

Luu Doan Huynh in memoriam

If Luu Doan Huynh had not been wounded in a clash with French forces in Laos in April 1946, he would not probably have lived on to the age of eighty, and would not have been given a chance to develop his particular brand of intellectual curiosity, which has inspired several generations of Vietnamese diplomats and researchers in international relations. Most of his poorly trained comrades-in-arms back in 1946 were killed that year or the following, but his wounds made him unfit for combat. Instead of fighting he was ordered to listen to and translate radio news, and write reports about international developments. He knew French from the Auguste Pavie secondary school in Vientiane, and by listening to the same shortwave news reports on Radio France and BBC, he now also learned English. Thus he could absorb all kinds of international news and analyses, and acquire a solid basis for becoming a scholar diplomat in the service of national liberation and unification.

Last year, when he turned eighty, he knew that his heart was frail, and on January 27, 2010 it failed him. Before he passed away, he requested those who were with him to convey to all of us his sincere feelings of friendship and his deep thanks for the kind assistance and guidance we have given to him. His family and friends held a funeral for him in Hanoi on January 30.

Luu Doan Huynh was born in Laos on 1 August 1929, the son of a non-commissioned Vietnamese officer in the Garde indochinoise and a half-Lao, half-Viet mother. In October 1945, following the Japanese coup against the French on 9 March, the Japanese capitulation in August and the revolution that followed in its wake, he joined a 350 man strong Viet Minh fighting unit in Savannakhet, and suffered injuries during the violent French return there in April 1946. Huynh was taken to a hospital in Thailand where he slowly recovered so he could take up his new assignment as a radio listener. He did this so well that in 1948 he was invited to join the diplomatic delegation of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) in Bangkok. When it was forced to close down in 1951, Huynh returned to northern Vietnam by way of Rangoon, where he boarded a Norwegian ship to Hong Kong and took a car to the Vietnamese border. He then entered the poorly organized Ministry of Foreign Affairs before being sent, in 1952, with his boss Nguyen Duc Quy, to work in the government's new Embassy in Moscow, under Ambassador Nguyen Luong Bang.

In Moscow he was thoroughly distressed by Stalin's lack of attention to the Vietnamese cause. Stalin had decided to let Mao take responsibility for the revolution in Indochina. After Stalin's death, at a time when the Vietnamese communists were under the influence of doctrinary Chinese anti-intellectualism and were forced by the Chinese and Soviets to accept the temporary division of Vietnam at the 17th parallel during the Geneva conference, Huynh was told that he was reading too much and had no realistic understanding of the world. Hence he was sent back to Vietnam

from Moscow to take part in the land reform in a village in Thai Nguyen, and learn from ordinary people. However, when the Vietnamese troops marched back into Hanoi in October 1954, Luu Doan Huynh followed in their footsteps and took part in building up the DRV's Foreign Ministry. In April 1956, he married Cao Thi Yen, a comrade he knew from the base area who now worked as an accountant in Hanoi and would later graduate in banking, and who remained with him for the rest of his life. Soon after the wedding, he was posted to India, where their son was born.

This was how Huynh became a diplomat, and a specialist of international affairs. Indian intellectuals told him many things about Sino-Soviet relations that no one had dared talk about in Hanoi or Moscow, and he was positively impressed with the liveliness of political debates in the Indian parliament, where he sat listening on his free time. However, he was thoroughly disappointed by India's policy of seeking to prolong the division of Vietnam.

Through his postings in Moscow and New Delhi, he lost many of the ideological illusions of his youth. His new, more realistic and nuanced understanding of international relations was reinforced when he took part in the Geneva conference on Laos in 1961, when he worked for the Foreign Ministry's China and America divisions during the 1960s and 1970s and when he served in Beijing amidst the cultural revolution, although in this period he suffered from illness for a period of seven years.

After the end of the Vietnam War, he sadly observed how his top leaders refused to listen to the Foreign Ministry's warnings and allowed Vietnam's crucial relationship with China to deteriorate beyond repair. Huynh was now sent back to Bangkok for a period of five years, at a time when the Socialist Republic of Vietnam utterly failed to insert itself in Southeast Asia. He learned the hard way what diplomatic isolation means, and became strongly convinced that Vietnam had to gain friendly relations with ASEAN, and look more objectively at US policies. His interest in improving Vietnam's relations with the USA was stimulated by a role he undertook in Bangkok in arranging visits to Vietnam by American scholars, such as David Elliott and William Turley. In 1983, he returned to Hanoi, and soon afterwards was sent to Canberra, where for the first time since his stay in New Delhi he experienced a truly debating liberal culture. He quickly discovered that Australia was not just a "US henchman," but had its own, independent foreign policy. After his return from Australia, he joined the staff of the Institute of International Relations, today's Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam (DAV), which is responsible both for research and training of young diplomats.

With basis in his vast international experience, his readings and his growing international network, he immediately became one of Vietnam's leading teachers and researchers in international relations, inspiring critical thinking among the most independent-minded among the young generations of Vietnamese scholar diplomats. "Intellect is like an emerald. The more you rub it, the brighter it becomes," he used to say. After his retirement, he took part in numerous international conferences, such as the retrospective conference on the Vietnam War initiated by former US Secretary of Defence Robert S. McNamara in 1997. Huynh, just like the other

Vietnamese participants, refused to heed McNamara's call for them to reciprocate his self-criticism and admit that they too had made mistakes. Neither Huynh nor any other of McNamara's dialogue partners would accept a confessional exchange between one side who was an invader and another who was a resistant.

My last meeting with Luu Doan Huynh was in Hanoi on 30 November 2009, when with his usual vigour he challenged my assertion that the Vietnamese communist leaders fell into a French trap when launching their attack in Hanoi on 19 December 1946. Huynh agreed intensely with General Vo Nguyen Giap and all the others who maintain that at that stage it was impossible to avoid the war with France. Vietnam had to fight, and mainly on its own. All countries, and in particular the great powers, act in accordance with their own national interests. Vietnam could not trust anyone else, but had to supplement its armed struggle with astute and perseverant diplomatic navigation. The need to navigate on the basis of research based knowledge and experience of international relations continued when the war was over, and continues even today.

In addition to international relations, Luu Doan Huynh was keenly interested in social theory and political philosophy. In the late 1990s he read himself up on civil society, and towards the end of his life acquired an interest in the history and doctrine of social democracy. His intellectual curiosity will continue to live on through his writings and in the minds of his pupils and friends.

We are fortunate to have known him.

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