceful to lead. That woman already has her hands full with her kids. Who would look after them?" or "When you're a president, you must know how to talk to others and give orders. That comrade is at ease only in field work."

When the "Three Responsibilities" movement was launched, the Central Committee of the Viet Nam Workers' Party sent a directive to the grassroots cells reminding responsible cadres of their two essential tasks toward the women's movement:

- To enlist a large number of women workers in all branches of social activity, notably in those best suited to women's aptitudes, and at the same time to ensure more advanced professional and technical refresher training for women cadres.
- To nominate a suitable proportion of women to leading posts in place of men.

The realization of these two tasks were to be hampered by two erroneous conceptions. Some rather too "mechanical" cadres took little account of the differences between the two sexes, and of the former obscurantism, from the deep consequences of which women still suffered. These cadres felt there was a fixed set of talents and virtues to be looked for in a leading cadre, independent of sex. Thus to show any flexibility towards women would in their eyes depreciate the criteria already fixed for leading cadres.

At the other end of the spectrum to this unjust intransigence were those who thought that the

^{1.} Directive No. 99, June 8, 1965.

"Three Responsibilities" movement was the begining of women in the saddle, and that you had to promote women to the leadership, whatever the task. So women were promoted willy-nilly "to attain the norms." The women promoted in this way to leading posts were neither helped nor supported by responsible cadres, and left to themselves to handle new tasks beyond their capacity, with neither training nor refresher training. Some of them had to resign. It was only by dint of very hard work that others were able to live up to their tasks.

It was not uncommon that the urgency of the struggle to maintain production and defend the people against enemy destruction led to a failure to take proper care of the health of women workers and to ensure the application of policies concerning their rights, both of which conditions were indispensable to the exercise of their new functions.

The problem of training women cadres and the promotion of women became more urgent than ever.

On January 10, 1967, the Party Central Committee published Resolution No.153 on this problem. The resolution once again stresses that "the emancipation of women is a question of strategic importance in the Party's political work, and a question of national importance, to which all sections of the Party must give particular attention." ¹ The resolution also analyzes the organic relationship between the training of women cadres and the emancipation of women, "the responsibility for which rests with the

Party, the State, and society. But it is up to women cadres, the shock force of the women's movement, to provide the impulse and lead it to success." ¹

Women cadres in all branches or sectors of the Party and the State were the best placed to improve their own political, cultural and professional standards. They understood better than their male colleagues the possibilities and limitations of women workers in their respective branches of activity and were more determined to struggle for their rights. They were prepared to entertain close relations with the women workers, to mobilize and organize them for revolutionary activities for their own emancipation. The fostering of a body of women cadres provided a driving force in the emancipation of women, who in turn were vital to the success of all our revolutionary endeavour.

The struggle against the US war of destruction in the North and for the liberation of the South highlighted the pressing nature of the task of building and consolidating the North as the rear.

The Party's policies concerning the training and promotion of women cadres were born of this necessity; they were in no way worked out to "bestow favours on women", as some people might think.

While outlining visible progress, the resolution did stress, however, that this work "has not yet met the requirements of the situation and matched the development of the 'Three Responsibilities' movement. Shortcomings still exist." ¹

^{1.} Resolution No. 153.

^{1:} Resolution No. 153.

The resolution analyzes the causes of these short-comings and stresses the responsibility of leading cadres, the necessity to fight feudal ideology and prejudices against women.

It advocated the following concrete directives and measures:

- Intensify the refresher training of women cadres to help their advancement; and carry out a bold policy of promotion parallel with their refresher training.
- Continue the refresher training of newly promoted women cadres. ¹

The same resolution made the promotion of women a task of prime importance; the underestimation of women's abilities had in fact hindered their development. Long-term plans were to be worked out for training women cadres and for the improvement of their professional and technical level. This was to be a permanent, crucial task. In the domain of education, medicine and commerce, the percentage of women cadres was to reach 70 per cent. In education, 80-90 per cent for heads of first-level (primary) schools, 60 per cent for heads of secondlevel (junior middle) schools, and 50 per cent for heads of the third-level (senior middle) schools. In the services that were staffed mostly by women, there were to be women cadres in the leadership. Outstanding young women scientific and technical cadres were to finish their studies and attend training courses to prepare them to become responsible and leading cadres.

It was also recognized that women cadres have their own characteristics and special difficulties. Resolution 153 made it the responsibility of State organs and the mass organizations of the Party, the VNWU and the Youth Union, to study and work out regulations affecting the life and work of women. The most important tasks in this respect concern protecting their health, and bringing up and educating children.

The publication of Resolution 153 was an important event in the history of the Vietnamese women's movement. It is a general record of the Party's policy on women, of the problem of fostering women cadres and of the general advancement of women. It was a positive contribution to the training and fostering of women revolutionary forces. It was warmly welcomed by the masses for this was the first time that the women's question had been studied so thoroughly and such far-reaching solutions proposed. It marked great progress toward the abolition of inequalities between the sexes and the complete emancipation of women.

On March 8, 1967, two months after its publication, the Government Council decreed the employment of more women in State organs and factories.

This decree included a concrete plan for the percentage of women workers and functionaries to reach 35 per cent between then and the end of 1968; in education, public health, and light industry the percentage aimed at was 50-70 per cent. Women

^{1.} Summary.

were to be given work better suited to their capacities and their physical conditions in other branches like heavy industry, communications, and national defence.

This decree, like Resolution 153, showed the determination of the Party and the Government to carry out their policy toward women. This administrative act was a stimulus to the women's movement, and its concrete application, with the thorough-going explanatory work involved and the careful study it required, proved crucial.

The development of the women's movement and of the contingent of women cadres required a more consistent organization and more advanced ideological education, especially for the numerous new, inexperienced, cadres. A third resolution, Resolution 152 of the Party Central Committee, delineated concrete tasks in this work: the Women's Union was to initiate close collaboration with the women's commissions of the Party, the trade unions and the Working Youth Union with a view to improving the ideological education of the masses of women, ensuring more effective participation from them in production and in serving the army and the population. These organizations were to help the State work out regulations and codes for women workers, and help them to overcome difficulties in their daily life.

The most important thing was to train women according to the ideal of the working class, to make their patriotism and heroism—traditional virtues of Vietnamese women—blossom.

The publication of the above three resolutions helped the women's movement make great progress. From 1967 until North Viet Nam's victory over the US war of destruction in 1972, the number of women cadres increased constantly. Tens of thousands of young, capable, and cultured women, schooled through production and struggle, acceded to all branches of social activity and all administrative echelons. They formed a body of cadres with a bright future, and they promised a fruitful contribution to both scientific and technical work and economic management. Moreover they brought about an important qualitative change among the cadres of the Party and the State. Forty-five thousand women now had secondary and higher education, and nearly 70,000 had completed junior secondary (7-year) education. Thousands of them were now lecturing at higher-education establishments, or teaching at secondary schools. When compared to the 90-percent illiteracy rate among women left by the former regime, these figures pay eloquent tribute to the efforts of the new generation of women in this glorious epoch of our national history in which they "fought the enemy and built up the rear area while caring for their families".1

In 1965, as US aircraft began to intensify their bombing of cities and provinces in the North, cadres of the women's movement held their national congress. Prime Minister Pham Van Dong said to the delegates "War is a severe trial for any social system.

^{1.} Le Duan: speech at the Conference on Political Work among Women, 1971.

In this trial our people, especially our women, will defeat American imperialism and at the same time will make unusually rapid progress."

After eight years of struggle against US aggression (1965-1972), Vietnamese women had travelled a very long road with the "Three Responsibilities" movement. Great and rapid progress had been made in all domains, political, cultural and social.¹

The Spring 1975 General Offensive crowned their long efforts, their countless sacrifices, and the heroism and courage they had displayed over months and years. The brilliant victory of our people over the US imperialists, driven right out of the southern part of our fatherland, the reunification of the country—the dream nurtured by our people throughout a whole century of struggle—was a new encouragement for them, a new source of pride. This was also a victory of 30 years of struggle for their own emancipation which was inseparable from the struggle for national liberation and social equality.

For women in the North, the return of peace marked a new stage in national reconstruction and the building of socialism. Their work and their creative spirit have a wide field of action open to them The prospects have never been so rosy.

For women in the South, national reunification often brings a confrontation of values. This is a particularly sensitive question for the city-dwellers, whose life-style has been Americanized to different degrees, and this has affected fashions in clothes,

their way of speaking and even their way of thinking. They have rejoined the national community, and the paths they have taken are many and varied.

For women fighters of the South, liberation and contacts with the North give concrete expression to their aspirations for emancipation. For them socialism is the natural result of their struggle.

Women workers in southern cities have long been cut off from the national traditions. They have experienced exploitation and oppression. The liberation of the South and the advance to socialism have opened a longed-for new era. Their awakening is perhaps slower, but will prove not very difficult.

Before liberation, most middle-class women city-dwellers, women employees, functionaries, and housewives lived on American salaries and American aid, which kept them in a numbing atmosphere of false prosperity. They will undoubtedly have much difficulty getting used to the new regime following the withdrawal of American aid.

However, even more than the men, they suffered in their dignity from the American occupation and from the persistence of feudal customs and habits. Liberation and contacts with women in the North have opened new horizons for them.

The emancipation of women in the South, like that of their northern sisters, and the realization of their legitimate rights, are linked to socialism, which abolishes all social inequalities and brings real happiness to each of them. The reunification of the country and the steady and rapid advance to socialism are the best guarantee for the realization of these legitimate aspirations.

^{1.} See statistics, page 291.

TWELVE YEARS OF THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT IN THE NORTH: SOME STATISTICAL FIGURES

- I. WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN THE WAR OF RESISTANCE AGAINST US AGGRESSION
- 1. Women's militia and self-defence: 41 per cent of the total forces;
- 2. Women's militia units credited with shooting down US war planes: 20 units; (28 aircraft).
- One women's militia unit hit and damaged US warships on five occasions.
- II. WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN THE MANAGEMENT OF THE STATE AND THE ECONOMY

1. National Assembly	2nd	4th
	legislature	legislature
	1961	1972
— Deputies	53	125-129
	(11,6%)	(7%)
- Members of the Stand-		
ing Committee	0	1
- Vice-presidents	. 0	1

2. Leading cadres	1965	1972
— Vice - ministers and		
equivalent functions	5	12
— Heads of department,		
directors and deputy		
directors of institutes	21	65
— Heads and deputy		
heads of department		
(at central level)	115	1,837
 Factory directors and 		
deputy directors	58	130
 Directors and deputy 		
directors of enterprises	32	90
— Directors and deputy		
directors of public of-		
fices and provincial		
commissions	135	221
3. Participation in organs		
of local power Legislature	1961	1972
— Members of people's		*
councils at different		
levels		
province	22.8%	34.7%
district	20.76	40%
commune	16.5	40.87%
— Members of administra-		
tive committees at dif-		
ferent levels		
province:		
— vi c e-presidents	2	10
— members	36	42

The American Co.		
district:	0	15
— presidents	9	186
— vice-presidents	308	533
— members	300	000
commune:	0.0	C 977
— presidents	20	637
vice-presidents	61	2,652
— members	3,820	10,330
III. STATE CADRES	AND EMPLO	YEES
	1961	1972
Women work force		
(State sector)	20%	42.2%
Agriculture :		
— State farms	24.7%	54%
— Collective sector	57%	61%
-Light industry	43%	65.7%
— Textile industry		80%
— Ready-made clothing		83%
- Transport and commu-		
nications	13%	31.7%
— Building	-	34%
— Food industry		60%
— Trade	24.6%	58%
- Post and telecommuni-		
cations	10.3%	38.4%
— Handicrafts	35%	52.4%

— Culture		36.32%
— Public health	41%	58.2%
— Education	12%	
Scientific and technical		
cadres:		
— Post - graduate - level		
cadres	5	97
— University-level cadres	2,117	16,941
— Middle-level cadres	11,530	76,982
— Skilled workers	24.7%	31.44%
Achievements to the		
benefit of and for the		
emancipation of women:		
1. Infirmaries, commune		
maternity homes	3,298	5,977
— Percentage of com-		
munes with infirmaries		98.61%
— Number of country		
midwives		10,180
2. Child-care groups		•
Rural sector: number		
of children	87,052	320,114
~	(4.5%)	(16.4%)
- State sector: number	00.000	
of children	36,000	101,667
		(36.6%)
3. Kindergartens	95,946	266,810
4. Pre-school	809,900	940,557

5. Pupils and students

a) General education Total number of pupils at the three levels (from primary to secondary		
school) b) Higher and vocational	751,200	2,325,991
education in Higher education (number of	1961 and	1972
pupils)	2,059	17,221
F,	(10.1%)	(43.54%)
Vocational	2,634 (15%)	25,645 (50%)



LEGEND OF THE MOUNTAIN GENIE AND THE WATER GENIE

Princess Ngoc Hoa (Jade Flower) was the youngest and prettiest daughter of the 18th king of the Hung dynasty. Her father decided to find a son-in-law worthy of her beauty. The Genie of Mountains and the Genie of Waters both came to ask for the princess' hand. King Hung was embarrassed, and promised to give his daughter to whichever of them proved to be the more talented. The Genie of Waters immediately conjured up rains and winds, the skies darkened, and the water fell in torrents. Thunder clapped. The wind howled, shaking the trees violently. From all sides, the waters flowed tumultuously. Men and beasts hurriedly ran for shelter.

The Genie of Mountains raised his magic wand. The thunder became silent, the rain stopped, the skies became clear again, birds sang in the green trees, and flowers blossomed. And it was spring, cool and gay.

King Hung was perplexed and decided that he would give his daughter to whoever was first to bring all the wedding gifts required the next day. The two rivals withdrew and went in search of the required gifts: nine-tusked elephants, nine-spurred cocks, nine-hoofed horses, and so on.

The Genie of Mountains opened his "Wishing Book" and immediately sea fruits and precious timber, elephants, cocks and horses appeared. He brought his gifts to King Hung before cockcrow and the king allowed him to take the princess away. The nuptial procession ran into the Genie of Waters with his suite and his wedding gifts in Treo village 1. The latter was furious and shouted to his men to attack the procession and snatch the princess away. The skies darkened, and lightning streaked the dark night. The soldiers of the Genie of Waters threw themselves upon their adversaries with deafening shouts. Lost in this dark chaos, Ngoc Hoa called to her husband in anguish. The Genie of Mountains found his princess again and took her to the top of Mount Tan. The Genie of Waters made the waters rise from the rivers and pursue them. Plains and forests were submerged, and the waters shook the mountains. But as the waters rose. Mount Tan also rose under the strokes of the magic wand of the Genie of Mountains. The people threw up embankments against the rising waters: blocks of stone and lumps of earth were piled up as dikes. The Genie of Waters had to withdraw. But he would never forget his defeat: every year he raises the waters from the rivers to take revenge on his enemy.

This was believed to be the origin of the yearly floods in the country of the Southern Viets (Viet Nam).

THE WEDDING OF PRINCESS NGOC HOA

When the Mountain Genie — the people also called him the Genie of Mount Tan — had defeated the Genie of Waters, he took Princess Ngoc Hoa up Mount Tan where the young bride stayed for a while before returning to her parents at Phong Chau. Three times the carambola trees blossomed and the apricot groves adorned themselves with white flowers. But Ngoc Hoa did not want to go back to her husband. The Genie of Mount Tan had to go to Phong Chau once again to ask King Hung for the return of the princess.

Ngoc Hoa left her father's palace and followed her husband up to Treo village where she sat on a rock and wept. The Genie of Mount Tan tried to console her but in vain. He had to go and ask for the help of the people in the nearest hamlet. They came and sang and danced for her to cheer her up. The princess forgot her sorrow and enjoyed herself, singing with the young people. A gay parade was formed up, led by people carrying sheaves of rice and worn-out farming implements which they showed to the princess to amuse her. The Genie of Mount Tan and the princess sat in a palanquin and young people followed them dancing and singing.

^{1.} Now Trieu Phu (Rich) village in Hy Cuong commune, Lam Thao district, Vinh Phu province, near the Temple of the Hung Kings.

Since then it has been a custom of the people in Treo village to organise a "yearly procession of the Prince and the Princess", accompanied by "a hundred professional amusements." In the first month of the lunar year, the population choose a boy and a girl aged between 13 to 16 to act the parts of the Genie of Mount Tan and Princess Ngoc Hoa. They dress them in beautiful clothes and carried them in a palanquin up to the communal house. There a procession of people carrying rice sheaves and wornout farming implements forms up and the participants engage in various forms of mimicry to amuse the audience. Some put on plaited bamboo hats that look like heads of buffaloes, bulls and goats. Others masquerade as hunters. All of them sing humorous songs or crack jokes at the spectators. A ceremony at the communal house, in honour of the Genie of Mount Tan and Princess Ngoc Hoa, follows.

YOUNG CHU AND PRINCESS TIEN DZUNG

The third king of the Hung dynasty had a very beautiful daughter whom he called Tien Dzung (Fairy Face). At the age of 18 she was still single. She had refused her hand to many suitors who were all princes from neighbouring countries. She wanted to stay with her parents and travel now and then and visit beautiful sites of her country. King Hung had a special boat built for her and put a large retinue at her disposal. Every year at the end of spring, the princess began travelling and only returned to her palace when clouds of migrating birds darkened a corner of the sky.

At that time there lived in Chu Xu (village of the Chu)¹ located at a river-mouth, a fisherman named Chu Cu Van and his son, young Chu. They were so poor that they owned only one fishing rod and one loin-cloth between them. When one of them went out fishing, the other had to stay inside the hut.

^{1.} Chu is a family name. Formerly a village community in Viet Nam was called by the family name of its members. This vestige of the partriarchal society still subsists today: many villages bear the family name of its inhabitants, such as Bui village, Ngo village, Nguyen village, etc.

One day, Chu Cu Van fell ill. When he felt that his end was nearing, he called his son to his bedside and said to him "Keep the loin-cloth. I've got nothing else to give you!" But young Chu did not want to bury his father naked, and he wrapped him up in the loin-cloth.

From then on, Chu only went out fishing at night and before dawn he swam up to the boats of women traders anchored at the river ferry to exchange his catch for rice. One day young Chu was swimming toward the ferry when he heard a loud clamour. News swept along the river bank that Princess Tien Dzung was coming in her boat. Sails and multicoloured banners appeared. Bells rang and melodious music rose from the royal barge. Everybody ran to the riverside to have a look at the princess. Young Chu was taken aback and hid behind a sand bank.

The young princess, on seeing this beautiful beach, ordered her suite to cast anchor. She wanted to bathe there. The princess' maid-servants chose a secluded spot to hang a curtain, right by the sand bank where young Chu was hiding. As the sand was swept away by the wash created by the bathing princess, young Chu found himself facing the princess. Trying to overcome her fear, she asked: "Who are you? Why are you hiding here? Answer at once!"

The young man told her all about himself and the princess was deeply moved: it was the first time in

her life she had realised that in this land ruled by her father there lived people who were so poor that they did not have even a piece of cloth to cover themselves. She believed that destiny had brought about this strange encounter with this pious young man.

"I didn't want to get married," she told him. "But meeting you in these circumstances is surely Heaven's wish. You will be my husband!"

She ordered the young man to be clad in a beautiful military mandarin's costume. She introduced him to her retinue and told them about her decision. The wedding was celebrated right on the beach.

King Hung flew into a terrible rage on learning that his daughter had married a fisherman. "I repudiate this degenerate daughter of mine," he yelled. "She's turned down princes' offers to marry a wretched fisherman. She will never darken my door again. If she dares return to Phong Chau with her unworthy husband, I'll have her beheaded!"

Tien Dzung and her husband dared not return to Phong Chau. They settled down in the port and became traders. Some time later Chu met a Taoist priest, and he gave up commerce to follow the priest who taught him ethics and magic. After three years he received a conical hat and a stick from his teacher and returned to his home. He shared the occult sciences he had learned with his wife. Shortly afterward the couple shared out their property to the poor and left their adoptive village to travel far

and wide in search of other teachers from whom to learn other supernatural sciences. One night, tired out after a long walk, they stopped over in a deserted spot where neither a dog barked nor a cock crowed. Chu planted his stick in the ground and put his conical hat on it, and he and his wife took shelter under it.

In the third watch¹ a great noise rent the dark night, and the earth began shaking. A sumptuous palace emerged in place of the stick and the conical hat. The couple were the masters of this palace, and mandarins, officers, soldiers and maid-servants bowed before them and declared themselves at their service. The people from neighbouring villages came and pledged allegiance to the princess who, they believed, possessed the magic power to erect a palace in just one night.

A rumour soon swept the capital, carried by foul tongues: "Princess Tien Dzung is rising up against her father! She now has a large domain and she's raising an army and is preparing to take the kingdom by storm!"

King Hung summoned all the *Lac Tuong* (military governors) in the country and ordered them to suppress the "rebels". The Lac Tuong marched on Tien Dzung's castle at the head of a big army. They arrived there late at night and stopped at the riverside, in front of the princess' palace, waiting for daybreak to launch their attack. At the third watch,

however, a great storm broke out. A hurricane rose and unleashed a downpour. At daybreak, however, all became quiet again and in the faint light of dawn, people saw that the palace had disappeared without a trace, leaving just a big pond where it had stood. It was called "One-night Pond" and the local population erected a temple there in memory of Chu and his wife, Princess Tien Dzung.

¹ In ancient times, the night was divided into five "canh" (watches) reckoned from midnight.

LEGEND OF THE BETEL AND THE ARECA - NUT

Once upon a time there lived two brothers called Tan and Lang who resembled each other like two peas. They were orphaned when they were still toddlers, and the two brothers lived in the house of a priest called Luu to whom their father had entrusted them before dying. This teacher had a young daughter of the same age as Tan and Lang. She was fond of both brothers and wanted to marry the elder brother, but was at a loss to tell the one from the other.

To find out, she served them a bowl of soup one day and laid only one pair of chopsticks; then spied from behind the door. She saw Lang invite Tan to help himself first, as was the rule — a younger brother (or sister) should show respect to an elder brother (or sister). She asked her father for permission to marry Tan. The priest readily agreed for he too appreciated both brothers' good behaviour.

So Tan married the young girl. But from that day on he began neglecting his young brother, who consequently felt deeply hurt. Lang left his elder brother and went away. After aimlessly walking about the country, one day he arrived at the bank of a wide river. The place was deserted and he found no boat there. He sat down on the river bank and wept. The next morning there was a white rock at the place where Lang had sat the night before. He had died and, had turned into a rock.

When Tan noticed the absence of his brother he went in search of him. He followed the same road and stopped in front of the rock. He sat beside it and wept out of remorse and he too died. In his place a strange tree shot up: the trunk was straight. but ended in a canopy of large leaves and a cluster of round green fruit.

Shortly afterward Tan's young wife went in search of both brothers. The same river barred her way and she too died like the two brothers, transformed into a creeping plant which wound around the trunk of the tree with green fruit.

The priest waited in vain for the return of his three children. Maddened by anxiety he dispatched his servants to look for them. When they got to the rock, the tree and the creeping plant, they concluded that all three had died, and stood wide-eyed at their miraculous transformation. People erected a temple to their memory, and the people in the area called it "The temple of the two united brothers and the faithful husband and wife."

Many decades went by. One year, there was a great drought in this region. Trees and plants withered. But the tree with the green fruit and the creeping plant beside the rock remained green.

When King Hung passed he was astonished and he ordered the local old people to come and tell him the story of Tan and Lang. He ordered his men to pick

up some of the fruit and tasted them. The fruit tasted somewhat bitter but when he chewed them with a leaf of the creeping plant, a fragrant taste, sweet and pungent, crept over his palate.

Suddenly a mandarin in King Hung's retinue shouted: "Heavens, blood!" Everybody looked, dumbfounded: somebody who had been chewing the fruit and the leaf had spat on the rock and the saliva was red like blood. The king ordered a member of his suite to chew a bit of the green fruit, a leaf of the creeping plant, and a little bit of the white stone at the same time: heat rose to the man's face as if he had drunk alcohol. His lips took on a vermilion hue.

King Hung concluded "This phenomenon is a product of their ardent and faithful love which is like this red colour!" and he ordered the people to plant the tree with the green fruit called cau (areca nuts), and the creeping plant called trau (betel). A royal decree ordained that from then on, at wedding ceremonies, brides and other participants must chew betel with the areca nut and lime.

This is the origin of the custom that has been handed down to later generations.

Famous Women in National History, up to the Founding of the Indochinese Communist Party (1930)

THE TWO TRUNG SISTERS

In the year 34 A.D. Giao Chau ¹ was invaded by the Han. To Dinh, a cruel foreign governor, pursued a policy of down-right exploitation and oppression, and his tyrannical yoke weighed heavily upon the entire Vietnamese people. Not even the Lac Hau and Lac Tuong (Vietnamese civilian and military governors) were spared. Discontent and hatred for the enemy spurred all social classes to rise up to smash their chains.

At that time there lived at Me Linh ² two sisters, Trung Trac and Trung Nhi, daughters of a military governor. Trung Trac and her husband Thi Sach were preparing an uprising but the conspiracy was discovered and Thi Sach was killed by To Dinh Fired by their "desire to pay their debt to the country and to avenge their family ³, in February of the year 40 Trung Trac and her younger sister Trung

^{1.} Giao Chau: name of the ancient Red river delta.

^{2.} Situated in Vinh Phu, between Mount Ba Vi and Mount Tam Dao.

^{3.} Phrases which originated with the Trung and are still current today.

Nhi called on the people to drive the Han out of the land.

Their appeal reflected the aspirations of all social classes. The Lac Hau and Lac Tuong in other provinces joined their ranks. With talented generals like Lady Le Chan¹, the two sisters led the insurrection, which rapidly spread to the whole country. Waves of uprisings broke out against To Dinh's oppressive rule.

Within a short space of time they had reconquered 65 "citadels" ². Trung Trac was proclaimed Queen and made Me Linh the capital.

In 42 AD, after three years' intensive preparation, the Han dispatched an expeditionary force to Viet Nam led by Ma Vien, a high-ranking military mandarin of China, much celebrated in his time. Fighting erupted at Lang Bac (now Ha Bac). Less experienced than the invading armies, the rebel forces sustained heavy losses and had to fall back on Cam Khe (now Ha Tay). There the two sisters threw themselves into the Hat river in order not to fall into the hands of the enemy.

Ever since then the Vietnamese people have honoured the two Trung sisters as the first national heroines and inaugurators of the tradition of patriotic struggle for national independence.

LADY TRIEU

In 248 Viet Nam came under the yoke of the Wu. At Nong Cong, a district in the Nui Nua (Bamboo Mountain) area in Thanh Hoa province, there lived a young woman called Trieu Thi Trinh, who was then in the prime of her youth. When people advised her to get married, she replied "I would rather ride strong winds, tread mighty waves, and drive out the Wu invaders to reconquer our land, recover our independence and break the yoke of slavery, than bend and be a maid-servant of man!"

At the age of 19 she settled in the Nua mountains with her younger brother Trieu Quoc Dat where she gathered patriots and trained them to fight. She made an appeal to the entire population, denouncing the crimes of the Wu, exhorting the people to rise up against the aggressors and save the country. Later her brother died in battle. She took over the leadership of the uprising alone, won numerous victories and liberated almost all of Cuu Chan¹. Lady Trieu went to battle clad in a golden robe, holding a sword, and sitting in a golden howdah carried by an elephant.

^{1.} See above.

^{2.} Political and military centres administered by the country's nobility, the Lac Hau and the Lac Tuong who were civilian and military governors, which enjoyed relative autonomy before Han domination. Under Soo Ting this autonomy gave way to total and crude subjugation.

^{1.} The area now known as the province of Nghe Tinh.

Cuu Chan reconquered its independence for six months before the Wu king launched another expedition led by a famous general, Lu Tan. The patriotic forces faced an enemy army superior in men and weapons and were gradually decimated. Lady Trieu handed the command over to one of her officers and took her own life on Mount Tung, in Thanh Hoa province. A temple erected in her memory stands on the mountain.

LADY Y LAN

Lady Y Lan was born and grew up in Kinh Bac¹ in an area covered by vast mulberry fields. According to the annals, her trade was "to pick mulberry leaves and raise silk worms."

One day when she was working in the field, the king's herald shouted from the highway "The King is going to pass by here!"

It was King Ly Thanh Ton (1054-1072) on his yearly outing. All the inhabitants, all the labourers ran to the roadside to have a look at the king. Y Lan did not join the on-lookers but stood at a distance, alone, leaning against the trunk of a magnolia. The king ordered her to be brought up to his palanquin where he asked her several questions. This young girl of King Bac was not only pretty but showed herself to be intelligent, calm and quickwitted as well. The next day a royal order reached

^{1.} Kinh Bac, part of the present Ha Bac province, was a scene of ancient Vietnamese civilization, the land of popular songs, especially the Quan ho songs. Young women of Kinh Bac were renowned throughout the country for their beauty and their dances and songs.

^{2.} The annals call her Lady Y Lan after this encounter. Y Lan (Sino-Vietnamese), means "leaning against a magnolia tree".

her village, summoning her to the king's palace. She was named nguyen phi (first-rank wife of the king). The court officials called her Y Lan nguyen phi (The Lady Who Stood Beneath a Magnolia). This took place in the XIth century.

She was intelligent and cultured and she soon became an adviser who had the King's ears in State affairs. In 1069, Ly Thanh Ton conducted an expedition against the Kingdom of Champa in the South. Y Lan was promoted regent. Every day, from behind her blind¹, she presided over the sessions of the court, advised on a wide range of questions, military as well as civilian, and settled all matters arising. The people respected her very much, for her administration ensured security and welfare, in spite of the absence of the king and the state of war with Champa.

Ly Thanh Ton's expedition failed, and he had to withdraw his troops. Everywhere on his way back he heard people praise the merits of the Queen Regent, and he finally said to his officers:

"A woman can rule the country, while I, a man, have lost in battle against our enemy. What shame!" He turned round and headed back south, and this time won a brilliant victory over Champa. The Cham king Che Cu was taken prisoner and had to surrender three provinces in exchange for his release.

King Ly Thanh Ton died in 1072. His only son, Crown Prince Can Duc, aged seven succeeded him. Y Lan was promoted Queen Mother, and was Regent throughout the king's minority. She paid great attention to agricultural production and the protection of draught animals in particular, as theft and slaughter of buffaloes and other cattle was impeding production and hindering the development of farming. She was the first to try to liberate women, by organizing a relief office to help poor women who had been sold as slaves to rich families for example. She spent money from the royal treasury on paying ransom for them and helping them to start families. This was a bold and very progressive undertaking at that time.

The people honoured Y Lan like a saint. The official annals conferred on her the title Linh Nhan Thai Phi (The Holy and Happy Queen Mother).

^{1.} A bamboo blind separating the throne (on which the Queen sat) from the mandarins of the Court, as required by the rules of etiquette.

BUI THI XUAN

Bui Thi Xuan figures in the national history of Viet Nam as an indomitable woman general and as a celebrated strategist of the Tay Son dynasty¹. With her husband, General Tran Quang Dieu, she won brilliant victories over the reactionary Nguyen feudalists (18th century).

When still very young she began martial arts training. With young girls of her own age she learned how to fight with swords and sticks. In her native province of Binh Dinh a popular saying exalted this audacious breach of the feudal rules imposing restrictions on women:

Let's go to Binh Dinh and have a look.

Even women there know how to fight both with sticks and bare hands.

When the Tay Son peasant uprising broke out in 1788 she became one of its most celebrated leaders. She assumed the command of a particularly battle-hardened unit of 5,000 men, famous for their red uniform, a colour which symbolized their determination to win.

In 1802, with the help of the French expeditionary corps, Nguyen Anh, who had had to flee to Thailand,

1. See above.

counter-attacked the Tay Son. The Tay Son fleet was destroyed, and their army decimated. The King of Tay Son, Nguyen Quang Toan, abandoned Phu Xuan (now Hue), withdrew to the north, and was captured. Bui Thi Xuan, her husband Tran Quang Dieu and the other Tay Son officers met with the same fate. Nguyen Anh used the most barbarous tortures to take revenge on his enemies. He killed Bui Thi Xuan's two young children before her eyes. But while consoling the youngsters in her soft voice on the one hand, she flayed the cowards and the traitors of the Nguyen Anh clique on the other. She was sentenced to be trampled to death by an elephant.

Condemned as a "pirate" by the Nguyen feudalists, Bui Thi Xuan nevertheless survived in the faithful memory of the people as a heroine of the Tay Son peasant uprising of the 18th century.

^{1.} Two of the most barbarous feudal tortures were trampling by an elephant and quartering by four horses.

NGUYEN THI NHU

At the end of the 19th century, French aggression spread to North Viet Nam. Son Tay¹ citadel was taken in 1883, and both civilian and military mandarins fled. Tu So, a soldier of the unit defending the citadel, decided to lead the people's continued resistance. Nguyen Thi Nhu had been born into a scholar's family which was dispersed by the war of aggression, and now had to earn her living as a songstress. One day she met Tu So, then leader of the Son Tay people's uprising. To sound the morale of this young chief she sang:

Wind and $dust^2$ are shrouding our native land Why does the talented man still hide away? Let him set to work

To drive out those packs of wolves and foxes!

Tu So proposed to her and she agreed to marry him. The couple set up a resistance base in the Non Dai mountain in Son Tay. Later Tu So was betrayed and killed by a soldier in the pay of the French. "Lady Nhu"—as she was called—led a unit in

pursuit of the traitor and killed him to avenge her husband. She replaced him in leading the resistance. She pursued her military activities from Son Tay to Tuyen Quang further north, and she carried on a long and persevering resistance until 1920. Realising that she could not defeat a stronger enemy she dispersed her partisans, and they returned to their native villages. Then she left the country. In 1922, aged 72, she returned to her village to pay a visit to the tomb of her husband. Vuong Huu Dai, a local tyrant, hurried to inform his chief who sent a force to capture her. But when the latter arrived in the village, she had already gone. They found at the entrance a quatrain written by her:

Vuong Huu Dai, you're from good stock
You're living but your soul is dead. What a pity!
I do not deign to punish you, for fear of soiling
my sword,

I leave it up to the people to pass judgement on your crime.

Lady Nhu just disappeared.

^{1.} Now a town of Ha Son Binh province, west of Hanoi.

^{2.} A figure of rhetoric meaning war.

LADY DINH

It was during the first years of the French domination, at the turn of the 20th century. In Thua Thien province (Central Viet Nam) lived a woman of about 40 whom the people called Lady Dinh, her husband's family name. Widowed at an early age, and childless, she was known in the region for her culture and her literary gifts.

From the north to the south, there was revolutionary ferment: national reformist movement, "Go East" movement, fight against exorbitant taxes, and other struggles led by progressive scholars. Lady Dinh joined these organizations. Disguised as a trader, she ensured liaison between the revolutionary organizations of Quang Nam — Quang Ngai (Central Viet Nam) and those of Thua Thien province, Hai Phong, and mountain regions in the West where resistance bases were set up.

She collected money, bought arms, and even went to Thailand to contact Thai arms dealers. She also worked among women and exhorted the peasants to struggle against heavy taxes. She was caught in 1908, and put in jail. For all their tortures, the colonialist security thugs failed to squeeze any disclosure on the revolutionary bases out of her. She asked her executioners for paper to write her "admission". Instead she wrote a long and severe condemnation of the colonialists and the traitors. She wrote a poem¹ on the wall of her cell with blood from a cut she made on her forefinger and committed suicide.

^{1.} Revolutionary movement encouraging young people to go and study in Japan which was then regarded as an example of liberation from colonial powers of Europe.

^{1.} See above.

A SHORT HISTORY OF THE VIET NAM WOMEN'S UNION

1930: Founding of the Women's Emancipation Association following the foundation of the Indochinese Communist Party (renamed Viet Nam Workers' Party in 1950, and Communist Party of Viet Nam in 1976).

Aim: to gather and organise women for struggle against colonialism and for equality between the sexes. First base of activity established in Nghe An. Legal forms of organization: women's mutual-aid groups, women's association for mutual aid (1932-1939).

- 1936-1939: "Women's Democratic Association" founded in the movement of the Indochinese Congress launched by the ICP under the slogan "Liberty Food and Clothing Peace Struggle against the Fascist War."
- 1939-1941: Women's Anti-Colonialist Association, "for struggle against the colonialist war to retain the men forcibly drafted into the colonial army or for corvees", participation in the Bac Son, Do Luong, and Nam Ky uprisings (led by the ICP).
- **16-6-1941:** Foundation of the Women's Association for National Salvation. Aim: to unit women

of all social strata, without distinction of class, creed, and nationality, to drive out the Japanese fascists and the French colonialists, to reconquer independence for the Fatherland and the legitimate rights of women.

- 20-10-1946: Foundation of the Viet Nam Women's Union. Aim: to gather broad sections of the women's forces to defend the revolutionary power, to build the people's democratic regime, and protect the rights of women and children. The Women's Association for National Salvation is the core of the VWU.
- 1950: First Women's National Congress. Merger of the Women's Association for National Salvation with the VWU to unify the leadership of the women's movement and for a more efficacious participation in the resistance against French colonialism.
- 1956: Second Women's National Congress; participation of women in the restoration and development of the economy, in the socialist transformation of the North and the reunification of the country.
- 1961: Third Women's National Congress: mobilization of women to carry out the first five-year State plan to build socialism, apply the Law on Marriage and the Family, and liberate the South.
- 19-3-1965: The Central Committee of the VWU launched the "Three Responsibilities" movement.

- 20-10-1966: 20th anniversary of the founding of the VWU; the Central Committee of the VWP presented Vietnamese women with a banner bearing these embroidered words: "Vietnamese Women, Courageous and Devoted to the Struggle Against US Aggression, for National Salvation."
- 8-3-1961: Founding of the South Viet Nam Liberation Women's Union. Aim: to unite women of all social strata in the South to struggle against US imperialism. The South Viet Nam Liberation National Front conferred on the SVNLWN this praise: "Heroic, Dauntless, Faithful, Dedicated."

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