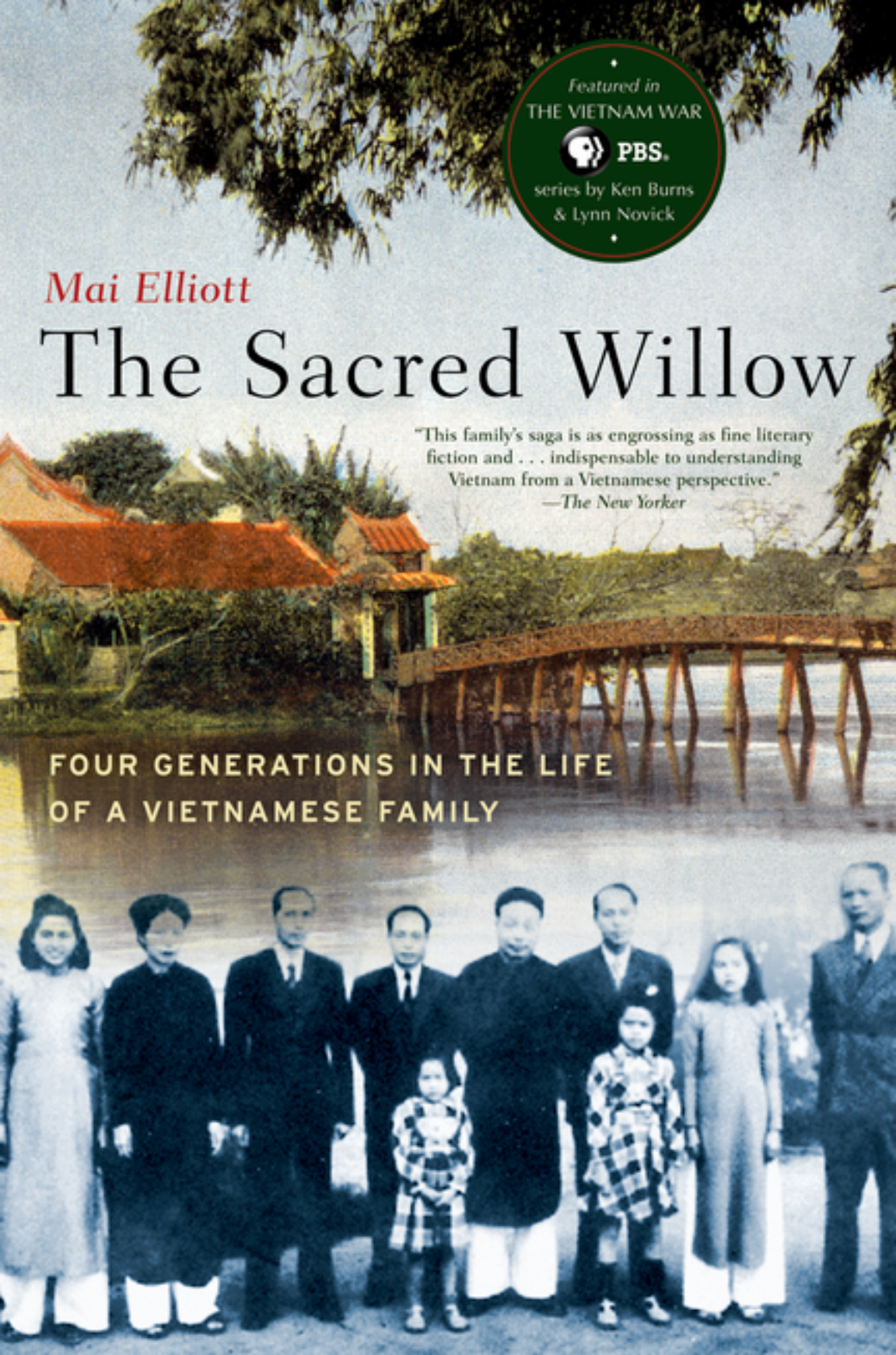
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The Sacred Willow
"This family's saga is as engrossing as fine literary fiction and . . . indispensable to understanding Vietnam from a Vietnamese perspective."
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FOUR GENERATIONS IN THE LIFE OF A VIETNAMESE FAMILY

The Sacred Willow

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Four Generations in the Life of a Vietnamese Family

Mai Elliott

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Dedicated to my family

THE LEGEND OF THE SACRED WILLOW

Long ago, a king's son became sick and fell unconscious. A holy man from India broke off a branch from the Duong willow tree, dipped it in water, and sprinkled the water on the prince, who immediately revived and was cured. From then on, the Duong willow was said to be a sacred tree.

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Prologue

Returning to Vietnam in April 2016, I found—as I had discovered during my previous visits—that it was getting harder and harder to find vestiges of my family's past whether in the northern or southern region of the country. Vietnam is changing fast and old buildings are being torn down or altered almost beyond recognition. Structures are rising where open fields once stood, changing the topography and confusing visitors like me who try to locate landmarks associated with their past. The slow-paced and simple way of life that my family knew is being replaced by a more hectic and affluent lifestyle driven by rising income and modern technology, and by the impulse for acquisition and competition. Each time I came, the bygone days seemed more and more distant.

Yet, underneath the stunning transformation, old customs and traditions persist, and I found links that reconnected me with the past. My relatives who remain in Vietnam still cling to the value of family loyalty and the belief in its continuity. At the center of this value system is the reverence for ancestors and the faith that they are still watching over their descendants and providing protection against life's vagaries and tragedies. So, whenever I return to Hanoi where my family spent many eventful years before moving to Saigon in 1954, they welcome

me back into the family's fold and relish the opportunity to take me to visit Van Dinh Village, near Hanoi, the cradle of my clan, to worship at the shrine dedicated to our ancestors and at their tombs. The visit is an emotional renewal of ties that still bind us, and a powerful reminder that we still belong together, no matter where life has flung us throughout the world. I also found echoes of the past in the rhythm of life—the daily trip to the market to buy food, the preparation of traditional dishes that continue to be popular (such as spring rolls and fish stewed with black pepper in a clay pot), and the observation of holidays and festivals we also celebrated decades ago (such as the Thanh Minh Festival when families visit ancestral graves to pay respects).

I arrived with my husband David and son Bryan at Noi Bai Airport one morning after a long flight from Los Angeles. Although I had been visiting periodically—the last time in 2012—I felt a bit disoriented at first. The changes were striking. Looking around at the large and brand-new terminal, I remembered what it had been like when I first landed here in 1993. That was my first visit since the end of the Vietnam War in 1975, and I had come to conduct research for this book about my family. Walking down a very long hallway, and looking through the expansive plate-glass windows, I pointed out to my husband and son that in 1993 I had seen water buffaloes grazing near the tarmac. The buffaloes are gone now, along with the countryside that envelops Hanoi, pushed further and further away to make way for the airport, factories, houses, and apartment buildings. Twenty-three years had passed since that day in 1993 when I landed in Hanoi, filled with trepidation about what I would find in a place from which my family had fled in panic in 1954 before communist forces arrived to take over the city following the French surrender at Dien Bien Phu. Those twenty-three calendar years could have been twenty-three light-years, considering the distance Vietnam has traveled from the impoverished, war-ravaged country that I saw then to one with a growing economy, fueled by foreign investments seeking cheap but skilled labor.

Our luggage arrived on one of several shiny carousels. (In 1993, I watched my suitcase being dumped from a flatbed truck onto a low wood pallet in a drab terminal needing a coat of paint.) We breezed through immigration and wheeled our luggage cart down the "Nothing to Declare" customs lane to the exit. Cumbersome immigration and customs procedures have been streamlined to make it easier and more pleasant for the millions of tourists who visit the country each year. Unlike many regions in the world, Vietnam is a safe and attractive destination,

with a mix of Asian and French allure and a Southeast Asian *dolce farniente*. Tourists flock here at Christmas, New Year, and especially Tet—our lunar new year—and hotel rooms become scarce.

Our driver waited for us and took us to a twelve-seat van. I gawked at the four-lane highway that took us into Hanoi across a new suspension bridge. Narrow houses (some of them five-feet-wide) rising four or five floors high, topped with lightning rods, stood alongside the road where rice fields would have been. We reserved our rooms at the Lucky 3 Hotel—one of many that have mushroomed in the Old Quarters—through Priceline.com. The driver deposited us across from the hotel on Hang Bong Street. I hesitated at the curb, staring at the unending stream of traffic—cars, vans, scooters, an occasional SUV, and motorbikes coming at me. How was I going to make it across without getting maimed or killed? Bryan stepped into the mad rush and I followed him. The vehicles avoided us deftly and we reached the hotel safe and sound.

The food scarcity caused by the legacy of the Vietnam War and by misguided Soviet-inspired economic dogma, which deprived my relatives of even the barest necessities after 1975, is a distant memory for most people, except for those who lived through it and still remember it as if it were yesterday. The evening my husband, our son, and I arrived, Kien, a nephew, took us to a large restaurant near the Western Lake and not far from the 5-star Intercontinental Hotel. Kien, a manager at a petroleum company, ordered generously. As we savored the honey-roasted chicken with chewy sticky rice, the grilled fish, and the other dishes that covered our table, Kien reminisced about the period before Vietnam jettisoned the Soviet economic model, when food and other necessities were controlled by the government, rationed with coupons and distributed to the people through an inefficient network of empty state stores with bare shelves. "If it was the harvest of pumpkins, that was all we would be able to buy at the state store with our food coupons. We'd eat pumpkin for a month and nothing else. I can't even look at a pumpkin now without getting sick to the stomach," Kien told us. "People used to raise pigs even in their apartments to supplement their food rations. Pigs were so important to people that they'd refer to a pig as "Mr. Pig" (*ong lon*)," he added. He sighed and smiled, "That's system gone for good. Everything's relaxed and pleasant." We remembered an exhibit about this period—when communist orthodoxy reigned—at the Museum of Ethnography in Hanoi several years ago and which we visited during one of our previous trips. Older people came in droves to see it, shaking their heads at the memories it stirred and marveling at

how they had managed to survive the hardships. Their sons and daughters shrugged, uninterested in the past and too busy pursuing the life that has opened up for them.

The Lucky 3 hotel is close to the silk shop my grandmother used to own on Hang Gai Street. Of all the places where my family had lived in the North and which I had revisited, this street and this shop hold a special place in my heart and mind. They remind me of my mother's happy childhood here and stir in me affection for a grandmother I only know from stories my mother passed on to me and my siblings. I always feel nostalgic when I am on Hang Gai Street looking at what used to be the shop. I imagine the life my mother led in this long and narrow "tube" house—typical of the shops in the Old Quarters—and I picture my grandmother selling silk threads to the weavers from villages near Hanoi who would travel to the Old Quarters on market days to buy from her.

Early in the morning after we arrived in Hanoi, I took Bryan to see the shop. It is now an art gallery and is flanked by stores selling clothing and other souvenirs to tourists. Across the street, the banyan tree I remembered was still there, shading the sidewalk and the small temple in the back. The stalks of old joss sticks protruded from the incense urn nestled in a small shrine at its base, left by people who continue to worship its mighty spirit. We opened the gate and entered the temple, and the smell of incense evoked the trips I made with my mother to Hanoi's many pagodas, temples, and shrines. I felt sad, remembering how much she regretted that old age and its infirmities had kept her from returning before she died in Paris in 2007. I knew she would have loved to light incense one more time at this temple and at the base of the banyan tree.

Walking back to our hotel, we had to dodge traffic at every intersection. Bryan marveled at a man who was texting on his smartphone with his left hand while steering his motorbike with his right. We looked through the windows of the convenience stores, the shops, the hotels, restaurants, and cafés that dot the Old Quarters, once sleepy and moribund but now awakened from its economic slump and pulsing with the energy of commerce. At night, street vendors set out their low tables and even lower chairs, and diners devour dishes such as *pho* and grilled pork with fresh noodles, littering the sidewalk with scraps which will be collected by street sweepers later.

With local SIM cards installed in our iPhones, I called my cousin Thuc, the youngest daughter of my Uncle Chinh and one of the devoted custodians of our family's shrine and tombs in Van Dinh Village. As for most returning overseas Vietnamese, a visit to my family's village and tombs

is a must. For me as for them, it is a way to reconnect to our homeland and to renew our bonds with our extended family. I asked Thuc to organize the trip for us so that we could pay respects at the shrine and tombs and Bryan could discover his family's roots. My relatives in Vietnam have succeeded in getting our ancestral temple in Van Dinh, as well as my great-grandfather's tomb in Tao Khe Village, located next to Van Dinh, classified as historical sites. The official classification gives prestige to the sites and protects them from vandalism and destruction. Descendants in Vietnam and across the globe—scattered here and there after the end of the war in 1975, when they fled the communist takeover—have contributed money to restore and refurbish the structures. Even as they surf the Web and use apps, they cling to the old belief that ancestral graves and temples have power over their lives and the lives of their children, grandchildren, and those who will come after them.

The best time to visit these tombs is during the Thanh Minh Festival, which, when we were there, was in full swing. For a period of ten days in the third month of the lunar year, or April in the Western calendar, people make pilgrimages to their relatives' graves to spruce them up and commemorate the dead. The government has loosened its control and abandoned its effort to force society into a communist mold, and is now tolerating old customs and traditions that it used to condemn as feudalistic and wasteful practices. As it becomes more tolerant, my uncle Chinh, once vilified as a landlord and persecuted during land reform in 1953, is now worshiped as a guardian spirit of the village where he used to live. When they were invited to the dedication ceremony at the village temple, my cousins initially hesitated. They remembered the persecution inflicted on their family when land reform got underway. The memory of the hatred was still fresh in their minds. In the end, however, they decided to attend. To their relief, the villagers welcomed them warmly. Many remembered how Uncle Chinh had saved their families from starvation when flooding and requisitions by occupying Japanese forces caused a famine in 1944–45. Now, they felt free to express their gratitude openly without being condemned as followers of a landlord.

My family's tombs are scattered, as the dead are buried in auspicious sites—next to a river, or smack in the middle of rice fields—to ensure the welfare of descendants. My grandmother was buried in a plot of land that looks like the head of an elephant, considered auspicious. Thuc, who grew up under the communists, is devoted to ancestor worship and makes frequent visits to Van Dinh. She remembers exactly where each site is located. Like a homing pigeon, and without the benefit of GPS,

she knows which route to take, which turn-off on an unpaved road or which path overgrown with weeds will lead to which tomb. Bryan took out his iPhone and pinned each destination on Google Maps so that others in the family can find the sites on their own.

My niece Bich Lan and her husband Nam—who almost fell to his death in a mad dash to flee Saigon in 1975, from the skids of a helicopter lifting off from the roof of a building rumored to be a CIA villa—came with us to visit the family's village for the first time. They now live in Sydney and visit Vietnam frequently. Their oldest daughter, a lawyer, lives in Vancouver and their son, a bank finance officer in Sydney, is married to an accountant from China. My family now also includes in-laws from the United States, Canada, France, England, Italy, Ireland, Chile, New Zealand, South Africa, Hong Kong, and Ukraine. My family tree is growing in ways the ancestors buried in Van Dinh and its surrounding areas could never have imagined in their wildest dreams.

We rode in a comfortable sixteen-seat van. Thuc knew the van driver. She has hired him for numerous trips to Van Dinh and he knows the itinerary. Thuc and Trung, her husband, have loaded stacks of offerings in the back of the van: sticky-rice cakes, pork sausage, biscuits, fruit, flowers, incense sticks, small bottles of rice wine, and votive money. We will burn the money, wads of photocopied, blurry $100 bills with the faded images of Benjamin Franklin, to send to our ancestors. They will redeem the bills at the Underworld Bank and use the money to buy necessities, maybe even fly to California to visit us.

Once a sleepy and moribund city, Hanoi is growing by leaps and bounds and expanding in all directions. We passed through what is called New Hanoi, with high-rises and housing developments. The city has become a gigantic shopping mall. Stores line the streets in unbroken succession. Hanoi, like Saigon, is filled with energy. Everywhere, traffic is chaotic. International chains have set up hotels; the Opera Hilton is located next to the Opera House, a replica of the Palais Garnier in Paris. The Métropole, once rat-infested and run-down, has again become one of the grand hotels of the colonial era in Southeast Asia.

As we passed through a village—formerly famous as the manufacturing hub for firecrackers, which are now banned—Thuc turned her head toward me and told me that we would do our visit according to the proper family hierarchy. We would start at the ancestral temple to worship our oldest ancestors, then visit the tomb of Duc Thang, the man whose encounter with a stranger changed our clan's fortune. After that we would visit the tomb of Duong Lam, our great-grandfather, and

then those of our grandfather and grandmother. Thuc said that unless we observed this order, our ancestors would get angry and make our van break down. This was what happened to a relative who failed to observe the correct order of visits. Another relative, while kneeling at the tomb of our great-grandfather, a high-ranking mandarin in the court of Emperor Thanh Thai, saw his ancestor's apparition at the top of the mound wearing his court costume, his beard flowing. Thuc's tone told me that she believed their spirits were still powerful and could intervene in our lives. She instructed us to place our hands on the grave of our grandfather and pray. If we did this, whatever we prayed for would come true, she said.

Thus, we made our pilgrimage to every family grave and prayed. At each tomb, we spread out the offerings. Trung lit the incense sticks and distributed them to us. He put the rest in an incense urn and pointed out to me with awe how the sticks had suddenly burst into tiny flames, a sign that our ancestors were happy that we had come to visit their graves. Next to me, Thuc whispered fervently as she prayed to the souls of the departed, talking to them as if they were sitting right across from us. At the end of the ritual, Trung burned the votive money and poured the rice wine over the ashes. This would prevent demons lurking nearby from stealing it, he told me. When we finished our round of visits, we returned to the ancestral hall for a lunch prepared by a local woman. Van Dinh is famous for duck, so she lay out grilled duck with herbs and dipping sauce and a rice soup—also made with duck. The guardian of the ancestral hall, a distant relative, poured his home-made rice alcohol into tiny cups and we lifted our drinks to celebrate our family gathering. From the front porch of the temple, we gazed at the well-kept garden and the large carved marble incense urn.

After five days in Hanoi, we flew to Hue, the former capital of the Nguyen, the last imperial dynasty of Vietnam. My family viewed the Nguyen as our benefactors, and it was under Emperor Thanh Thai that my great-grandfather reached the highest peak of his career as a mandarin. To my great-grandfather, Hue—as the residence of the emperors—was like the center of his universe. After a couple of hot and humid days, during which we played tourists, visiting the major former imperial sites—the Imperial Citadel and the royal tomb of Emperor Minh Mang—we flew to Saigon. I remember flying from Hanoi to Saigon in a decrepit Soviet-era plane with malfunctioning air conditioning that filled the interior with sprays of water vapor. Our plane had all the amenities.

Saigon, now known as Ho Chi Minh City, has changed even more drastically than Hanoi. It has sprawled and is starting to absorb towns on its fringes. It has also been spruced up and become cleaner. The refugees fleeing the fighting in the countryside during the Vietnam War are gone, along with the lean-tos they erected against the walls of houses and villas. The economic boom spurs demand for housing. Real estate prices for homes and offices have soared. My parents' humble two-room home in an alley, remodeled into a three-story house, is now worth around half a million dollars. Wealthy investors are building high-rises. One skyscraper soars 68 stories high and has its own helicopter landing pad. Housing complexes look like they have been transported from American cities, bearing names like Central Park, Golden River, and Saigon Pearl. Property ownership is now allowed and the rich are buying condos to park their money. Along with foreigners and overseas Vietnamese (like two of my nephews in Australia), they are buying up units. One complex that we toured will have a park, a marina, a clinic, a school, a central tower that will house a luxury hotel, shops, restaurants, and cafés, and several residential high-rises. Many retired Americans have chosen to live in Vietnam year-round or part of the year. An Army colleague of Dave's divides his time between his Saigon condo and his house on Maui. Nha Trang, located on the central coast, is now listed as one of the world's best places to live for American retirees. Gone are the days when American combat troops in Vietnam could not wait to return to "the world" and for whom Vietnam was a deadly backwater.

My relatives, no longer bound by coupons that restricted them to buying necessities like rice, sugar, and cloth, can shop in the myriad of boutiques that have sprung up throughout Saigon and in shopping malls. The fanciest malls, with stores like Chanel and Louis Vuitton, are located on the old Rue Catinat, also known as Tu Do. Old charming stores have been demolished to make room for these malls. But like most Vietnamese, my relatives go to these malls mainly to enjoy the air conditioning and eat in the food courts. The *cyclos* I used to ride in have been banned from the center of town to make way for the motorbikes and cars. A metro is being built with Japanese help to relieve the congested streets choked with motorbikes and, increasingly, more and more cars. Harley-Davidson has a store and a membership club. Bryan, who loves motorcycles, had to make a stop there to buy a t-shirt with a Saigon logo. David, who remembers the Saigon of the 1960s, when the city still retained many of its old charms that gave it the name of Pearl

of the Orient, shook his head at its transformation into another Bangkok or another Singapore.

Though my relatives struggled after the war ended in 1975, they are now doing well. Some cousins in Hanoi sold their cramped family home to a foreign-owned hotel chain, split the money, and built houses in which they live separately with their own families. Others sold their parts of the houses, which at one point they had to share with up to twelve families of strangers, taken the money, and built themselves comfortable new homes. Those who have done best have taken advantage of economic liberalization and gone into business for themselves. Others are getting along reasonably well by working two jobs. On the whole, they enjoy more freedom. They can decide where they want to live, no longer restricted by the *ho khau* (household) system, copied from the Chinese communists, without which they would not have been able to find jobs or buy food. They can travel abroad. They can work wherever they find employment instead of being assigned jobs by the government. They are free to worship though the government keeps a tight leash on the Catholic Church, Buddhist monks, and religious sects like the Cao Dai and the Hoa Hao, monitoring them to detect any effort to organize opposition. Political freedom remains limited. They can criticize the Communist Party and the government in private only. Open opposition is ruthlessly suppressed and Amnesty International ranks Vietnam near the top for its violations of human rights.

My relatives are lucky to have found jobs that allow them to lead a comfortable life. Unemployment and underemployment are high, as the economy cannot grow fast enough, even with strong foreign investment, to absorb the workers that enter the workforce every year. Economic inequality is growing, with the gap between the rich and the poor widening. This wealth divide, combined with widespread corruption, has fueled deep popular dissatisfaction. However, this discontent is kept under check by the Communist Party, which retains sole control of the country and the government. The security apparatus is efficient. It keeps the country safe but it also suppresses dissent swiftly and severely.

We took Bryan to visit the places where we used to live in Saigon. The areas around our former homes and the houses and apartments themselves have become unrecognizable. We wrack our brains, trying to conjure up details that might help us locate them. A few things—an old balcony, an entry way—offered clues. The RAND building where I once worked is now a kindergarten and has expanded to absorb a couple

of neighboring houses. Large pictures of giraffe on the fence block the view of what remains of the old villa.

We rented a van and drove on a new high-speed highway to My Tho in the Mekong Delta, where Dave and I lived from 1965 to 1967. The town had grown and we had trouble locating our old house at 27 Hung Vuong Street. It is a restaurant now, with outdoor seating and tables shaded by a thatched roof to give it a rustic atmosphere. When we drove to My Tho several years before, the house had been turned into the "OK Karaoke Bar." The karaoke craze must have come and gone. For lunch, our van driver took us to the "Mekong Stop," a restaurant that can seat hundreds of customers, with nicely landscaped grounds and clean flush toilets with soap and hand driers. Waiters and waitresses roam the open restaurant, communicating with each other and the kitchen staff through tiny microphones, like those worn by singers performing on stage. Indeed, if dining out is a measure of prosperity, the restaurants in Hanoi and Saigon indicate that the Vietnamese have come a long way from the days when they could only dream of eating at restaurants like "Sen" in Hanoi—cavernous, brightly lit, a bit over the top with gilt, glass, mirrors, marble and chandeliers—where those with money come to sample native and foreign cuisine, buffet style, with dishes like spaghetti, stuffed clams, and roast beef. Today, there are Vietnamese millionaires and even billionaires—like the woman who has started a domestic airline and puts bikini-clad models on flights and calendars. But the rising tide has not lifted all boats. The prosperity is like a thin blanket thrown over a society where the poor and marginal struggle to get some of the crumbs of economic development.

Even vestiges of the war for independence against the French and of the Vietnam War were hard to find. Friends and relatives who had gone to Dien Bien Phu, the scene of the climactic battle that forced France to sue for peace with the Viet Minh led by Ho Chi Minh in 1954, told me that they had found few physical remnants of this historic event. When we returned to Ap Bac in the Mekong Delta in 2016, we found that most of the colorful markers for the 1963 battle—a turning point in which the fledgling insurgents learned they could defeat South Vietnamese troops supported by American helicopters and armored personnel carriers—had been removed from the rice fields. The site is not as thrilling as when we first saw it in 2007. Gone, too, is the display of a helicopter and an armored personnel carrier. A small dark museum behind a metal garage door houses a few artifacts. The authenticity and immediacy of the battle are no longer there. Lack of funding, indifference, and

the desire to move on are slowly obliterating physical reminders of the defining moments in Vietnam's modern history.

What about the memory of the Vietnam War in Vietnam? In 1993, the sorrow of the war still hung in the air. Large cemeteries dotted the landscape, like hovering, soulful reminders to the living of their sacrifices. Mothers and fathers of the missing in action traveled through old battlefields to look for their remains so that they could be given a proper burial—without which their souls would remain disconsolate. In 2016, the cemeteries are still there but we do not see visitors. The Museum of American War Crimes draws mainly foreign tourists. The younger generations do not care about the independence war or the Vietnam War, or battles like Dien Bien Phu and Ap Bac. Even the more recent Vietnam War does not intrude in unguarded moments. They did not live through its agony and do not want to know of its sadness. Why dwell on the war when life beckons and the excitement and worries of the present crowd out any desire to learn about the fighting and the dead?

In Hanoi, we met a young Vietnamese-American working in the Political Section of the U.S. Embassy who was preparing for President Barack Obama's visit to Vietnam in 2016. He is one of thousands of Vietnamese-Americans who have returned to work and live in a country their families fled in panic at the end of the war in 1975. I remember going to Vietnam in November 2000 as part of an unofficial Vietnamese-American delegation traveling with President Bill Clinton, Hillary and Chelsea Clinton for a state visit, the first ever by an American president since the end of the war. His arrival marked the restoration of diplomatic relations between the two former foes. The American embargo, which had strangled the Vietnamese economy, had been lifted and foreign investments were beginning to pour into the country. People lined the route from the airport into Hanoi to cheer "Bill" as if the war had never happened. I remember sitting in the balcony of an auditorium in Hanoi, listening to President Clinton deliver his speech to the Vietnamese people, with the bust of Ho Chi Minh in the back of his podium. I thought I was dreaming. Since then, relations between the two former enemies have improved to the point that they have become unofficial allies. American warships now pay port visits to Vietnam. Former Defense Secretary Ashton Carton suggested that the three-decade-old ban on arms sales be lifted. As of this writing, Vietnam is sponsoring a meeting with U.S. defense industry companies like Boeing and Lockheed Martin in anticipation of the lifting of the ban.

Indeed, today, both Vietnam and the United States face a vastly changed security landscape in Asia, with China rising as a superpower and as a threat to its neighbors. Along with a number of countries in Southeast Asia, Vietnam is embroiled in a territorial dispute with China over the Spratlys and Paracels islands in the South China Seas (which Vietnamese prefer to call the Eastern Seas). To enhance its claim, China has built up some reefs and turned them into military bases, endangering the freedom of navigation and impeding the flow of commerce through this crucial ocean passage. China's rise also challenges U.S. power in the Asia Pacific region, and the Chinese territorial ambition destabilizes regional security. Both Vietnam—China's staunch ally during the war—and the United States, then, have an interest in making common cause against Chinese ambition.

During this visit, as well as during previous ones, I felt keenly the absence of relatives. My sister Thang and her husband Hau have passed away. Cousins Luc and Phi also are gone. But I am happy for my sister Yen who has found solace in Buddhism and become a lay nun. She spends part of each year in Paris with her daughter, now married to a French-Vietnamese technician. With two nephews and a niece visiting from Australia, we held two happy family reunions with her sons and Thang's daughters in local restaurants to celebrate our return.

This trip in 2016 with my American husband and son was rewarding for me, especially since Bryan seemed thrilled by the visit. Before we flew from California, I had wondered how he would react. Would he be turned off by the poverty of Vietnam, accustomed as he is to the affluence of America? From the moment we drove into Hanoi, Bryan fell in love with Vietnam. He has become fascinated by his family roots, the cult of ancestors and its rituals, and Vietnam's culture and history, and was thrilled to meet his relatives in Hanoi and Saigon. He has been open to what Vietnam has to offer and has enjoyed practically every experience. He has also been a delightful travel companion. His excitement was contagious and through his eyes we have seen Vietnam afresh, and this made the trip thrilling for us as well.

As my husband and I packed our suitcases in our room at the Continental Hotel, where the writer Graham Greene once stayed and may have written his classic novel *The Quiet American*, I think of those changes, contrasts, and ironies that the years since the end of the war in 1975, and even since 1993, have wrought.

Vietnam has been greatly transformed since then. Modernization and globalization, as well as the lure of American culture and technology,

have given Hanoi and Saigon a more pronounced Western appearance and atmosphere, so that my American son can feel quite at home there. Where will Vietnam go now, I wondered? Will the transformation erase all vestiges of the past? Will the Vietnamese people's attachment to many of their traditions and customs endure? I left hoping that this would be so and that those of my family who come to visit in the future might be able to find the practices—if not the places—that make up this story.

Preface to the Original Edition

Growing up in Hanoi, Haiphong, and Saigon, I loved listening to the stories told by my parents and other relatives about their parents and grandparents. I found these tales fascinating—some funny, some tragic—but although I knew that they spoke of family continuity, values, and Vietnamese traditions, they did not, at first, coalesce in my mind into a narrative larger than the individual parts. It was when I was in my late teens that I began to see how these anecdotes merged into a whole—a tale that reflected, in miniature, the history of Vietnam in the modern era. Still later, I began to see the common threads that ran through the lives of my great-grandfather, grandfather, parents, and siblings: the struggle to adapt and survive in the face of upheavals that more than once turned their world upside down, and the attempt to make the right choices for their families, for themselves, and for their country, often in very confusing circumstances. Someday, I told myself, I would write that story. In this book, *The Sacred Willow*, I hope I have done it justice. The work that follows is based on dozens of interviews that I conducted with my relatives over the years, on family records, on archive documents, on research done on-site in Vietnam, and on information from existing works in English, French, and Vietnamese. It traces the social, cultural,

and political events that have shaped the men and women of our family over four generations—the scholars and mandarins, the silk merchants, the military officers, and the revolutionaries—who were witnesses as well as participants at many of the nation's key moments. These events, beginning in the late nineteenth century, include the French conquest of Vietnam, the war against French colonial rule, the brief years of peace, the socialist transformation of the North, the resumption of fighting in the South with American involvement until the communist victory in 1975, the evacuation of refugees from Saigon, and the effect of the communist victory on my relatives who remained in Vietnam. *The Sacred Willow* is also my story, from my childhood in northern Vietnam to my adolescence in Saigon, my student days in the United States, my meeting and falling in love with my American husband, my life and work in South Vietnam during some of the fiercest years of the war in the 1960s, and my evolution from hawk to dove.

I have chosen to tell my family's story in a scope and depth that, as far as I know, have not been attempted by a narrative work written by a Vietnamese in English. I believe that this provides a continuity that allows readers to see the chain of events unfold from the beginning and follow their impact on my family until the final resolution of the conflict and its aftermath. My purpose is to show Vietnam in all its complexities at peace and at war, good and bad, traditional and transformed. I have elected to tell a story, rather than write an academic analysis, because I believe that a personal narrative can render history more immediate to readers and make them empathize better with the people who lived through the events. Other works published in the West have focused on the French and Americans and have relegated the Vietnamese to the background, but I have shown them—as they saw themselves—as the central players in their own history.

The Vietnamese who appear in American writing (and film) about the war are most often either villagers in combat areas or Saigonese soldiers or bar girls, yet Vietnam had a substantial population of educated, urban, middle-class families, including mine. As the reader will see, this did not mean they were untouched by war and turbulence. I have attempted, above all, to evoke the intense and conflicting feelings of each generation of my family, and others like them. I have presented the dilemma confronting the Duong in choosing sides in the internecine conflicts unleashed by the French conquest, and have shown those conflicts through the eyes of relatives on opposing sides. While most of my relatives threw in their lot with the French and, later on, with

the Americans, others went against personal and family interests to join the communist-led resistance and revolution. These divisions were not unique to my family, and actually extended throughout the middle class, dating from the watershed years of 1945–46, when hundreds of thousands of patriotic Vietnamese joined the communist resistance to fight the French, who were trying to reimpose their colonial rule after Ho Chi Minh had declared independence.

Looking back over this narrative, one of the themes I see in it is the irony and unpredictability of history. The choices each person made had unforeseen consequences that, at times, made losers out of winners. I see also the tenacity of family bonds that, though strained, were ultimately stronger than any political differences. I find it heartening that the Duong, and the Vietnamese people, have survived through the turmoil. Like the willow, they have bent with the wind, but remain unbroken.

Acknowledgments

A book of this scope could not have been written without the generous help of many people. First, I express my gratitude to my parents, especially my mother, who became my main source of information on the family after my father's death in 1979. Second, I thank all my siblings who shared their remembrances with me, in particular my sister Thang, her husband Hau, my brothers Giu, Xuong, Luong, and Tuan, and my sisters Binh, Yen, Tuyet, and Loan. I also convey my appreciation to my cousins, nephews, and nieces, especially Phi, Luc, Thuc, Trung, An, Minh, Lap, Hien, Lan, and Nam, for the information they provided. I want to emphasize that none of my relatives should be held accountable for anything that appears in this book. They supplied the stories, but the interpretation and analysis are mine, and I take full responsibility for them. I am also indebted to many relatives for the family photos, documents, and other information that they gave me, especially my brother-in-law Khiet, my nephew Bao and his father Chuong, and my uncle Tong, who wrote an erudite book about my great-grandfather Duong Lam.

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I am also indebted to the numerous authors—Vietnamese, French, and American—whose books I have relied on to describe the historical background and validate the dates and events in my family story. They can take comfort in the fact that their scholarship has been put to good use. Finally, I could not have gotten this book published without the dedication and commitment of the Wylie Agency, in particular of Jin Auh and Sarah Chalfant, and without the support of Oxford University Press, especially Peter Ginna, who edited my manuscript with great skill and sensitivity. Last, but not least, I thank the numerous relatives and friends who gave me constant encouragement and showed intense interest in my project, and, above all, I express my gratitude to my mother-in-law Louise for her loving support.


CHINA
Red River
NORTH VIETNAM
Dien Bien Phu
Hanoi
Haiphong
GULF OF TONKIN
HAINAN
Thanh Hoa
Mekong River
Vinh
LAOS
TRUONG SON MOUNTAINS
Demilitarized Zone
Vientiane
Quang Tri
Hue
SOUTH CHINA SEA
Da Nang
Mekong River
Ho Chi Minh Trail
THAILAND
SOUTH VIETNAM
CENTRAL HIGHLANDS
CAMBODIA
Nha Trang
Cam Ranh
Bangkok
An Loc
Tay Ninh
Xuan Loc
Phnom Penh
Saigon
GULF OF THAILAND
Ha Tien
SOUTH CHINA SEA
Ca Mau Peninsula
0 100 200 Miles
0 100 200 Kilometers


NORTH VIETNAM
Demilitarized Zone
SOUTH CHINA SEA
Quang Tri
Hue
Khe Sanh
LAOS
Da Nang
Mekong River
THAILAND
Kontum
Pleiku
IA DRANG VALLEY
CENTRAL HIGHLANDS
Ban Me Thuot
CAMBODIA
Nha Trang
Cam Ranh
SOUTH VIETNAM
PHUOC LONG
An Loc
Tay Ninh
Bien Hoa
Phnom Penh
Xuan Loc
Saigon
PLAIN OF REEDS
My Tho
Vung Tau
Ha Tien
SOUTH CHINA SEA
Ca Mau Peninsula
0 50 100 Miles
0 50 100 Kilometers


CHINA
Red River
Cao Bang
Dong Khe
Lao Cay
TUYEN QUANG
Bac Can
Lang Son
Yen Bay
Thai Nguyen
Bac Giang
Phu Tho
Son Tay
Hanoi
Dien Bien Phu
HOA BINH
Van Dinh
Haiphong
THAI BINH
Nam Dinh
Thanh Hoa
NORTH VIETNAM
NGHE AN
LAOS
Mekong River
HA TINH
QUANG BINH
Vinh Linh
Vientiane
Mekong River
THAILAND
Demilitarized Zone
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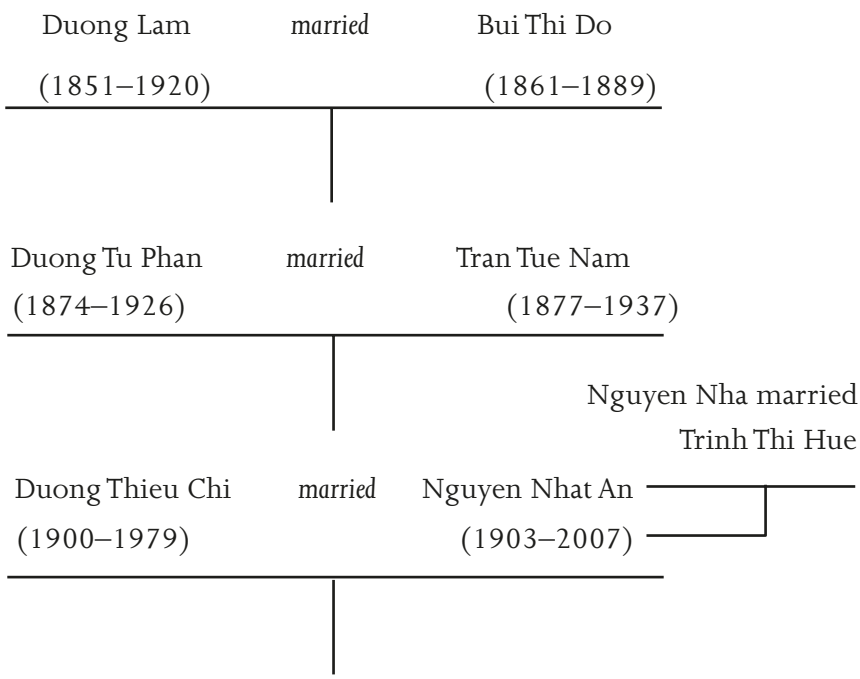
Family Tree



Duong Van Luat (*died in infancy*)
Duong Hong Ta (*died in infancy*)
Duong Van Thang (*died in 2005*)
Duong Van Mao (*died in 1969*)
Duong Hong Hung (*died in infancy*)
Duong Hong Giu
Duong Hong Xuong (*died in 2005*)
Duong Van Phu (*died 1984*)
Duong Hong Luong
Duong Hong Tuan
Duong Van Binh
Duong Van Yen
Duong Hong Nam (*died in infancy*)
Duong Van Mai
Duong Van Cuc (*died in childhood*)
Duong Van Loan
Duong Van Tuyet

1

A Burial in the Night

My family owes its good fortune to a mysterious man. What he did one night changed my ancestors' destiny, leading them from poverty to social prominence.

When this enigmatic figure appeared in my family's story toward the end of the eighteenth century, Vietnam was still in the throes of a civil war that would erupt intermittently and last over 200 years. It was an unsettled time, with several clans backed by armies vying for domination. After their province in the central region of the country had turned into a raging battlefield, my ancestors fled. But there was no safe haven in the next province, or the next, as the opposing armies swept back and forth destroying everything in their

path. So, along with thousands of other desperate peasants, my ancestors kept moving further and further north, trying to escape warfare, drought, and hunger. The trek finally took them to Van Dinh, where they settled down. This village is located on the bank of the Day River, about forty kilometers south of Hanoi. People here earned their livelihood by growing rice. They also grew vegetables in the soil along the bank of the river and sugarcane on higher ground. For extra food, they caught fish, shrimp, and freshwater clams, as well as crabs and snails that became plentiful in the flooded rice fields during the rainy season. The industrious villagers also sold bricks, cooking pots, and toys that they made by using clay scooped from the riverbank.

The Day is a branch of the mighty Red River, which irrigates and nourishes the delta of northern Vietnam with its rich silt. From its source in the mountain range in southern China, the Red River flows for hundreds of miles before pouring into the sea. As it penetrated into the flat delta, this river, enlarged by tributaries, began to course in a bed that was higher than the surrounding plain. During the monsoon, especially in July and August, the river would become menacing. Swollen by the incessant and torrential rainfall, it raged its way to the sea, frequently overflowing its banks and threatening to drown the surrounding land. To tame the floodwaters, an elaborate network of dikes had been constructed centuries before. But the dikes, built with wooden pillars, bamboo poles, and compacted earth, could not always contain the river and its branches. Inundations continued to occur almost every year, killing people and animals, and destroying crops and houses. Bandits usually emerged after the most disastrous inundations, as destitute peasants resorted to armed robbery for survival.

For villages like Van Dinh, the Day River was both a blessing and a bane, providing water to irrigate their lands, but also threatening them with flooding. The river drew the villagers to its rich alluvial soil, but also compelled them to keep their distance, shielded by the dike or safely perched on the higher ground near the marketplace. The thirteen-foot-tall dike, whose flat and wide top also served as the main road into the village, dominated Van Dinh's landscape. When my ancestors arrived, all the desirable housing spots had been taken, so they built their hut near the river's edge, on the "wrong side" of the dike. Whenever the water level rose, the river overflowed into their back yard and occasionally even into their house. As outsiders, my ancestors were viewed with suspicion and discriminated against by the clannish villagers. Most of the rice fields were the communal property of the village and were

distributed only to the indigenous residents for cultivation. Migrants who came to settle like my ancestors were not entitled to a part of the land, and so were deprived of this main source of income. Some of the migrants earned their living by making clay pots, while others survived by doing odd jobs, fishing in the river, and catching crabs and snails in the rice fields. The only hope for them to escape their lowly status and poverty was to produce sons who could become mandarins—officials in the imperial bureaucracy and the elite of society at the time.

Scholars who aspired to become mandarins had to spend years mastering classical Chinese, introduced when China ruled the country from 111 B.C. to A.D. 939, and thereafter retained by the royal court, even after independence had been achieved, as the official language for all its documents. In addition, these scholars had to digest a daunting body of Chinese writings, learn how to compose elegant prose and poetry, and memorize Vietnamese and Chinese history, in order to pass a series of progressively more difficult exams. The goal of this education was not to encourage original thinking, but to produce men of culture who could master the wisdom of Confucius and his disciples and apply it to protect the welfare of the people. The higher the degree earned, the higher the potential appointment would be within the imperial bureaucracy and the faster the rise to the top. Only a relatively small number of people had the ambition and the persistence to pursue this career path.

My ancestors, who descended from scholars, were determined to continue their family's tradition, in spite of their poverty. The men focused on their studies and did odd jobs on the side. They survived mainly because their wives were able to contribute to the meager income by buying and selling goods at the various local markets. Every three years, the men tried their chances at the civil service exams, hoping to pass and to earn a position in the bureaucracy which would give them power and prestige and a steady income.

The mysterious man's connection with my family began with his friendship with Duc Thang, my ancestor of six generations ago. By this time, my family had lived in Van Dinh for about a hundred years. Three generations had come and gone, without achieving any noticeable success. Duc Thang himself struggled to survive after bandits ransacked and burned down his hut several times. He knew that the only way to escape his predicament was to study hard and pass the exam.

At this time, most people could not read or write. Whenever illiterate people needed to have something recorded, they would go to students, scholars, or retired mandarins for help. In exchange, they would pay

them a small sum or, since barter was common, give them betel leaves, areca nuts, rice wine, tea, or a combination of these. Duc Thang used to sit outside the gate of a pagoda near his village and hire himself out to the faithful, writing prayers in Chinese characters in exchange for a small fee. When worshipers had a big favor to ask of the deities, they would burn such messages in a special trough inside the pagoda courtyard to convey their pleas to the gods.

One day, the mysterious man in my family's lore showed up at the pagoda. He liked Duc Thang immediately and they became friends. But after Duc Thang stopped visiting the pagoda, the man lost contact with him. Several years later, he decided to look for him in Van Dinh. When he arrived, disguised as a poor traveler, he learned that Duc Thang had been dead for many years. He found Duc Thang's house as evening fell. The poverty he saw was appalling. Without telling her who he was, he asked Duc Thang's widow for some water to wash his dusty feet. Although he looked poor, she greeted him with kindness and hospitality. He thought she was worthy of help and revealed that he was a geomancer, someone who could read signs in the earth and identify auspicious spots for burial sites to ensure the good fortune of future generations. He said, "I can show you where to put your husband's grave so that your descendants will have a better life. But you must tell me first whether you want them to be rich or to become successful scholars and mandarins." She answered, "I want them to have success and prestige, not wealth." Her choice made sense because, during the time in which she lived, scholars and mandarins were the most respected social classes. The wealthy, on the other hand, were despised because people believed that commerce, the usual source of money for the rich, was a parasitic—if not dishonest—occupation.

The mysterious man listened to her and said, "I'll help you get your wish. I know of a very good location for a grave in the village. I want you to dig up your husband's bones and rebury them there." But she protested. Exhumation was out of the question: she did not have the money to buy a clay pot in which to put the bones for reburial, as required by custom. The stranger reassured her, "Don't worry, just use a bamboo basket, if you can't afford to buy a clay pot." At exactly midnight, the man asked Duc Thang's widow and son to take him to the grave. After the bones had been dug up and placed in the basket, he told them to follow him. Guided only by starlight, they made their way to the new site the man had chosen. It turned out to be located in the middle of a common graveyard, where only wretched people without relatives or descendants

to take care of their graves were buried. Wandering souls resided here, forever disconsolate because no one was burning joss sticks or making offerings to their spirits. Duc Thang's widow wept with disappointment and clung to the basket, refusing to bury the bones here. The stranger soothed her, "Don't worry. This is an auspicious site. In three years, all the other graves will be relocated. With them gone, the earth's currents will be unblocked and will flow directly into your husband's grave." Before leaving, he told her not to build a tomb over the grave. He also wrote a cryptic poem predicting that future generations would produce scholars and mandarins as she had wished.

Earth termites later built up the mound so that the grave, unrestricted by construction, kept growing year by year, an encouraging sign that it had been placed in powerful earth currents. It is said that if you stood on high ground and looked down at the grave, you would see that the contours of the earth around it formed the shape of an ink slab and a brush, the writing implements used by a scholar. You would also see the shape of a horse, a mount that a scholar rode on his triumphant return to his village, after winning the *tien si*, or doctorate degree—the pinnacle of academic achievement and a door-opener to a high position in the government. When I visited Duc Thang's grave in October 1993, I was astonished to find that, after almost 200 years, the mound had not been leveled by the passage of time. While all the old graves in the vicinity had disappeared, Duc Thang's burial site could still be seen protruding over the rice fields surrounding it. The ink slab and the brush had, unfortunately, been turned into rice fields, and the horse had had his left foot clipped when a nearby road was built. Because of this injury to the horse's left foot, people in my clan have become prone to accidents involving the left leg. When I fell and broke my left kneecap in 1981, I became another casualty of the carelessness of those road builders.

For about a hundred years after he first appeared in our history, we did not know who the mysterious stranger was. Then, one night, my great-grandfather spoke to the god of Tan Vien Mountain, Vietnam's most sacred peak, through a medium. This spirit, a mythical figure associated with the origins of our people, told him that this enigmatic person was a monk who had taken the ordained name of Thanh Tinh Thien Su, or Master of Purity and Serenity. From that day onward, my great-grandfather began to worship the monk as if he were one of our ancestors. On the anniversaries of their deaths and at Tet, our lunar new year, when he prayed to their departed souls, he would also thank this holy man for his deed. This became a tradition for my clan. The predictions came true

starting with the generation of Duc Thang's son, who became a mandarin and launched the family on the path of success and better fortune. Among Duc Thang's descendants, the most successful were my great-grandfather Duong Lam and his older brother Duong Khue.

Duong Lam was born in 1851, the third year of Emperor Tu Duc's reign during the Nguyen dynasty, the one that had emerged triumphant from the long civil war and that would be the last to exist. Following in the footsteps of his forebears, he immersed himself for years in the study of philosophy, history, and poetry, under his father's tutelage in the hope of becoming a scholar and a mandarin and earning fame and prestige for himself and for his family. A strict adherent to Confucian dictates, he believed that this would be the best way for him to fulfill the hopes of his parents and show his gratitude. He was an excellent student, mastering the art of writing prose and poetry. But scholastic brilliance could not always guarantee success. Vietnamese believed that fate as well as justice beyond the grave could dictate the outcome of an exam. As the candidates struggled with their materials during an exam, the souls of those they had wronged in a previous life could come back to seek revenge and cause them to fail, while those that owed them a debt in a previous incarnation could return to help them turn in a stellar performance.

The first-level examination consisted of three to four sessions. Candidates who passed all of them received what can be called a master's degree—or *cu nhan*—and those who passed all but one earned a *tu tai*—or a bachelor's degree—the lowest in the system. The examination was extremely competitive, and only a few candidates were chosen out of a field of thousands, with usually twenty to twenty-five master's degrees and seventy to seventy-five bachelor's degrees at each site. Seven major categories of complex if not incomprehensible rules governed all the exams, and an infraction could result in disqualification or even imprisonment, depending on the seriousness of the oversight or offense. A careless juxtaposition of words unintentionally implying a criticism of the throne was considered *lèse-majesté* and could land the candidate in jail.

The exam tested not only a candidate's intellect, but also his mental and physical endurance. Due to the huge number of candidates at each site, there were no permanent exam rooms. Instead, each candidate had to bring his own tent, a portable bamboo couch that also served as a writing table, paper, brushes, ink, water, and food, as each session lasted all day and candidates were not allowed to leave the site. On exam day, the candidates had to arrive before daybreak and submit themselves to

a thorough search by the guards before being allowed inside, to make sure they were not smuggling in any written materials along with their paraphernalia.

Strict measures were taken to prevent cheating. Sentinels standing guard in watchtowers and soldiers patrolling on horseback kept vigil to prevent candidates from sneaking into one another's tent and offering help. To make sure that the papers submitted by the candidate had been composed at the site and not prepared beforehand and smuggled in, the first ten or so pages used by each candidate were stamped with an official seal, and the manuscript had to be stamped again at noon on the exam day. An elaborate procedure for selecting the examiners and for grading was observed to prevent cheating. Mandarins appointed as examiners were chosen from outside the region where the exam was to be held. At the site, they were put in cramped quarters, and held virtually like prisoners until the sessions were over, completely cut off from the outside world, and even unable to communicate among themselves. The manuscripts submitted to them for grading were anonymous, with the candidates' names removed and bearing only coded numbers. Two sets of examiners independently graded each manuscript, and the cumulative grade stood as the final grade, to ensure objectivity and avoid favoritism or cheating. As an added precaution, a military mandarin with no ties to the examiners was put in charge of keeping watch over them and enforcing order at the site.

In his first try at the regional examination, in 1867 at age sixteen, my great-grandfather did not succeed completely, getting only the bachelor's degree. If he was disappointed, he would also have felt comforted by the fact that he had done better than thousands of other scholars who never managed to earn even this degree, and spent their youth making repeated but fruitless attempts. Brilliant scholars who failed were not despised but simply pitied because fate did not reward their talent, and *hoc tai thi phan*—"learning depends on one's ability, but succeeding at the exams depends on one's fate"—became the common lament for those cursed with bad luck at the exam site.

If he were living in normal times, my great-grandfather would have focused his energy only on succeeding in the next exam. But Vietnam was under French attacks. After taking over the southern region in 1867, the French embarked on a conquest of the northern part of the country. In 1873, their troops bombarded and stormed Hanoi's citadel. Outgunned, the governor of Hanoi felt he had only one honorable response. Wounded and taken prisoner, he ripped off his bandages

and committed suicide by starving himself to death. After Hanoi fell into their hands, French forces moved out to conquer the surrounding area. The campaign gave my great-grandfather the opportunity to prove himself. He recruited and trained militiamen to defend a citadel in his native district that stood in the way of the French advance. Under his leadership, the citadel resisted the enemy siege for two months. It was ultimately spared when the French withdrew from the North after their commander was killed in a skirmish in a Hanoi that had not been completely pacified. For his achievement, Duong Lam was later cited by the court in its official account of those events.

With the departure of the French, things returned to normal. In 1878, Duong Lam took the mandarin exam again and not only earned the *cu nhan* degree, but took the highest honor as the valedictorian. In a country that revered learning, Duong Lam's success won him instant fame. After that, the last prize for him to pursue was the *tien si*, equivalent to the doctorate. But first, he would have to make the arduous trip to Hue, the imperial capital, where this series of exams was held. Hundreds of miles lay between Van Dinh and Hue. He would have to get there and back on foot and by boat, sailing along the shore of the South China Sea, then making his way by land through jungles and mountains. The trip took over a month.

The imperial exam, held every three years, was extremely competitive. Each time, only ten scholars out of a field of 150 to 200 candidates would be chosen. The exam would begin with three rigorous sessions. Those that passed would sit for a fourth, held in the Imperial Palace, with subjects chosen by the emperor himself. Sometimes, an emperor would even grade the exams personally. If the candidates succeeded, they would earn the doctorate degree. If not, they would become "candidate doctors." My great-grandfather entered the first round of exams with great confidence. But although he turned in brilliant papers, he was disqualified because of a minor infraction. For the rest of his life, this twist of fate would nag at him. When his oldest son, my grandfather, also failed the same exam years later, it was like rubbing salt in the wound. The family was finally vindicated in 1919 when my oldest uncle Tuong earned the doctorate degree, in the last *tien si* exam to be held in Vietnam.

The failure rankled even more because Duong Lam's older brother Duong Khue, whom he measured himself against, had taken and passed this exam in 1868, and had received the honors that Duong Lam would never have the chance to enjoy. My great-granduncle could easily have failed as well. According to my family's lore, when Duong Khue sat for

the palace exam, he and the other candidates were asked to write an essay on a topic Emperor Tu Duc had chosen himself: "Make War or Make Peace." The imperial Council of Ministers was then hotly debating this issue. The court was split. On one side were those that wanted to make peace with the French. On the other side were those that wanted to go to war to get back the southern provinces that the emperor had been forced to cede to France. The emperor took the opportunity of the exam to test the best minds in the country on this issue. For the candidates, it was a loaded topic, because they had no way of knowing what the emperor himself was thinking. However they came down on the issue, they might run the risk of offending the throne.

Duong Khue managed to avoid trouble by submitting a tactful essay, opposing the concession the emperor had made, but avoiding a direct criticism of the throne. He wrote simply that as a loyal subject he had wept upon reading the royal edict announcing the loss of territory to the French. Then he went on to recommend that the court go to war to expel the foreigners. The emperor liked the composition, but did not agree with this suggestion, and wrote the comment "Not appropriate to the situation" in vermillion ink in the margin. That was not the last time my great-granduncle recommended going to war. He would do this two more times in petitions he addressed to the throne. This audacity could have cost him his career, if not his freedom or even his head.

After passing the exam, Duong Khue was granted an audience with the emperor, entertained at a royal banquet, given a robe and a hat adorned with a silver flower design of his own choosing, and invited to stroll the imperial garden. The emperor also gave him a gift of precious cinnamon bark that had been presented to the court as tribute, observing, "We notice that *tien si* Duong Khue does not look well. We instruct him to take care of his health so that he can serve the country." This was a great honor, since this cinnamon—a kind found on only a few trees out of thousands growing in a cinnamon forest—was believed to be a wonder drug, capable of curing innumerable diseases, and even of bringing the dying back to life.

My great-grandfather Duong Lam chafed over his failure, but did not have the luxury of indulging in anger and disappointment. The French were back. After a third attempt, they occupied Hanoi in 1883. Although it would take France twelve years to pacify the North, this date marked the end of Vietnamese independence. Sporadic and localized armed resistance against French domination would continue until the last band of rebels was subdued in 1913. But it had become clear to most people

after 1883 that military struggle would be futile and would bring only further death and destruction to the people. For the mandarins, the choice was either to accept the situation and collaborate, or to resist passively by resigning or refusing to take up their posts when appointed. Most had to adapt and to cooperate, to avoid retaliation against themselves and their families. Most were also driven to cooperation because government work, the only career they were trained for, was the most viable means for them to support their families.

Following the conquest, the North became a French protectorate and assumed the name of Tonkin. The emperor would continue to rule this region through a viceroy, but all the latter's decisions had to be presented to and approved by the French official representative, called a *résident supérieur*. In addition, French officials were placed at the head of each province to oversee the mandarins who, however, were allowed to retain most of their autonomy. From that date onward, the French presence would drastically change my great-grandfather's life and career.

In 1884, when the French consolidated their hold over the North, my great-grandfather had just begun his mandarin career, having become district magistrate in Ha Dong province in 1883. The goal he had struggled for was finally within his grasp. Yet, as fate would have it, the moment of triumph would become clouded only months later by the loss of independence. He stayed in this position for three years, but his heart was not in it. He resigned in 1886, using his mother's illness as an excuse, the first of many resignations during his career. But time and again, he would be forced to resume government service, either in response to official summonses that he could not turn down, to meet his family's heavy financial burdens, or to do the little he could to help his country in its hour of need.

For the rest of his life, until his retirement, he would feel the conflicting pull of what scholars at the time called "engagement" and "withdrawal." Should he, as a scholar trained to serve the court and the country, join the government and risk getting stigmatized by collaborating with the French? Or should he abstain from dealing with affairs of state, even if he could make some difference, and keep his reputation intact? He would also struggle with the issue of loyalty, a value that scholars considered central to their lives. Could he, in "engaging," separate loyalty to the court from loyalty to France, which controlled it? And could he, as a mandarin, be loyal to the people and their welfare, without also furthering the interests of France? Despite his frequent discomfort and discouragement at "engaging" himself, he always met his mandarin

responsibilities head-on. He knew he could not singlehandedly change the situation, so he carried on as best he could and bided his time, waiting for the opportunity to reverse his country's fate. Unfortunately, this opportunity never came during his lifetime.

A year after he resigned as district magistrate, the dilemma presented itself in the form of a summons. Nguyen Huu Do, the first viceroy of Tonkin following the French conquest, appointed my great-grandfather as his assistant. It was an honor and a demand that Duong Lam could not have rejected. If he had refused, the court and the French would have viewed his decision as an act of opposition. Besides, by this time, he had a large family to support: a wife, three children, and two parents without an income of their own. So this appointment, giving him a sizable salary, was too attractive to turn down. Thus began a long period of "engagement" for my great-grandfather, one that would last for ten years.

His new position was a double-edged sword. The viceroy admired and trusted him, but Duong Lam's power created enemies. Complaints that he was using his influence to put his friends in key positions soon reached the ears of the French. They became alarmed and suspected that my great-grandfather was trying to create a political network. There was perhaps some substance to the charges. But more probably Duong Lam was simply fulfilling his personal obligations. In Vietnam there was a saying that "when one man becomes a mandarin, the whole clan can benefit from his position." So my great-grandfather must have been under intense pressure from relatives as well as friends to give them jobs in the government. If he had refused to help, he would have been accused of failing to meet his obligations—a serious criticism in a society that prized good personal relationships.

Duong Lam's influence continued to rise even after the death of the viceroy at the end of 1888. Tran Luu Hue, the new viceroy, admired and trusted him as much as the previous one, and even promoted him to a higher grade. This official came to rely on my great-grandfather so much that Duong Lam's jealous colleagues began to complain that he was the real viceroy of Tonkin. Hanoi, as the seat of power for North Vietnam, was full of intrigues, where the more unscrupulous mandarins jockeyed for positions and influence, tried to curry favors with the new French masters, and did not hesitate to resort to slander and anonymous denunciations to bring down their rivals. Even jealous relatives could turn into enemies, such as the one in Van Dinh who denounced Duong Lam and his older brother to the French in 1888, accusing them of seditious activities. This was a serious allegation that could have cost Duong

Lam and his brother their freedom, if not their lives, and ruined their families.

Duong Lam's colleagues' complaints about him became more vociferous. This time, the French reaction was more serious. One high-ranking official, a member of the *résident supérieur*'s cabinet, expressed his uneasiness over Duong Lam in a memo, in which he called my great-grandfather brilliant but too arrogant, and advocated removing him from the viceroy's circle. When the viceroy and Duong Lam became personally linked by the marriage of their children—my grandfather and grandmother—they had to inform the authorities of this relationship, in conformity with a law that the French had established to prevent collusion among high officials. My great-grandfather had to request a transfer, and the French gladly complied, transferring him in 1889 to Hung Hoa, a distant province.

The year 1889 was a trying one for my great-grandfather. His first wife died, and he had to pull up stakes and move from the capital of Hanoi to a trouble spot. Duong Lam had married his first wife, the daughter of a governor, when she was thirteen years old, a very acceptable age considering that girls past the age of sixteen were already considered too old to marry. My family's chronicle did not say much about my great-grandmother (or any of my female ancestors, for that matter) except to praise her virtues, in particular her filial piety, her devotion to her husband and children, and her harmonious relationship with everyone. Family records were not written to reveal the truth, but to inspire awe and respect for ancestors. So my great-grandmother was held up as the model of a "great and virtuous lady."

When she fell ill, my great-grandfather took a month-long leave of absence to care for her at their residence in Hanoi. But his ministrations and those of the doctor failed. At her death, my great-grandmother left five children, the youngest newly born. Still reeling from this tragedy, my great-grandfather received the order to leave the comfort and security of Hanoi for troubled Hung Hoa province, where he had been appointed judge, one of several assistants to the mandarin in charge of a province, called a governor in the case of a small province, or a governor general in the case of a large one. Hung Hoa was located in the hilly region above the flat delta plain, and its main town, bearing the same name, controlled navigation on the Red River. Occupying such a strategic point on the water route leading into the vital delta, the town was a fortified citadel topped with an observation tower famous for its attractive design. The province of Hung Hoa at this time was plagued by

the Black Flags, members of the T'aiping Rebellion in China who had fled to Vietnam. For a while, the Vietnamese court had used them to fight the French. But like guests that refuse to leave after a party, the Black Flags stayed on when they were no longer needed and began to resort to banditry. They were reinforced by Vietnamese bandits who joined them to pillage, kidnap, and sow terror among the villages.

There were daring attacks on the Hung Hoa citadel during the time my great-grandfather served as judge in this province. Most nights, the citadel echoed with the sound of cannon fire, rifle shots, and war drums, as the government forces fought these roving bands. After such assaults, government troops would launch counter-expeditions, returning with captured suspects to throw into the provincial jail. As the judge, my great-grandfather had to try each case. He believed in justice and in the Confucian ideal that mandarins should be humane toward their subjects. During his tenure, he ordered the release of hundreds of these prisoners once he determined they were innocent. His performance impressed the French official overseeing the province, who gave him a flattering annual appraisal, calling him an "active, intelligent, and erudite man" and observing that he "appeared" loyal.

In 1892, Duong Lam was promoted as governor of Thai Binh, one of the most important provinces in the Red River Delta, when this position became vacant. The year my great-grandfather assumed his new function, the Tonkin delta was flooded when the Red River overflowed its banks. The maintenance of the dike network was one of the most critical duties of the mandarins, and required enormous expenses of money and labor. Each year, mandarins had to conduct frequent inspections and supervise the maintenance work performed by conscripted villagers, who lived in the vicinity of the dikes and benefited from their protection. For reinforcement, the villagers would add compacted earth to the top and sides of the dikes. This work usually began in October, right after the rainy season, and had to be completed by the end of March. After reinforcement was completed, the mandarins would direct the villagers to plant rows of bamboo on the riverside base of the dikes, to lessen the force of the water flow and to facilitate silt deposit.

When a dike broke, local mandarins were held responsible and punished with demotion of one or several grades—depending on their rank—if they had failed to predict or prevent the rupture. Occasionally, villagers could see signs that a dike was about to break, and could warn the authorities in time. Once its base was destroyed, the entire dike collapsed with a thunderous sound—like cannon fire—and water spread