

Two villages

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Two Villages

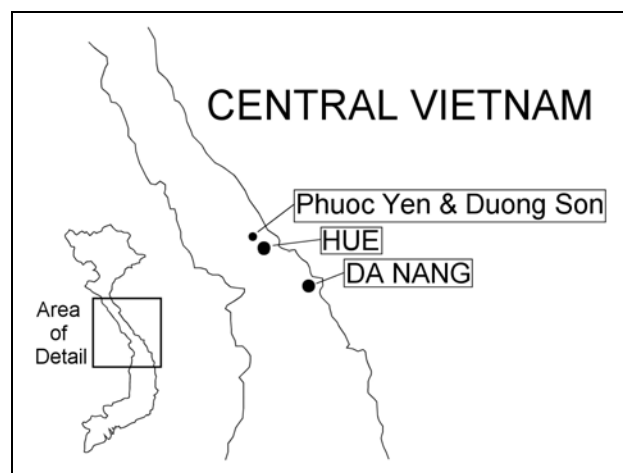
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Abstract

In recent years there has been a steady rise in the number of anthropological and ethnological studies on religious life within the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV), home to fifty-two officially recognized ethnic groups, every major world religion, and myriad forms of local religious practice. Simultaneously, there has also been an outpouring of academic studies on political history and political life in contemporary Vietnam. Within Vietnamese studies, the intersection of these two fields of inquiry - the religious and the political - is marked by an almost complete absence of scholarly reflection. The following is a story about two villages in rural central Vietnam: one Buddhist and one Catholic, where I have been conducting preliminary ethnographic research for an M.A. thesis. The research explores how religion has affected political practice, and in turn, how politics has affected religious life in these villages from the beginning of the Vietnam War (1960), to the present. This story describes the religious practices of each village, and how a bond was established between the two villages during the Vietnam War.

It is Christmas Eve. In Phuoc Yen, it is a day like any other day. Children go to school, farmers work in the rice fields, women shop at the market, the elderly gossip and reminisce while drinking tea and rolling cigarettes. Christmas in Phuoc Yen, as in most hamlets of central Vietnam where the people practice a mixture of Buddhism and ancestor worship, passes by without notice and without celebration. This is my second trip to Phuoc Yen, the village where my father was born and where my grandparents continue to live. Phuoc Yen's origins date back to the early seventeenth century when the first Viet colonists decided to make it their home at the end of a southward trek from the ancestral heartland of the Viet people in the Red River Delta. They were led to Phuoc Yen by Nguyen Hoang, who is credited with founding the first southern Viet state, on the long narrow stretch of coastal land that is present day central Vietnam.¹ Today, the

population of Phuoc Yen is comprised of almost thirty different family lineages, but it is still commonplace to hear people refer to the *thap nhi ton phai* (twelve founding families) who were the first Viets to live and cultivate wet rice on this narrow flood plain north of the imperial city of Hue (see Map A).



Map A. Central Vietnam.

As one of the few living elders who knows Phuoc Yen's history well, my grandfather is frequently called upon to preside at weddings, funerals, local feast days, and grave-site consecrations, to ensure that ceremonies are conducted proper to form. Moreover, as my grandfather is the most senior man in the Nguyen Van family lineage, my grandparents' house doubles as an ancestral shrine where the descendents of the lineage gather once a year to pay homage to those who came before them. Step into the main room of their home, as in any other home in the central Vietnamese countryside, and the first thing one notices is the altar, which looks like an over-sized dresser without the drawers. At the front of the altar, it is customary to see a statue of a woman in a flowing white gown (the Bodhisattva of Compassion), encased in a glass box, flanked on both sides by vases of tall flowers – usually yellow chrysanthemums or birds of paradise. Behind the

¹ Li Tana and Anthony Reid, *Southern Vietnam under the Nguyen: Documents on the Economic History of Illumine*, Vol. 3, No. 1

Conchinchina (Dang Trong), 1602-1777 (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1993).

altar to the Buddha stand anywhere between one and three smaller altars dedicated to the family ancestors and deceased children. Hanging on both sides of the altar are cloth banners colourfully embroidered with Chinese proverbs and sequined dragons and phoenixes.

On the full moon and new moon of each lunar month, villagers arrive home from the market with baskets full green bananas by the bunch, fresh flowers, and packets of jasmine incense: gifts to be offered on household altars, in the family temples and in the village pagoda.² Whenever special foods are made, people are mindful to always leave an offering on the altar for their ancestors. Even for those who find it difficult to make ends meet, which is almost everyone in the village, maintaining a proper altar is a top priority. Knowing this, I shouldn't have been surprised when my famously stingy grandmother (who refuses to use any of the electrical appliances that her children buy for her because she hates paying for electricity) dropped eight hundred dollars a few years ago for a new and even more auspicious altar. The ornately carved wooden structure now dominates my grandparents' modest concrete house and makes their home feel very much like a temple, which is the intended effect. Tucked away at the back of this altar, my grandfather keeps the book in which all the names of the descendants of the Nguyen Van lineage are recorded. My brother Peter and I, along with our numerous cousins, are all listed as the most recent entries. We are the eleventh generation on record. I am told that within a two-kilometer radius of this shrine lie the remains of our ancestors going back at least fourteen generations.

In December, as Christians prepare to celebrate the coming of Christ, the villagers of Phuoc Yen are also busily preparing for celebrations of another kind. The twelfth lunar month, which generally straddles December and January of the Gregorian calendar, is *the* month for ancestor worship in rural central Vietnam. This month marks the lull in the agricultural year of the region – the time when farmers sow the seeds for their spring crop of rice. For centuries, these cold, misty days towards the end of the rainy season have been the time when peasants steal away from their work in watery fields in order

² The village pagoda (*chua*) is the place where Buddhist rites are observed. In larger cities, the *chua* is usually adjoined by a monastery, where monks and nuns live and study. In small villages like Phuoc Yen, the *chua* is attended to by one or two resident monks.

to tend to the business of the ancestors, bringing together the past and the present.

Early on in the history of Phuoc Yen, each of the founding twelve families chose two days during the twelfth lunar month for their annual ancestor worship celebrations. The first day (*ngay chap ho*) is dedicated to the commemoration of the ancestors who have been admitted into a proverbial ancestral hall of fame, by virtue of being dead for more than five or six generations. The second day (*ngay chap nhanh*) is dedicated to the members of the ancestors of the *nhanh* (branch) – that is, to family members who have died within living memory. On these feast days, all the members of the family lineage return to Phuoc Yen to tidy the gravesites of the ancestors, to pay their respects at the family temple, and to share a meal of sticky rice and pork.

The cult to the dead is one of the many aspects of Vietnamese culture that has been influenced by over one thousand years of Chinese colonial occupation spanning from the first to the twelfth century. Today, these feast days are a precious opportunity for cousins from Hue, sisters now married with families in Da Lat and long-lost grandnieces from Canada to meet and greet one another. In times of less mobility, when people rarely left or married outside of their birth villages, the feast days were extremely important as a means of ensuring that people could know how they were related to one another so as to avoid the shame and potential danger of marrying too close within the family bloodlines. Over the centuries, these feast days, a living expressions of the Confucian values of filial piety and right relation, continue to be a call to the living not to forget from whom and whence they came. Weeding gravesites, offering incense, waking up before dawn to prepare a feast of slaughtered pig and sweet rice, making offerings of food and flowers to the ancestors, are small gestures meant to express an awareness that our present is possible only because of the sacrifices of those who came before us.

To visit Phuoc Yen during the month of December is to constantly be asked the question “Are you going to stay for *ho nhanh* (family feast days)?”

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On this day before Christmas, I am out for a walk with Uncle Lieu, my father's cousin. As the mayor of Phuoc Yen from 1965 to 1975 and one of the most senior members of the Nguyen Van family lineage, Uncle Lieu knows more about village and family history than just about anyone else in Phuoc Yen. On our walking tour, he points out local places

of worship: buildings freshly painted blue or yellow, adorned with soaring dragons and graceful phoenixes, their concrete bodies covered with mosaics made from broken china. In a village with less than a thousand inhabitants living in fewer than two-hundred homes, there are dozens of ceremonial structures: the *chua* (pagoda) where the people worship the Buddha, dozens of *nha tho ho*, where they worship their ancestors, four shrines to local tutelary gods (called *am*), yet another shrine dedicated to Nguyen Hoang, as well as the *dinh lang*, or the village temple, where the people of Phuoc Yen gather twice a year, in the spring and fall, to pay respects to the village founders, to celebrate the rice harvest, and to deliberate over village business. And we must not forget the hundreds of gravesites that sprawl all over the rice fields each one over four meters in diameter. In a country with one of the highest population densities in the world, and where arable land is a precious commodity, it amazes me that people willingly dedicate more land (and often spend more money) to commemorate the dead than to house the living.

Being in Phuoc Yen in December has allowed me to be immersed in the rhythms of a life based on Confucian values and feudalistic social structures that are quickly being eroded as Vietnam becomes increasingly integrated into the global economy. Being in Phuoc Yen in December has also shielded me from the frenetic commercialism and wasteful consumption that has unfortunately become such a dominant element of the North American holiday season. However, as Christmas day approaches, I find that a desire arises in me to celebrate the day, as I would in Canada. Having anticipated that I might feel this way, and knowing that Christmas would surely be a day like any other in Phuoc Yen, before I left for Vietnam, I had asked my father where I might go to attend a Christmas worship service, assuming that he would probably direct me to one of the Catholic churches in Hue.

Instead, my father said, "Ah! Why don't you to Duong Son?"

"Where's Duong Son?" I asked, never having heard him mention this place in the twenty-three years he has been telling me stories about his birth village.

"Duong Son is the only village in the entire region that is Catholic," he continued, "A hundred per cent Catholic! They're famous for their Christmas Eve celebrations. Big parties that go on all night: singing, a giant manger, paper lanterns everywhere. Even the Buddhists go to check it out.

And you know, it's the only village that the Viet Cong were never able to infiltrate during the war."

I was definitely intrigued. According to my father, while most villages in central Vietnam (including Phuoc Yen) were deeply divided during the war, with some villagers being supporters of the NLF (National Liberation Front, more commonly known as Viet Cong), while others supported the ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam) who fought to prevent Ho Chi Minh's efforts to reunite North and South Vietnam, Duong Son experienced no such internal divisiveness. Somehow, the villagers were able to present a united front against the NLF, well known for their effectiveness in infiltrating villages, which they did by winning over the sympathies of the disaffected Vietnamese peasantry.

Once I arrived in Phuoc Yen, I asked my grandmother to tell me what she knew about the village across the river called Duong Son – the only village for miles that has a building with a pointy steeple and gravesites crowned with crucifixes instead of lotus blossoms. She confirmed my father's story.

"During the war, the people of Duong Son guarded their town so tightly, not even an ant would have gotten in!" she said.

As I tour Phuoc Yen with Uncle Lieu, my mind turns again to the Catholic village across the river. Surely there, Christmas day is *not* a day like any other day. At the village temple, I asked Uncle Lieu if he knew anything about Duong Son.

"Of course I know Duong Son!" says Uncle Lieu, casually. "I hid there every night for years during the war. In a few days, I will take you there."

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Now it is the eve of the Gregorian New Year. Again, another day like any other in Phuoc Yen. Children go to school, farmers work in the rice fields, women shop at the market, the elderly gossip and reminisce while drinking tea and rolling cigarettes. Tet, Vietnamese New Year, and the most important celebration in Vietnam, is more than a month away, and people in Phuoc Yen won't even begin preparing for a couple of weeks yet, until the ancestor worship days have passed.

On this grey afternoon, with the rain swirling around us in a spraying mist, Uncle Lieu and I cross the Thanh Luong Bridge to the western bank of the Bo River. Our boots sink shin deep into the soft

muddy path that separates the line of tall bamboo shadowing the river's bank from fields of *dat mau* (coloured earth), on which the people of Duong Son grow beans, sesame, and vegetables for pig feed. It is too rainy to work in the rice fields on this afternoon, so Uncle Lieu has obliged my request to connect me with friends of his in Duong Son, so that I can satisfy my desire to learn more about the village's distinct religious character and fascinating political history. Walking through the gates of Duong Son, we first pass the church, and the village kindergarden school. Unlike Phuoc Yen, where the village pathways feel narrow because of the high arching bamboo on both sides, there is a feeling of spaciousness about the paths of Duong Son, which the villagers have lined with flags of blue, yellow, red and green cloth, for the Christmas season. The village also strikes me as unusually prosperous compared to all the others that I have passed through in the area. Most homes still have their cheerful star-shaped Christmas lanterns hanging on the veranda. Uncle Lieu comments to me that this is what is possible when a town is left untouched by war.

We enter a well kept two story house and are greeted by Aunt Kien and Uncle Duc, a sister and brother in their fifties, who greet Uncle Lieu warmly and offer us thimble-sized cups of the most bitter tea I have ever tasted. Upon learning that I am the granddaughter of Mr. and Mrs. Nguyen Muu from Phuoc Yen, Aunt Kien takes my hand as though we have known each other forever. In addition to being farmers, the villagers of Duong Son have for generations earned their living from making rice wine, selling it to neighboring villages, whose inhabitants consume the turpentine-like brew prodigiously during family feasts and other special occasions. Thirty years earlier, as young wine seller, Aunt Kien's delivery route included Phuoc Yen. Due to her natural warmth and congenial nature, she quickly became endeared to all in the village and a confidante to many, including my grandmother.

"Your grandfather and my father were both soldiers in the French army as well as great friends," she related.

Aunt Kien continues to disclose the story of our two families. She tells me how much it meant to her that Uncle Lieu and my grandfather were part of her father's funerary procession: a sign of true friendship, in her mind. I soon discover that Aunt Kien knows more gossip about Phuoc Yen than perhaps many of the people who actually live there.

"Your grandmother and I have shared many things," she recalls.

"After the Revolution, she used to hide all the pictures that your parents and uncles sent from Canada and the U.S. When I would come to visit, she would take them out to show me, and me alone."

"Why did she have to hide family photographs?" I puzzled.

"Everyone hid the photos of their overseas relatives back then."

In the years following the Revolution, possessing photographs of overseas family members was sufficient cause for harassment by the police, who considered such artifacts to be signs of attachment to Western bourgeois ideology and a danger to the ideals of the new socialist state. As such, family photos were only shown to those one most trusted.

While Aunt Kien related stories about our two families, her brother, Duc, a former seminarian, began to tell village stories of another kind. From Uncle Duc, I learned why this rural village of a thousand people is considered to be one of the greatest strongholds of the Catholic faith in all of central Vietnam.

The first Viet settlers arriving from the Red River Delta came to Duong Son in 1307. In the mid-seventeenth century, about fifty years after the Nguyen Lords began to develop Phuoc Yen across the river, the first Catholic missionaries had arrived and begun their proselytizing in Duong Son. By the end of that century, the whole village had converted to Roman Catholicism, and in 1696, Duong Son was officially entered into the records of the Vatican. Up until the Vietnam War, Duong Son was home to a convent of female religious belonging to the order of the Lovers of the Cross, as well as a *petit seminaire*, dedicated to the formation of novices for the priesthood.

Duong Son flourished until the early 19th century, when tragedy struck at the heart of the village. Unlike his predecessors who tolerated Catholic missionaries, King Minh Mang of the Nguyen dynasty, who reigned from 1820 to 1841, viewed the spread of the Catholic as a potential threat to his sovereign rule.³ As a result, Minh Mang

³ Oscar Salemink, "One country, many journeys," in *Vietnam: Journeys of Body, Mind and Spirit*, eds. Nguyen Van Huy and Laurel Kendall (University of California Press, 2003), 20-51.

ordered the execution of hundreds, perhaps thousands, of Vietnamese Catholics during his reign. The bridge where Catholics were often summarily executed several kilometers outside Hue bears the name *Cau Chem* (Beheading Bridge) to this day. Seventy-three of those killed during this period hailed from Duong Son. In 1994, while in the process of exhuming the remains of their ancestors for reburial in a newly created cemetery, some villagers unearthed four skeletons lying in the fetal position, each wearing a rosary. It is believed that these are the remains of four female religious who were martyred during this period.

Every morning at 5:00 a.m., before the first light of dawn, the church bells toll in Duong Son. By 5:30, most of the villagers are quietly filing into the church, sitting closely together on the hard wooden benches. All the women are sitting in the pews left of the centre aisle, and all the men on the right, as is the common custom in Vietnam. In Duong Son, Catholicism has not displaced the ancient practices of ancestor worship that developed centuries prior to the arrival of European missionaries, but rather, traditions have blended to produce a fascinatingly syncretistic religious life. One sees examples of this syncretism most clearly in the way that mass is celebrated in the village.

At the beginning of each mass, the priest offers three sticks of incense before the main altar, just as Buddhists offer incense at the altar of their ancestors on the first and fifteenth day of each lunar month. The presentation of the Eucharist is not accompanied by the customary ringing of steel bells, but rather, with the beating of an ox-skin drum and copper cymbal, powerful sounds that not only send chills up one's spine, but are also deeply meaningful to anyone who knows that the drum and cymbal were used by Vietnamese warriors over many centuries to rouse their people during times of foreign invasion. When the parishioners pray the rosary in Duong Son, the rising and falling drone of their voices sounds eerily similar to the chanting of monks and nuns in Buddhist temples all across Vietnam.

Every house in Duong Son, as in Phuoc Yen, has a large altar for commemorating ancestors and deceased relatives. The main difference is that the centerpiece of a family altar in Duong Son is not the statue of a bodhisattva, but a Christian icon, such as a crucifix or a portrait of the Virgin Mary. Banners of embroidered Chinese characters have been traded in for framed pictures bearing the smiling face of John Paul II or beloved Vietnamese cardinals. And whereas the original twelve family lineages of Phuoc Yen celebrate ancestral feast days separately

throughout the twelfth lunar month, all the families of Duong Son commemorate their ancestors together on the same day of the year (the eighth day of the third lunar month) and in a village-wide ceremony. On the evening of this village-wide day of ancestor worship, the parish priest of Duong Son delivers a special outdoor mass at the village cemetery. For this service only, he sheds his customary scapula in exchange for navy blue *ao dai* (the traditional blue tunic worn by Vietnamese men on ceremonial occasions). The villagers weed the graves of their forefathers and foremothers, offering incense to them, and inviting them back to the family home to share in a meal with the living, just as they would if they were in a Buddhist village.

However, unlike in Phuoc Yen, Christmas is not a day like any day, but the most festive occasion of the year. On Christmas Eve, the pathways into Duong Son are choked with bicycle and motorcycle traffic, transporting youths from Buddhist villages nearby who hope to catch a glimpse of Duong Son's famous Christmas pageant, and participate in all-night parties of karaoke singing.

I ask about the connection between Uncle Lieu and the Phan family. What did Uncle Lieu mean when he said that he used to come here to hide during the war?

“Well, you know there were Viet Cong in our village,” begins Uncle Lieu.

“They only came out at night though. During the day you didn't know who was loyal to whom. But night was when they would come out and assassinate people. Nobody knew whom he or she could trust. And those of us who were ARVN soldiers were easy targets. Several people were murdered in their beds. So, for years, I would paddle my sampan across to Duong Son every night to sleep, and then come back to Phuoc Yen in the morning.”

Uncle Lieu pauses and Aunt Kien continues the story. She begins by repeating what I have already heard from my father and grandmother. To prevent infiltration by the NLF, the villagers of Duong Son guarded every entry and exit point to the village with the greatest vigilance, rarely allowing people from outside the village to enter. They were convinced that this was the only way to keep themselves safe and free from the constant state of fear and mistrust that people in other villages suffered from, as a result of not knowing the true political loyalties of their neighbours and, oftentimes, of one's own family members.

So why did the people of Duong Son make an exception for my Uncle Lieu, and other men from the village of Phuoc Yen, who came to Duong Son seeking refuge?

“My mother was from Phuoc Yen,” Aunt Kien explains.

“She was from the Hoang lineage. If you go the Phuoc Yen cemetery, you’ll see the gravesite. I had it built there for her.”

Remembering Phuoc Yen as the place where his wife’s ancestors were buried, Aunt Kien’s father felt that the two villages were bonded in a special way. As such, he ensured that anyone from Phuoc Yen who fled to Duong Son would be treated as a member of the family. Aunt Kien and her sister, Y (pronounced “ee”) recall years of their youth when it seemed like for months and months on end their days were spent laundering the clothes of these asylum seekers and cooking enormous pots of rice with which to keep them fed.

In the worst years of fighting, upon hearing the roar of American B-52’s overhead, people from Phuoc Yen routinely abandoned their homes and fields to seek refuge in the cities. As they ran terrified along National Highway 1 towards major cities like Hue, Quang Tri and Da Nang, they knew that it might be months, or even years, before they would return to decimated farmlands and ransacked houses. Those from Phuoc Yen who were able to plan their departure from the village in advance often stopped through Duong Son to meet with the young Aunt Kien. Since she had a reputation for being honest and trustworthy, people entrusted her with purses full of gold and jewellery for safe keeping as they fled, to be reclaimed a few months or years down the road when they would finally return.

My grandmother, who is infrequently generous in her estimation of the living, cannot speak highly enough of Aunt Kien and her family.

“In those days, we lived together and we died together,” grandmother sighed to me one night. Her voice becomes grave when she talks about the *cuoc song hai chieu* (two way life) of the war years. At nighttime, the NLF ordered the villagers to dig tunnels. During the day, American troops came by and ordered them to fill up the same tunnels they had just dug. Meanwhile, most of the villagers just wanted to live and let live, to continue growing rice and worshipping their ancestors. During these confusing times, grandmother remembers that our family and the Phan family were able to depend on

each other for support and survival. “*Song chet co nhau.*” In life and death we had each other.

When she talks about the Phan’s grandmother often says, “*Doan ket thi song, chia re thi chet.*” If we united we lived, if we were divided, we died.

The generosity of the Phan family towards the villagers of Phuoc Yen is particularly striking if we keep in mind the political backdrop against which this drama unfolded. In addition to this story about taking refuge in Duong Son, another thing that caught me by surprise on my Christmas Eve walkabout with Uncle Lieu had been an off-handed remark of having spent six months in prison during the war. When I asked him why, he responded, cryptically, that there were actually three sides to the Vietnam War.

In addition to the American supported ARVN forces and their NLF adversaries, Uncle Lieu considers the Buddhist revolt against the regime of Southern Vietnamese president Ngo Dinh Diem to be the “third force” in the conflict. During the Vietnam War, the Catholic Ngo brothers who ruled Southern Vietnam with the backing of the U.S. government, severely persecuted Buddhists during first years of the 1960s that they believed supported the NLF. When Buddhist monasteries in South Vietnam were shut down or effectively turned into prisons and Buddhist monks began to be massacred on orders by the Ngo brothers, seven Buddhist nuns and monks burned themselves in protest, bringing worldwide attention and criticism to the Saigon regime. Uncle Lieu, although an ARVN soldier himself, felt that as a serious Buddhist, he could not stand on the sidelines and watch the escalation of government violence against his religion. In 1962, Uncle Lieu spent six months in a state prison for participating in the Buddhist revolt, sentenced by the very government for which he was fighting.

I have not yet asked Aunt Kien, or anyone else in Duong Son, for their thoughts on the Buddhist revolt and the government repression that instigated it. What I do know from Aunt Kien is that she believes that it was certainly divine intervention that kept Duong Son safe during the war. Awe fills her voice and excitement flashes across her eyes as she tells a story known by all in Duong Son: the one about the holy family appearing by the banks of the Bo river one day during the worst years of fighting. As she tells it, the Virgin Mary, riding on the back of a donkey, was seen with her arm stretched out across the Bo River, literally shielding the village from the onslaught of bullets being fired from the opposite river bank. While they witnessed many villages being levelled by bombs several times over, not one

of Duong Son's sons or daughters died in the war. This is one reason that the people of Duong Son believe in miracles.

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As we amble towards Phuoc Yen I tell Uncle Lieu that what strikes me as miraculous is that while Buddhists from Phuoc Yen were being persecuted by their own state, the most reliable place of refuge for them was the home of a Catholic family in a village across the river. Arriving home, I tell grandma about my incredible day in Duong Son, and again talk about miracles – like the way Phan family opened the gates of their village to the Buddhist villagers of Phuoc Yen, risking their own safety in order to save the lives of men like my Uncle Lieu, who surely would have been murdered in the night by friends-turned-enemies had they slept in their own beds. Grandma, always armed with the perfect verse for any situation, says, “*ai cung co mau do gia vang.*” Everyone has red blood and yellow skin.

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Phuoc Yen and Duong Son are two villages separated by a river and differentiated by religions, whose bond, forged from family ties, was tested and strengthened through a war. These two villages have not only been valuable sites through which to glimpse important aspects of contemporary religious life in rural Vietnam (Phuoc Yen's ancestor worship traditions and Duong Son's syncretic Catholicism) but are also interesting portals into the nation's religious history. Prior to the arrival of European missionaries in the seventeenth century, religion and politics had little to do with each other in Vietnam. This situation changed with the persecution of Catholic missionaries and their Vietnamese converts by the Nguyen emperors, the affects of which were intimately experienced by some of the people of Duong Son. The South Vietnamese state's persecution of Buddhists would draw international scrutiny during its war with America; and during this collision of between religion and politics, it would be people from Phuoc Yen who would be the victims of intolerance. Through the stories of Uncle Lieu and the Phan family, we can gain an intimate view of the historical encounter between the main religions of Vietnam (Buddhism and Catholicism) and the political regimes of the country, as well as an opportunity to see how the interaction between politics and religion has affected the lives of some everyday Vietnamese Buddhists and Catholics.

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