

Letter to my children and grandchildren

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Dear old friend,

While waiting for our children to pick us up from our monthly meeting at the Seniors' Association, you and I had, on several occasions, the opportunity to discuss and to agree on a number of important points. You urged to me to put our thoughts on paper to share with our descendants because, as you said, your hands tremble so much these days that you are having difficulty holding the pen. Moreover, this year marks the 30th anniversary of our self-exile as refugees and we both thought it would be useful to transmit a clear message to our children and especially our grandchildren. During these last few months, I endeavored to accomplish the task you assigned. Today, my work may be considered complete. For ease of presentation, I wrote this article in the form of a letter by a father to his children. Please review it at your convenience. I would very much appreciate any corrections and improvements.

My beloved children,

Your mother and I are both in our eighties now, longevity virtually unknown to the earlier generations. Over the years, we have had many occasions to talk to you about a number of important subjects, but you were often not all present at the same time to share the same conversations. Moreover, you may not have entirely retained our message. Hence, this letter to summarize the key points that your mother and I wish to impart to you. For your children who speak Vietnamese but do not read it very well, we ask that you find the best way to communicate our thoughts to them and offer them the necessary explanations. It is not enough to merely take note of what we put today in writing for you. Please make an effort to really grasp the fundamental meaning of our message.

Gratefulness — My beloved children, in fleeing the communist regime in search of freedom, we had to leave everything behind: our properties, our ancestral shrine, as well as our ancestors' final resting place. The authorities and the people of this adopted land opened their arms and their hearts to help us rebuild our lives. Now that we are relatively well established, we should be grateful and show it by doing our best to help make this nation even greater, stronger and more prosperous.

The cause of our exodus — You must be sure to explain clearly to your children the reasons which pushed our family as well as hundreds of thousands of others to choose a life of self-exiled immigrants in a foreign country: *we fled communism, in search of freedom*. Your children have the great fortune of living in a democratic society. Having known nothing but freedom since they were born, they would never imagine the full extent of the duplicity and

the cruelty exerted by the communists. They would find it difficult to believe the atrocities to which men can submit men. (In due time, you may let them watch the movie *Journey from the Fall*, directed by Tran Ham, which premiered on April 30, 2005.) The communists are cruel in action, but very cunning in words and especially skilled in the art of concealment! Hence the need to really explain things to your children to ensure they have a full understanding of our background, not to incite hatred in them, but so they can be aware of the truth. We often repeat this saying amongst ourselves: “*Don’t listen to what the communists say, just examine what they do.*”

Our native land — Regardless of how busy you are, take the time to reflect on the history and the geography of Viet-Nam in order to understand the origin of our people and the creation of our homeland. Learn about the vicissitudes that our people experienced, including the moments of glory and the times of humiliation. Appreciate the wisdom and accomplishments of our forefathers as well as their mistakes. These are all lessons that we should learn and communicate to our descendants. The pages of our history books are alternatively filled with glorious achievements and painful tears. There was a time when our country had to bear the humiliation of Chinese occupation during a thousand years. Then, our heroic people rose to break the subversive bonds of domination and reclaimed our independence. Our past also included periods when we invaded and destroyed other countries. The most recent incident is the destructive ten-year occupation of Kampuchea, which incited the hatred of a neighboring country and created unwholesome karma, the fruits of which future generations will have to bear.

Recent historical events — Our country became a French colony around the end of the 19th century. In 1940, a World War erupted. In Viet-Nam, on March 9, 1945, the Japanese overturned the French in a military coup. Emperor Bao Dai enacted the abolition of the treaty of protectorate concluded with France and entrusted to Mr. Tran Trong Kim the formation of the first government of the independent state of Viet Nam. On the global scene, the countries of the axis — Germany, Italy and Japan — were overcome by the Allies — England, France, the United States, the USSR and China. In our country, on August 19, 1945, the Viet Minh revolutionary forces seized the power held by the Tran Trong Kim government and proclaimed the creation of the Democratic Republic of Viet Nam. As France sought to restore its domination, on December 19, 1946, a war of national resistance was declared in view of defending our independence. At that time, the Viet Minh revealed its true communist nature and initiated a campaign to eliminate the nationalist groups. Faced with the danger of being gradually eradicated, the nationalist parties pulled back into special zones controlled by another non-communist government.

After the battle of Dien Bien Phu, the *Geneva* agreement of 1954 divided our country into two: the North became the Democratic Republic and the South, the Republic of Viet-Nam. The North pledged open allegiance to the communist bloc and immediately launched the process of conquering the South by force, an act which it dissimulated to the eyes of the world by operating behind an organization of its creation, called the Front of Liberation of the South. At

that time, South Viet-Nam accepted the support of the United States and the allied forces of the free world created to stop the expansion of communism. In the 1960s, as the invading forces from the North grew in numbers and in strength, the United States started pouring their own troops into the South, and the war intensified.

In 1972, after the rupture of relations between the USSR and China, President Nixon went to China and signed the *Shanghai* agreement. Consequently, no longer needing an “outpost in the fight against communism”, the United States dropped their support of the Republic of Viet Nam! [The book “*Khi Dong Minh Thao Chay (When the Allies Ran Away)*” by Dr. Nguyen Tien Hung reveals the disappointing truths about the betrayal of the Americans in their shameful flight.] According to the *Paris* agreement signed in 1973, the United States was to withdraw their troops from South Viet-Nam and only leave in place a number of military advisers, while the North Vietnamese troops remained fully stationed in the South! The Communists of North Viet-Nam were therefore free to continue their unabated invasion of the South with the considerable assistance of the international communist bloc. Despite the courage shown in its war of self-defense, because of the serious lack of ammunition and fuel, South Viet-Nam was pushed into an untenable situation. On April 30, 1975, Saigon, the capital of the South, fell. In the months and years following that date, the world witnessed the exodus of the Vietnamese men, women and children fleeing communism, in search of freedom. I trust you already know the next chapters of our story with sufficient details.

Historical data and information — We live in an era of information and we are indeed swamped by a glut of data about everything. Much has been written about Viet-Nam and the Viet-Nam War, including photos and movies, but we found a serious shortage of books and films that are objective and truthful. There are of course a few authors who did try to provide an honest account of the war. Unfortunately, each of them only succeeded in relating one particular aspect of the truth, in the manner of the blind men in the ancient fable who tried to describe an elephant by each touching a part of its body. Moreover, many authors knowingly bend the truth to fit their personal justification or neurosis about the war. Still others, including certain monastic figures, make up stories for the purpose of slandering. The worst misrepresentations are found when those in power or their scribes engage in History writing. Alex Haley wrote in the last lines of his book *Roots*: “... *preponderantly the histories have been written by the winners*”. This is why we insist that you, and especially your children, should be extremely cautious and discerning in reading the books or viewing the films about Viet-Nam produced in the end of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st century, regardless of the authors and their nationalities.

From your parents’ perspective, the conflict that took place in our country from 1954 to 1975 was a *war that opposed the North to the South, a civil war, a war by proxy* resulting from the *confrontation between the communist bloc and the free world, a war delivered with the weapons of the foreign countries and the blood of the Vietnamese people*. For the South Vietnamese, it was a *war of self-defense*. Meanwhile, in the North, through propaganda and education of the masses, the communists portrayed it as a *war delivered against the American*

puppet regime to reunify the country. The Northern winners had been arrogant and cruel; the defeated Southerners swallowed their pain and their anger, and bowed their heads in humiliation. There lies the heart of the deep chasm dividing our people (even though in all truth, there are many other reasons for the division). As long as one does not succeed in changing these two opposing views, it would be useless to speak about national reconciliation! Millions of dead people, a reunified country, but the Vietnamese people still remain deeply divided in their heart.

Visiting Viet-Nam — Many people asked us whether we had returned to Viet-Nam. Our response has always been: “Not yet, because of our health.” Many have returned to Viet-Nam, each for their own particular reasons. Needless to say, we all long to be reunited with our homeland, but everyone has a personal view about the pros and cons of the matter! Returning to the country to care for one’s aging or sick parents, to help one’s family, to restore one’s ancestral tombs, to teach young students, to visit one’s country, these are valid reasons to go. Returning to the country to bring solace to victims of natural disasters, to selflessly help compatriots in need, these are also commendable motives. But returning to enjoy sensual pleasures, to take advantage of cheap tourism, or to seek monetary gains and official distinctions, then it is better to abstain.

Later, if the country has shown some real improvements, you may want to bring your children to visit our homeland. But we predict that they will not be particularly moved — one may not feel any emotion if there are no memories which associate one with something. Thus, in raising your children, please try to provide guidance and help them appreciate our native land, our people, our compatriots, and make sure they do not behave as vulgar tourists. As for the probability of your returning to live in Viet-Nam, we do not expect the prospects to be very positive.

The real situation in the country — If somebody tells you that the country has made progress — that the majority of the population are now able to eat rice with every meal, compared to the mix of rice and oats of the post-1975 era; that motorbikes and cars have mostly replaced bicycles — know that in truth, such progress only reflects the normal evolution of any country (after all, it would be unthinkable that after thirty years of peace, no growth or progress were achieved!). However, in terms of real democratic progress, if we compare Viet-Nam to its neighbors, we cannot help feeling shame for the country’s failure in many aspects (even Kampuchea has an opposition party!).

If you want to know the real Viet-Nam beyond the tall buildings, the shiny cars, the luxurious five-star hotels, the modern golf courses, then seek information from inside the country to see the extensive breakdown in many sectors (education, in particular), the excesses of “red capitalism”, the plague of widespread corruption, and the waste of our nation’s natural resources. And don’t forget to visit our compatriots who live in desolate poor regions in the back country. We need to look objectively at the actual situation without any make-up, that which is painted neither in pink nor in black.

For a clear view of the situation in our country, refer to a speech by Dr. Le ĩang Doanh, former Director of the Central Institute of Research on Management in Ha-Noi. In this speech, Dr. Doanh voiced the whole truth to the highest communist leaders. This document recently made its way abroad. In a presentation which is made of this text, one can read: “We should all pay attention to the numbers that point to the sad reality of the economic situation in Viet-Nam. Mr. Doanh underlines the weaknesses of the economy and the antidemocratic nature of the communist regime in Viet-Nam. He affirms unequivocally that the political infrastructure is obsolete and should be changed.” (Ngo Nhan Dung, in Nguoi Viet Daily, March 30, 2005).

Mr. Doanh relates the following story. An expert in international finances asked him the following question: “Clever as you claim to be, how come your country is still poor after such a long period? With your intelligence and your proud tradition, why do you beg all the time? Why don’t you give yourself a goal in time after which you will resolve to stop asking for alms? Is this possible?” How humiliating for us all! Our country is not populated only by incompetents; our people are not lazy; why this utter misery? It is all due to the dictatorship of the Party!

Having a political attitude — Our fellow expatriates are not the only ones who demand the abolition of the unique-party regime; some members of the Communist Party and progressive elements in the country are also clamoring for the same. Understand this: the fight against dictatorship, against a single party regime, against corruption, against the erroneous policies of the Communists, *is not a fight against Viet-Nam*; it is, quite to the contrary, an effort to move forward so that the country can improve and grow.

Some may say that the Vietnamese Communists did implement some change with the “Doi Moi” or modernization program. Know that whatever modest change there was, it was the consequence of the collapse of communism in Eastern Europe, of the fight against oppression by the Vietnamese people inside the country and abroad, and of international pressure. It was the threat of the disintegration of the Party which drove the Communists to institute *economic modernization (with no modernization whatsoever on the political level)*. Even though we do not “*do politics*”, we must nevertheless *adopt a political attitude*; we must continue to support the effort to bring about effective democracy and freedom to our country.

The Secretary General of the Communist Party recognized that the Vietnamese Communists “*committed several serious errors.*” The question that begs to be asked is this: if errors have been made, then why not correct them? Why not offer to the people a public apology? Why not return the wrongfully taken land and properties to their individual owners and religious institutions? Why not compensate the victims of the land reform, of the repression against the intellectuals and artists in the Nhan Van Giai Pham period, and of the waves of reforms in the industry and commerce sectors? Why not redress the harm done to those sent to the so-called “reeducation camps” and beg their forgiveness? In truth, everyone wishes to put aside hatred and resentments, but it is up to the Communists to demonstrate some constructive behavior that would convince the people of their good-will. It is utterly useless to simply say “let us erase hatred and resentments, let us forget the past and look towards the future” without doing

anything concrete to turn the idea into policy and practice. To call for *Dai Doan Ket* or Great Union on the one hand, and to place the proposed reconciliation under the stewardship of a unique, all controlling Party (Constitution, article 4) on the other hand — how would you expect anyone to trust such empty words?

Our family — Let's now talk about our family. Your mother and I belong to an older generation. We raised you in accordance with the standards of our generation, just like your grandparents raised us according to the standards of their time.

You must have at times found us too strict. We simply followed the norm of our times. We hope that you will forget any unhappiness that, unaware, we may have inflicted upon you. Know that we did not seek an extravagant lifestyle, that we were never wasteful and that we lived well within the ethical and moral guidelines of our culture. We worked hard and saved every penny to provide for our family so that you could have a relatively comfortable life, a good education and a warm and happy home.

Because we had been *despoiled of all our assets by the Communists*, we experienced a rather difficult beginning on arrival in this country. Your mother and I had to accept very harsh working conditions. And you also, you had to work hard and diligently during your holidays in order to complete your studies. Today, *everything seems to have fallen in place quite nicely*. You should try never to be self-satisfied or to think of yourself as the best. Remember this: *“When you look up, you will find that everyone is better, when you look down, you will see that everyone is worse.”* Your personal talent, if any, counts only to some extent, the remainder results from the combination of *favorable circumstances* and the *intangible benefits* inherited from your ancestors and from your own actions in former lives and in this life. Always cultivate a virtuous life in order to improve your karma, in the same manner as a motorist must recharge the battery of his car. One reaps what one sows. Such is the universal law of cause and effect which leaves no one untouched!

Regarding your small family unit, here is our advice: between husband and wife, it is important *to respect one another, to share and to compromise*. Frictions are inevitable; resolve problems with patience, calm and wisdom. *Anger is bad council, avoid it at all cost*.

With respect to your children, *love them without spoiling them*. Be sure to keep an eye on their social circles. Establish contacts with the parents of their friends in order to obtain a fuller and deeper understanding of who they are. In our society today, *bad peer influence* is such a widespread phenomenon! The time spent watching television, playing video games or “chatting” on the Internet should be limited. On the other hand, it is important to encourage the practice of some physical activities and sports. *This also applies to you personally. Be sure to include physical exercise in your routine* in order to balance your activities. Let your father's health condition be an inspiration to you. In my youth, I spent countless hours tied to my work. As a consequence, today, in my old age, my body “demands justice”, and I am frequently ill.

In your daily life, be thrifty (but not miserly). Make an effort to protect the environment because the resources of the world are limited; we must think of the future generations of our

descendants. Do not waste anything, not even the Kleenex that you use to clean your hands. From time to time, let your children view the photographs and the films showing little children who are suffering terribly from hunger and cold; this will help them learn that in this world, a great many still live in misery.

Between brothers and sisters, keep in mind the following Vietnamese proverbs: “*Brothers and sisters should be linked like hands and feet*”; “*when an elder sister falls, the little sister must help her up*”; “*a drop of blood is more valuable than a pond of water*”; “*when a horse is sick, the whole stable stops feeding*”. The secret to maintaining good relationships between brothers and sisters may be found in one word: “*forgiveness*”. Do not hold rigor with your brothers and sisters for their defects. *Any discord between you would be extremely painful to us.*

In this society, as everyone seems to be short of time and can barely take care of his own immediate family, the *extended family* is somewhat neglected, much to our regret. Please make an effort to emphasize the *tight relationship and unity in the extended family*. To our daughters and daughters-in-law, we have a special request: help your husbands to maintain good relations between your brothers and sisters, as well as with all relatives on both the paternal and the maternal sides of the family.

Speaking Vietnamese — Some points need to be mentioned here. Your children have grown up as citizens of our host country with all the related rights and duties. Their daily life at school and in society forces them to speak and to write English and/or French impeccably, or they would run the risk of not being able to fully integrate in their social environment, of being insulated and missing out on opportunities for success and growth. They communicate with each other quite fluently in the two languages. Even though you do encourage them to speak Vietnamese at home, we feel their command of our language is rather weak. Their conversation skills are lacking, and their writing skills are even worse. This is understandable because they never dedicated enough time practicing reading and writing in Vietnamese! To help your children acquire any meaningful command of our language, it is simply not enough to spend a few hours each weekend at the language school with a teacher, as dedicated as she may be. Just think: in Vietnamese, the nomenclature, the hierarchy and the forms of address for various members of the family are one of the most complicated in the world!

Our fellow expatriates often point out the need for maintaining the use of the Vietnamese language. We agree with them. But to really think about it, a child cannot be the fusion of two children (Vietnamese and Canadian, or Vietnamese and American.) If too much pressure is exerted, the children will not bear it. In addition, we have to make time for their other interests such as sports, music, etc. Therefore we must make intelligent choices and establish a proper balance to avoid transforming your children into “studying machines”. Your children will be making progressive achievements in this country. Help them be prepared and adapted to their environment in order to ensure a satisfactory quality of life.

The Western society — We live in a society of excessive consumption. Don’t let yourself be caught by skilful marketing techniques which encourage you to consume without control.

Surrounded by wants and needs, we become the easy preys of publicity; at the same time we are being conditioned and influenced by the banks and the insurance companies. Practice this motto: “*Minimize your wants, be content with little.*” Buy only what you need. This rule is also applicable to the houses and cars you buy; these should be well within your means and should provide the security and the basic functionality needed in your daily life. That’s enough. Avoid too much debt. This will lead to a much better worry-free life. Please understand that our advice is not mere theory. Today’s society is slipping lower and lower in many moral and spiritual aspects. The reason, in our opinion, is that when people are so focused on the appearances, they become egoistic, attached to material possessions, and cannot find happiness anywhere. To be truly happy, one needs to be less selfish. One must think of fellow human beings and learn to share with others.

Your old parents — With old age comes illness, and then one day, the old and the sick must depart... for good! That’s the universal law of life! When this day arrives for us, please make sure that our funerals are solemn but simple. Burying us in a cemetery may pose some problems for you, should you be required in the future to move away for your work. It would be difficult and impractical to take care of our tombs in this city. We prefer the *cremation solution*, which is more practical and does not require our bodies to be entombed. We believe future generations will need the land more than us. You could disperse our ashes on the mountain, in a river, or even in the ocean. We will return to dust, that’s all! Instead of spending on a funeral reception, please save the money to contribute to some worthy causes of collective interest. Do not be concerned that you would be criticized for this untraditional funeral. In time, people will understand and will approve.

One more important point: if, by misfortune, we should be sick and require life support in a vegetative state, please have the courage to *remove our artificial life support system*. Why prolong such a state which can only be a major burden to everyone?

The family shrine — Given today’s limited living space, it is not very easy to install a family shrine at home. To keep the memory of your ancestors, of your grandparents, both paternal and maternal, and of your parents, you may display photographs in the most suitable place of your house to show your respect and to reaffirm your commitment to never dishonor your ancestral tradition. On the anniversary of our death, prepare a small table on which you will lay out a cup of pure water, some scented flowers, fresh fruits and an incense rod (an electric rod would do as well). This would be sufficient. It is the expression of your love and that of your children that would be most meaningful and valuable to us on that day. We did mention “your children” to point out the need to make sure they understand the significance that we, Vietnamese, ascribe to the celebration of the anniversary of death of members of the family. During these special days, concentrate on good thoughts, do a few more acts of kindness compared to other regular days, give charity to the poor, donate clothes or food to charitable organizations. On these occasions, it would be wonderful if all brothers and sisters get together to renew and strengthen our family bonds. Please make an effort to organize such family reunions.

We hope that you will read this letter carefully, that you will meditate on it and that you will try to carry out our recommendations.

We thank you all for having always taken good care of us for so many years, and to have done all that's required so that we can enjoy our old age in serenity.

With much love to you all, our beloved children and grandchildren, and a thousand kisses.

Father and Mother