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History Reformatted: Vietnam's Great Famine (1944–45) in Archival Form

Ken MacLean*

The number and types of memory projects in Vietnam have proliferated rapidly since the mid-1990s. These projects, most of them intensely local in focus, reconfigure selective aspects of different “pasts” for strategic use in the present. Government-approved memory projects exhibit similar patterns. However, some of them openly diverge from official narratives of patriotic resistance. The project featured in this essay—the creation of an archive to document the Great Famine (1944–45) by a joint Vietnamese-Japanese research commission—is such an example. Close attention to the methodological procedures used to assemble this archive, which is highly unorthodox in form and content, provides insights into how historical evidence is fashioned rather than found in the Vietnamese context. The details reveal partial silences in four thematic areas: (1) the allocation of blame, (2) the suppression of sentiment in oral form, (3) the depersonalization of suffering in visual form, and (4) the comparative absence of organized resistance. Close attention to these elisions explains why the Great Famine and the hungry ghosts it produced continue to resist incorporation into state-approved histories of the “exceptional dead,” who sacrificed their lives to defend the “nation” from foreign aggressors.

Keywords: history, memory, commemoration, archive, famine, Vietnam

We primarily see the archive as storehouse of memory and fact, as the place from whence history issues forth. However, the archive is much more than this; it is . . . a place of trauma and pain. It is a place of sorrow and loss for many, where unpacified ghosts with unfinished business await, yielding stories and letters different from expectation, a site where loss is localized and realized. (Murphy 2011, 481)

Many Vietnamese present ritual offerings to wandering spirits during Tết Trung Nguyên, a popular festival that occurs on the 15th day of the seventh lunar month. Participants recite prayers and then light seven sticks of incense to appease these spirits, who cannot become benevolent ancestors due to the unjust and often violent nature of their deaths.

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People pour small portions of boiled sweet potato, cassava, roasted corn, hard rice pancakes, and porridge—foods commonly eaten during periods of scarcity—into cones made of leaves from banyan trees. They then place the offerings outside in bushes, small shrines, and other hidden spaces for these “ontological refugees” (Kwon 2008, 16), who are neither fully dead nor alive, to dine upon. The festival’s primary purpose, several Vietnamese explained to me, is to absolve the hungry ghosts of any harm they may have caused the living, such as misfortune or serious illness, over the past year. Several of them told me that the offerings also function as insurance against future problems because the offerings are meant to keep the hungry ghosts satiated for the next 12 months. The explanations are not mutually exclusive, and since the early 1990s growing numbers of people have used the festival to commemorate the victims of the Great Famine of 1944–45 (Nạn đói Ất Dậu).

Official Vietnamese estimates, first put forward in a famous speech by Hồ Chí Minh and then reiterated with little empirical support until recently, place the number of people who died within the space of six months at approximately two million (Nguyễn Khắc Đạm 1988; Văn Tạo and Nguyễn Khắc Đạm 1988; Đảng Cộng sản Việt Nam 2008, 921; Gunn 2014, 259n1). Given the vast number of hungry ghosts this famine reportedly produced, the gradual inclusion of its victims, as part of this festival, is not surprising.¹⁾ The Great Famine affected 32 provinces across colonial Tonkin and Annam, reducing the population of what is now northern and central Vietnam by an estimated 15 percent (Dương Trung Quốc 2005). Yet, despite the size and scale of loss, no national monument exists to collectively memorialize the deaths. Instead, commemorative practices remain decidedly local in nature and revolve around the mass graves that can still be found across the countryside, usually in close proximity to villages where death rates were particularly high. “Ghost graves” (*cồn ma*) and “hunger tombs” (*mả đói*), as they are colloquially known, typically consist of a small mound of earth or a pile of carefully arranged bricks. These sites become visible to nonresidents only when famine survivors and their descendants visit them during the festival to appease the hungry ghosts.

A three-meter-high concrete memorial, once part of a “charity cemetery” (*nhĩa trang hợp thiện*) in Hanoi, is an exception to these informal practices. The remains of thousands of people who fled the countryside to seek refuge in the city but perished shortly after their arrival are interred beneath it. Residents of Hanoi raised funds to construct the memorial, which was completed in April 1951. Photographs, displayed in a small room adjacent to the memorial, indicate that people visited the site year-round for the next several years. But the memorial fell into disrepair by the time the Second

1) Similar beliefs about hungry ghosts are widespread throughout Southeast and East Asia.

Indochina War (1954–75) began. In September 2001, the People’s Committee of Hanoi announced that it would rectify this situation by providing funds to renovate the long-neglected memorial. The announcement, which appeared as a small sidebar in local newspapers, stated that the renovations would be completed by 2005, in time to mark the 60th anniversary of the Great Famine.

The decision to renovate the memorial was not an isolated one. By the late 1990s, the number and types of memory projects were increasing so rapidly that Hue-Tam Ho Tai coined the phrase “commemorative fever” to capture the country’s mood (2001, 1–17). These projects, most of them local in focus, reconfigure selective aspects of different “pasts” for strategic use in the present (MacLean 2013, 176–204). Government-approved memory projects exhibit similar patterns. However, some of them openly diverge from official narratives of patriotic resistance and heroic sacrifice in defense of the “nation.” The project featured in this essay—a research effort led by the state-sponsored Institute of History to document aspects of the Great Famine—is one such example. I focus primarily on the unorthodox report that resulted from it, *Nạn đói 1945 ở Việt Nam: Những chứng tích lịch sử* (The Famine of 1945 in Vietnam: Some historical evidence), edited by Văn Tạo and Motoo Furuta (1995).

Close attention to the decisions the researchers made with regard to the project’s design, the methodology employed, and the representational strategies used provides insights into how historical evidence regarding the Great Famine is fashioned rather than found. This essay does not provide a comprehensive overview of the Great Famine or the Vietnamese literature published prior to this study as a result. An extensive, though still incomplete, list of sources can be found in the volume’s bibliography (*ibid.*, 704–722) and in Geoffrey Gunn’s recent *Rice Wars in Colonial Vietnam: The Great Famine and the Viet Minh Road to Power* (2014). The focus here is instead on the ways the researchers from the Institute of History and their Japanese counterparts from the University of Tokyo reformatted micro-histories of the Great Famine into a larger archival form.

It should be noted at the outset that the Institute of History has since published two expanded versions of the report, one in 2005 and another in 2011. I restrict my analysis to the original 1995 version for several reasons. First, the publication of the 1995 edition coincided with the 50th anniversary of the tragedy. In Vietnam, such anniversaries provide opportunities for political and intellectual elites “to restructure and reshape collective memory through rituals of commemoration” (Pelley 2002, 164). The 1995 version thus marks the first of what would become several efforts to accomplish this goal. Second, the 1995 publication was available when I began my fieldwork. I conducted ethnographic and archival research on mass campaigns to eradicate hunger and to reduce poverty in the northern Vietnamese countryside during 2000–02. The Great Famine was my tem-

poral starting point. I draw upon this material to destabilize the standard assumption that historical “evidence” emerges out of the closeness of fit between the records used and the event described. Instead, I take the position that primary sources do not possess an inherent “truth” value; rather, their evidentiary force—and thus credibility—arises out of the “very processes that treat and use records as evidence” (Trouillot 1995; Meehan 2009, 160). Jennifer Meehan’s argument serves as the point of departure for my own, hence my decision to focus on the first version, as it serves as the archival foundation for the subsequent editions. Finally, the 2005 and 2011 editions do not differ significantly in form or content from the one published in 1995. The continued accumulation of empirical data and personal testimonies they contain does shed light on a paradox that I revisit in the essay’s concluding section, however. Commemorative activities fix selected aspects of “the past” and then re-present them, often in ritualized form, to specific audiences. The Great Famine, as an “event,” remains an archive in formation, as the expanded editions and periodic academic conferences regarding the tragedy attest. Yet, the efforts to institutionalize the commemoration of the Great Famine nationally continue to generate disagreements that, to date, have prevented the outcome desired.

The essay is structured as follows. The first section provides background on the conflicting narratives regarding the Great Famine, particularly the question of whether the tragedy helped or hindered the August Revolution of 1945. I then present details about the research project itself, which culminated in the publication of the 1995 edition. Subsequent sections focus upon the report. Interspersed throughout are personal accounts from “eyewitnesses” to the Great Famine I gathered during field research in the Red River Delta, as well as selected historical documents, memoirs, and literary works relevant to the inquiry—some well known, others not. When put into “conversation” with one another, four unexpected themes emerge regarding: (1) the partial allocation of blame, (2) the suppression of sentiment in oral form, (3) the depersonalization of suffering in visual form, and (4) the comparative absence of organized resistance. Close attention to how each of these partial silences shapes the terms of the others reveals why what occurred during the Great Famine remains largely disconnected in historiographic terms from what happened in its aftermath—the struggle for national independence. The essay concludes with a brief overview of recent discussions about the disaster and what needs to be done to reconfigure the place of the Great Famine within the historical imagination.

Conflicting Narratives

Symbolic reconfigurations often coincide with physical transformations. These are the dynamics that prompted me to visit the neglected memorial to the famine victims in Hanoi before the planned renovations transformed it. Finding the memorial proved much harder than expected. It required nearly a half-dozen trips to Vĩnh Tuy, a poor working-class area of the capital, before I was able to locate it. Much of my difficulty lay in the fact that the charity cemetery no longer existed. Successive waves of postwar housing construction had transformed the once-rural area on the southeastern edge of Hanoi into a densely packed urban one connected by a chaotic network of narrow lanes, many of them barely 1.5 meters wide. Indeed, the ongoing process of urban encroachment was such that very few of the ward's residents I encountered during my search believed the memorial still existed. It did, as I discovered quite by accident on my fifth trip. But the site was surrounded on all sides by multistoried row houses that towered above the memorial. This situation clarified why Hoàng Văn Nghiê, then the chairman of the Hanoi People's Committee, suddenly declared in December of 2001 that the memorial was a "vestige" (*di tích*) of historical and cultural significance. This bureaucratic upgrade in status granted a measure of protection to the memorial, but it did not result in any immediate changes. In fact, no major changes occurred until 2005, the 60th anniversary of the Great Famine, when I again visited the site.

The slow pace was surprising given the unusual prominence of sites that are linked to the struggle for independence. Indeed, many of the officials I met while conducting research in Vietnam over the past 15 years expressed genuine disappointment that the monument remained so difficult to locate. Nearly all of them regarded the tragic famine as a catalyst for the August Revolution and Declaration of Independence on September 2, 1945. Three quotes, all of them from former commune-level cadres in three different provinces in the Red River Delta who had survived the Great Famine, follow.

Vỹ, for example, pointed out there were three different but interlinked forms of oppression during the conflict: "Japanese fascism, French colonialism, and the feudal system of the Vietnamese themselves." Taken together, he explained, "It was inevitable that by twisting the worm," by which he meant the suffering brought about by the Great Famine, "you would cause [us] to rise up" (*con giun xéo lắ phải quắn*).

Khoa, another cadre, explained: "We could not stand it anymore; we had nothing left to lose, and the famine was simply the drop of water that caused a full glass to overflow" (*giọt nước cuối cùng làm tràn cốc*).

A third, Phong, was more succinct. "The famine was part of a long historical process; we had no choice but to rebel."

Not everyone agrees with these assessments. Trần Văn Giàu, one of Vietnam's most eminent historians, placed less emphasis on the Great Famine as a key cause of the August Revolution. He instead stressed the many problems the famine subsequently posed. In his view, the Great Famine constituted a major obstacle to revolutionary activities, as the immense death toll "drained its power" (1962, 621; see also Hoàng Văn Đức 1946). Nguyễn Thế Anh, another highly respected historian, similarly argued it would be a fundamental error to conclude the Great Famine was the primary cause of the political instability that enabled the August Revolution to succeed. However, he maintained that the impact of the catastrophe was undeniable and that widespread fears that another large-scale famine might reoccur helped maintain the Party's political standing (1985, 98).

These views of the Great Famine differ in detail; nevertheless, all of them recognize the importance of this tragedy. Yet, the famine receives little attention today. For example, an official university textbook, published after the 50th anniversary of the Great Famine, devotes only a single paragraph to it (Lê Mậu Hãn *et al.* 2000, 11), while another textbook solely emphasizes the famine's statistical dimensions: the number of deaths and the material assistance the Provisional Revolutionary Government provided (Hoàng Phương 2015). Because the famine had such a tremendous impact on Vietnamese social life, culture, and economic issues (Hoàng Văn Đức 1946, 16–17), it should have been treated more comprehensively. The situation has not significantly changed, however. The Communist Party's annual yearbook devotes only four pages to the famine (Đảng Cộng sản Việt Nam 2008, 921–925), nearly all of it concerning the precipitating causes.

What accounts for the marginal place of the famine in the historical imagination in these representations of the past? While no single cause explains the famine's diminutive role in contemporary historiography, the Communist Party's manipulation of statistical evidence is surely implicated. Of course, such manipulation is not limited to the Great Famine. Statistics have long formed a key component of the Communist Party's efforts to centralize all forms of representation through itself by claiming to be the primary, if not exclusive, agent of unity as well as moral and economic progress (MacLean 2013). The Party's representational strategies have diversified somewhat in recent years. But the focus here is on how bureaucratic categories and practices affect the form and content of what can be remembered about the Great Famine. With this goal in mind, the remainder of the essay examines a highly unusual state-sponsored documentation project and the archive that has resulted from it. The details provide a common point of departure for ongoing debates regarding how the Great Famine and the hungry ghosts it created should be properly memorialized and commemorated. These debates, although notable in their own right, also reflect broader tensions concerning two closely related matters.

First, which tragedies of the past still need to be afforded a place in the present given the government's heavy emphasis on the socioeconomic development targets it has set for the future? (The current goal, according to the official slogan, is to build "a strong, independent, prosperous and democratic country.") And who should retain primary control over how these commemorative spaces are used—government officials or ordinary citizens?

Formatting an Archive

The Joint Vietnam-Japan Cooperation Committee for Researching the Famine of 1945 grew out of a larger study, begun in 1986, to jointly examine the effects of the Japanese occupation of Indochina during World War II. The massive 728-page study, titled *Nạn đói 1945 ở Việt Nam: Những chứng tích lịch sử* (The Famine of 1945 in Vietnam: Some historical evidence), was one result of this collaborative project (hereafter the Joint Committee). The study, compiled by researchers from the Vietnamese Institute of History in Hanoi and their counterparts from the University of Tokyo in Japan, collected oral histories from hundreds of famine survivors in three phases during the early 1990s. Excerpts from 157 of these "eyewitnesses" (*nhân chứng*) are featured in the volume and constitute its evidentiary core. A number of other semiotic technologies play an important supporting role as well. The most notable of these technologies include several hundred pages of "inquest reference tables" (*bảng tra cứu*). The tables provide annotated statistical breakdowns of local mortality rates, hand-drawn maps that depict the location of unmarked mass graves, and 42 photographs of famine victims. The result is an ethnographically detailed, though fragmentary and geographically uneven, depiction of the Great Famine as it unfolded in 23 different locations across what is now northern and central Vietnam. It also constitutes one of the most unusual memory projects ever undertaken by a Vietnamese state research institute.

The study, officially framed as an impartial and objective inquiry, thus invites a number of questions: first and foremost, why? What gaps were thought to exist in the historical record? How are the materials it contains—especially the first-person testimonies, which are normally *excluded* from official accounts of the past—supposed to fill them? My overarching discussion centers on what is imperfectly remembered in this multi-sited "history from below," a genre that is itself quite rare in Vietnam, to explore these questions. My intent here is not to read the survivors' accounts "against the grain" in order to fashion a critical counter-narrative that challenges the evidentiary claims the subaltern memories are used to make in the study. Such an exercise is questionable in

most instances (Stoler 2009). Nor will I argue that the Vietnamese historians involved deliberately excluded material related to the Great Famine that diverged from dominant narratives regarding the period, although this may have in fact been the case. (I requested but did not receive permission to review the interview transcripts kept in the Institute of History's archive.) Instead, I wish to take seriously Michel-Rolph Trouillot's claim that relations of power introduce "silences" at different moments in the process of historical production through the making of sources, the organization of archives, and the crafting of narratives (1995, 26–30, 82–83). Trouillot argues that these silences permit some accounts of the past—but not others—to appear plausible. Drawing on his insights, I explore the extent to which the procedures of the Joint Committee both produced and silenced certain kinds of evidence and thereby determined which aspects of the Great Famine could be memorialized and commemorated.

I should point out that a long-running and complex dispute between the governments of Japan and Vietnam over reparations and development aid prompted the formation of the Joint Committee and its study of the famine. A brief summary of the dispute follows, as the 1995 volume contains quite limited information on it (Văn Tạo and Furuta 1995, 28–42). Forty-eight nations signed the Treaty of Peace with Japan on September 18, 1951. Less than two weeks later, Bảo Đại, the State of Vietnam's head of state, informed the Japanese government of his intent to request US\$2 billion in war reparations. But no records indicate that he pursued the matter. Prime Minister Ngô Đình Diệm, who declared himself president of the newly created Republic of Vietnam (RoV) following a rigged election in 1955, renewed the issue of reparations. His foreign minister, Vũ Mạnh Mậu, submitted an *aide-memoire* (memorandum) to Ambassador Akira Konagaya on September 18, 1956, requesting US\$1 billion in *paiements de bouche* (reparations) for the people who died during 1945 due to Japan's military food policies and rice seizures by its troops (Gunn 2011, 7).² President Ngô Đình Diệm further asserted that Japanese military forces had caused US\$2 billion in war damages but limited the official request to US\$250 million. The Japanese government declared the total costs Diệm put forward as being "fantastically excessive and absolutely unjustified" (*ibid.*, 6). Following 18 months of negotiations, the RoV foreign minister reduced the claim to US\$200 million, but the Japanese ambassador refused to consider any figure higher than US\$50 million (*ibid.*).

The disagreement proved to be a significant obstacle to normalizing trade negotiations for several more years. Eventually, the focus of the negotiations shifted from the issue of war reparations to development aid, which resulted in a bilateral agreement,

2) On the differences between "reparations" and "grant aid" from Japanese perspectives, see Asomura (2013, 138–191, 228–328).

signed on May 13, 1959 (*ibid.*, 7–8).³⁾ (Most of the aid requested was earmarked for the construction of the Đa Nhim hydroelectric project, which would become the RoV's first such dam.) The need for further aid and the intensification of the Second Indochina War during the mid-1960s meant that subsequent discussions concerning famine-related compensation did not occur. Similar dynamics shaped post-treaty negotiations between the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) and Japan. Discussions also revolved around grant aid, and DRV representatives did not raise the issue of famine deaths during them. The monetary award was also much the same. The DRV received US\$39 million, approximately the same amount of aid that Japan granted to the RoV (Shiraishi and Furuta 1992, 18; Minami Yoshizawa, cited in Văn Tạo and Furuta 1995, 18–19).

Katsuichi Honda, a reporter best known for his books on the atrocities Japanese troops committed against civilians in China during World War II, especially the Nanjing Massacre, raised the issue of accountability a decade later. In 1973 he published an article in Japan's leading daily, *Asahi Shimbun*, in which he asserted that nearly a quarter of a million people starved to death in Thái Bình Province during the Great Famine, and his estimates from nearby Nam Định Province were even higher (Cao Văn Biền 1990, 451). Honda's controversial claims prompted the Institute of History in Hanoi to conduct further field and archival research in both provinces during 1992. The initial findings appeared to confirm Honda's findings, which inspired a joint team of Vietnamese and Japanese historians to carry out a more systematic study.

The efforts to resolve the disagreements concerning the actual number of deaths were more complicated than anticipated, due not only to the amount of time that had elapsed but to the uneven nature of the extant source material. The Joint Committee's report divided the sources into three separate categories—material evidence, written documents, and oral accounts—as a way to manage these problems (Văn Tạo and Furuta 1995, 19–27, 704–722). Lists in Vietnam, however, implicitly rank various kinds of evidence in a way that privileges physical remains over historical records and these, in turn, over individual memories. Nevertheless, the three categories all belong to the same analytical field, as the information derived from one source helps define the others. From this perspective, the boundaries that delineate the three kinds of evidence are thus less

3) An internal study reportedly conducted as the negotiations were taking place rejected the commonly cited figure of two million deaths as Vietnamese Communist Party propaganda. Instead, the authors of the official report allegedly concluded that no more than 300,000 Vietnamese died during the famine, a figure significantly lower than earlier French estimates of 600,000–700,000. Reviewer B contacted the director of the 1st Southeast Asian Division in the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs to verify the existence of the internal study and its conclusion; however, the director's office has yet to respond. Interestingly, Văn Tạo maintains that 1.97 million died at a minimum, whereas Motoo Furuta believes that the research done to date is not sufficient to “fix the total,” as reported by Reviewer B.

clear than one might assume.

This blurring of boundaries is most evident in the organization of the written documents. The researchers did not consistently distinguish primary sources from secondary ones or works drawn from vastly different genres such as memoirs and statistical atlases. Instead, other considerations shaped the “section” (*phần*) into which researchers placed them. Section one, for example, contains more than half of the known sources relevant to the Great Famine, collectively labeled “contemporaneous sources” (*đương thời*) documents. The period, although not explicitly defined, includes a diverse array of materials from 1941 to 1945. The significance of this temporal frame is twofold. Most obviously, the dates reflect the primary concern of the inquiry, which was to document the effects of French and Japanese policies through the enumeration of the dead in different locales. But the dates also illustrate how ideological assumptions influence the categorization of sources—in this case, along a political continuum. The editors grouped the reports by French colonial officials, Japanese military staff, and Vietnamese administrative personnel under the same heading, “lackeys” (*chính quyền tay sai*), despite important differences in their form, content, and communicative purpose. Articles that appeared in popular Vietnamese-language newspapers, such as *Thanh Nghị* (Public Opinion) and *Bình Minh* (Dawn), were placed in a separate group, presumably because French and Japanese officials censored them prior to publication. Documents prepared by the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) and the Việt Minh, however, as well as articles that appeared in their clandestine publications, especially *Cứu Quốc* (Save the Nation) and *Cờ Giải Phóng* (The Flag of Liberation), constituted the final group. By contrast, section three, which forms the next largest collection of written documents, includes administrative records that Communist Party cells and mass mobilization committees in 15 different provinces produced both prior to and shortly after the 1945 August Revolution.

At first glance, these records appear misplaced; however, the report’s authors justified their separate categorization on the grounds that the documents were primarily bureaucratic rather than political in nature. In most cases, these records languished in back rooms for decades until it became fashionable for low-level officials to compile some of the information they contained into amateur histories that highlighted district-level, but more often provincial-level, contributions to the revolutionary struggle. This trend, which began during the 1990s, helped precipitate the diverse range of official memory projects that followed. The collection of oral testimonies, such as the ones featured in the report on the Great Famine, is an important but understudied aspect of this trend. The testimonies, due in part to the procedures used to recover them, evince considerable similarities across the different locales studied; thus, they provide the basis of recasting local experiences as “national” ones.

Constructing Objectivity

Due to the continued dispute over the death toll, researchers were preoccupied with gathering evidence they believed would finally document the “true” scale of the Great Famine, hence the empirical nature of the questions that oriented the inquiry as a whole. Where did the famine originate? Which places experienced the most deaths?⁴⁾ Which socioeconomic classes were most affected and why? Since the Great Famine left some areas untouched and decimated others, the researchers limited their site selection to locations that had experienced “average” death rates, which they defined as between 30 percent and 70 percent of the total local population (Vãn Tào and Furuta 1995, 684–685). The researchers then collected oral histories from famine survivors in these locations with the assistance of local officials. To help further ensure the findings would be as representative as possible, the researchers also privileged what they regarded to be “typical” accounts rather than “extraordinary” ones in the report.

Taken together, these oral histories form the evidentiary core of the report. Yet, despite the crucial role these accounts play in it, no standard format was created to present the information they contain in a uniform manner. All of the eyewitnesses are named. However, some entries include other biographical details such as their age, place of residence, and/or occupation, while others do not. Similar variation marks the use of photographs, which accompanied approximately two-thirds of the eyewitnesses. Most of the images mimic, in both size and style, those that appear on national identity cards—a simple head-and-shoulder shot of the person who stares directly back at the camera with no visible sign of emotion. But in other cases, the eyewitness is depicted in action, pointing out a mass grave or discussing the Great Famine with the researchers. Each entry also includes a “statement” (*lời*, literally a “speech” or “address”), which consists of an excerpt taken from a longer first-person account that researchers elicited from survivors. These too vary in terms of length, detail, and narrative style. But nearly all of them exhibit a peculiar mix of anecdotes and statistics concerning family, hamlet, and/or village mortality rates:

Trần Đình Khả, 76 years old (Hải Dương Province)

I was 26 years old in 1945, and I am able to “testify” (*chứng kiến*) that the famine was terrible. [It is] something I will remember forever. My paternal uncle’s family was too hungry, so they had to head off toward the bridge in order to beg for food. I don’t know if they died of starvation. Đạo’s

4) Thái Bình Province, in northern Vietnam, and Thanh Hóa Province, in central Vietnam, are thought to have suffered the greatest number of deaths (Bùi Minh Dũng 1995, 574; Quang Thiện 2005).

family had five people; all five of them died of hunger. Diên's family had four people, and all four died. Phuong, five people died of hunger, the entire household. Mạc, Nhiêu Lân, and Bồng died of hunger. There were no reed mats to bundle them in. Their deaths were utterly tragic, their corpses only bones enclosed in skin. [They] died at the head of the road at the corner of the market. To look at them was truly horrible. (Văn Tạo and Furuta 1995, 393–394)

The excerpt, which is representative of the majority of those found throughout the report, exemplifies how fact and affect intermingle uneasily with one another in the memories of those who “witnessed” the Great Famine, at least as they appear here in written form. I explore this tension in greater detail later, but I note them here to raise a broader question: specifically, what effect does the “content of the form” have upon historical representations of the Great Famine (White 1987, 26–28)? In other words, how does the content of stories we wish to tell shape the form the narrative takes? This effect is most apparent in the pairing of the photograph with the excerpts taken from the famine survivors. These visual and textual elements, when combined, create the appearance of peasants and laborers speaking about their personal experiences as distinct *individuals*, which is quite rare in histories officially approved for publication in Vietnam.

The process by which memories were “individually” recalled also remains somewhat unclear. Researchers sought out informants who had not only survived the Great Famine but were also old enough to understand what they saw unfold around them, which meant the vast majority were between 75 and 85 years of age when interviewed. Of these survivors, researchers gave greater weight to those who held positions in local Party cells or mass organizations or otherwise “served the people” (*phục vụ nhân dân*) during the struggle to achieve national independence. The researchers did so on the grounds that their official positions afforded them greater access to information, which explains why more than one-quarter of all the survivors were members of this category. The preference for these survivors also reflects the widely held belief among older Vietnamese that individuals who participated in the struggle for independence did so for entirely selfless reasons. “Purity” (*sự trong sạch*) and “honesty” (*thật thà*) are two commonly used adjectives to describe them—hence the assumption that such individuals can provide accurate, factual accounts of what happened in specific locales as well.

These observations are not intended to suggest that the effort to identify “objective” sources was a disingenuous one designed to obscure the agendas of those who conducted the inquiry. Rather, the point is to draw attention to some of the assumptions that made the category of “objectivity” possible in this context. Doing so is important given the highly “situated knowledge” (Haraway 1991) of the survivors and the methodology researchers used to elicit information about the Great Famine. For example, a casual glance at the report reveals that hearsay, rumor, and other kinds of factually suspect

information permeate many of the eyewitness accounts. Other factors, such as the passage of time, the existence of cultural scripts for recounting hardship and suffering, and the use of standardized questionnaires to elicit information from famine survivors affected what could be remembered about the Great Famine. Admittedly, Vietnamese state historians rarely explicitly discuss such concerns, in part because they raise difficult questions concerning the authority of any narrative to provide a “found” rather than constructed account of what happened (White 1987, 20–21). But these concerns are further marginalized here as a consequence of the stated purpose of the inquiry: to elicit memories that would help enumerate the dead.

Interestingly, efforts to extract targeted forms of recollection from the survivors produced two dramatically different “statements” about the Great Famine. The first consisted of vignettes that provided powerful “snapshots” of what conditions were like, often in disturbing detail. Đỗ Mạnh Đích, who was a blacksmith at the time, provides a representative example. In it, he recalls what happened when residents from a nearby village traveled to his town to beg for food at the local market after Japanese troops had uprooted all of their rice seedlings. Since rice stocks were nearly exhausted, none of the traders wanted to give away any of the bran—a by-product of the milling process—they had left to sell, which led to this desperate scene:

... People would pilfer the bran by thrusting their hand into it and eating it off their fingers. The vendors took their shoulder-poles and lashed them as they ran by. As one person got lashed, another person would run up and grab some bran to eat. The situation was the same along the sewers. People sat down, and groped around in the water looking for some seeds or grain to eat ... (Văn Tạo and Furuta 1995, 542–543)

By contrast, the second kind of “statement” took the form of “memory-data,” i.e., highly detailed statistical lists that provided figures on the number of fatalities a particular family, hamlet, or village suffered. Nguyễn Khinh, who was the secretary in a commune-level People’s Council during the Great Famine, provides just such a statement:

Compared with other patrilineages the Nguyễn experienced the fewest deaths. Approximately half the Tô lineage died. The entire Lê lineage died, except for Khoa, who was 18 years old that year. Half the Hoàng lineage also died. The Đặng lineage had three taxpayers [but] 15 household members died, leaving only two. Compared with the Tây Bắc Hamlet, in which two-thirds died, the Nam Thị Hamlet had more deaths. Adding up the entire village of Hiên, two-thirds died. Hoàng Mạnh Tiếp’s family had eight members ... and they all died ... (*ibid.*, 77)

Since the primary goal of the study was to document the scale of the Great Famine as accurately as possible, the preoccupation with the facticity of the information extracted from the survivors is not entirely unexpected. However, the relentless focus on what

was remembered at the expense of how it was recalled signals an ethnographic refusal (Ortner 1995), one that continually resists rather than incorporates the meaning of the survivors' experiences and their aftereffects. Consequently, the report sheds surprisingly little light on how the Great Famine affected the survivors personally, the communities in which they lived, and Vietnamese society as a whole.

Allocating Blame

A relatively small number of examples of popular verse describing the hardships of life under French-Japanese rule during World War II have survived to make the transition into published form. Not surprisingly, much of it centers on food (Vũ Ngọc Phan 2000, 596–598). Some poems lament wartime policies that forced people off land where their ancestors were buried, whereas others assert that it was better to be reduced to eating roasted manioc and boiled sweet potatoes—two crops commonly fed to swine—year-round than to become “quislings” (*Việt gian*). During interviews with elderly Vietnamese in the Red River Delta, I frequently asked whether they recalled any examples from their youth. Three examples, because of their overlapping content and their broader relevance to the allocation of blame and thus moral accountability, are included here:

Version 1

Nhật cười, Tây khóc, Tàu lo
Việt Nam Độc lập chết co đầy đường.
 The Japanese laugh, the French weep, the Chinese worry
 The Vietnamese, independent, curl up and die all on the streets.

Version 2

Tàu cười, Tây khóc, Nhật no
Việt Nam hết gạo chết co đầy đường.
 The Chinese smile, Westerners weep, the Japanese are full
 Vietnam is out of rice, [they] curl up and die in the streets.

Version 3

Mấy năm thiếu thóc các vì ai?
Lâm dân ta chết hơn hai triệu người,
Ta thì khóc, nó thì cười.
 How many years [have we had] to pay extra paddy and on account of whom?
 [They] made our people die, more than two million people,
 We cry, while the full smile.

The ditties are reminiscent of satirical folk narratives (*vè*) common to northern and central Vietnam. Although *vè* are far longer and follow a four-syllable rhyme scheme rather than the six-eight form used here, they serve a similar purpose—namely, to pass judgment on people who transgressed the boundaries of morally acceptable conduct (unseemly family quarrels, households that beat their servants, etc.) by singing their stories out loud, but where no one could see them. But in other cases, the narratives commented on historical incidents, such as the heroic, though typically unsuccessful, struggles by ordinary peasants and scholar-mandarins to hold abusive and corrupt officials accountable for their actions (Vũ Ngọc Phan 2000). Since the poetic forms themselves are quite flexible, the content could be modified to suit the particular circumstances in which they were sung, which meant multiple versions were often in circulation simultaneously, as is the case here. In each instance, the emotional response of the different nationalities to the Great Famine varies. However, no clear reason is offered as to why one will “smile” while the others will alternately “weep,” “worry,” or “be full.” Additionally, without any particles to indicate tense, it is impossible to tell whether these affective states are real or imagined reactions to the Japanese occupation (the past), the Great Famine itself (present), or what the prospective end of World War II will bring (the future). Unfortunately, my efforts to obtain further details on the ditties from the survivors I spoke with were met with a strikingly similar response: “That is what I heard.”

Nonetheless, several constants emerged. The first is the repetition of the verb *cuòì*, which is rich in its varied meanings and occupies the ambiguous space between “to smile” or “to laugh,” on the one hand, and “to laugh at” or “to mock,” on the other. Without other lexical elements, it is not entirely clear which of the two was intended. However, the verb “to cry/weep” (*khóc*) offers a further clue since it is closely paired with *cuòì* in the adjacent clause in each of the three examples that I collected. What kind of smile, but a false one, is elicited by the sound of someone weeping? The same theme reappears in the last line of each of the three versions, which all share a common conclusion: independence is empty when there is no rice in one’s belly.

By contrast, the eyewitnesses in the Joint Committee’s report commonly speak of the joint French-Japanese regime. Sometimes the order is reversed, but the hyphen always remains, which suggests the average famine survivor saw little to differentiate them, even though underground Việt Minh publications during the period in question carefully distinguished the evils of French colonialism from those of Japanese fascism. When pressed, most of the people I interviewed identified the Japanese and their “policy of stealing paddy” via French and Vietnamese intermediaries as the primary cause of the Great Famine, which a combination of floods, pests, and the bitterly cold weather compounded (Trần Văn Giàu 1962, 122–123; Bose 1990; Phạm Quang Trung, 1990). The

Comité pour le Commerce et L'Exportation des paddys, riz et dérivés (CODIRIZ) was the most visible symbol of this policy; it also serves as the primary point of departure for debates regarding the proper allocation of blame. The following details focus on blame, as a detailed discussion of French and Japanese food policies is available elsewhere (Gunn 2014, 135–164).

A joint Franco-Japanese agreement established CODIRIZ in May 1941 to subsidize the cost of the occupation and, later, the war effort more generally. The managers of CODIRIZ instituted a compulsory rice purchase program shortly afterward. The impact upon rural households in Tonkin and Annam was immediate and dramatic, as a majority of them already lacked sufficient land to meet their dietary needs. The program required all rural households to sell a fixed percentage of the paddy harvested on each *mẫu* (3,600 square meters) of land they owned at well below market rates to its agents. Japanese regulations also forbade people from accumulating or dealing in cereals (Nguyễn Quyết 1980, 9). Policymakers incorrectly assumed that each *mẫu* of land could produce between four and five tons of paddy per year. Actual yields were much lower and further varied from place to place; consequently, the purchase program consumed 50 percent to 80 percent of the actual annual rice harvest (Trần Văn Giàu 1962, 122–123; Văn Tạo and Furuta 1995, 204; Hội Nông Dân Việt Nam 1998, 124). The quota system was thus crucially dependent upon village elites. They collaborated with the much-hated and feared rice unions (*liên đoàn thóc gạo*) that CODIRIZ outsourced to collect paddy. Yet, there are almost no references to them in the report. Where references do occur—fewer than five in the entire volume—eyewitnesses mention them in dispassionate terms. Indeed, they focus on isolated incidents where an unnamed landlord or wealthy peasant refused to help neighbors in need rather than the systemic nature of the exploitation.

The relative silence is striking since the violence and corruption associated with these organizations, which operated with the full consent of French and Japanese officials, was well known and widely documented in the press at the time. According to Việt Nông, a journalist who wrote for the Sunday edition of *Trung Bắc*, rice unions took advantage of their positions in every province to extort “small gifts” (*vi thiếng*), i.e., bribes, and to illegally confiscate paddy stockpiled as a safeguard against famine, which they consumed and/or sold at a huge profit on the black market (Bùi Minh Dũng 1995, 615; Văn Tạo and Furuta 1995, 619–620). Nguyễn Phúc Lộc, a journalist with *Trí Tân*, reached the same conclusion, and he noted that the program had “created a gang of thieves that was reducing the people of the North to starvation” (Văn Tạo and Furuta 1995, 611–612). In response, peasants with sufficient land to produce a surplus employed a number of tactics to limit how much paddy they were forced to sell to the rice unions. Some reduced production levels to meet their subsistence needs in addition to the required quota, which

rapidly led demand to outstrip available supply. Others abandoned nearby fields to secretly cultivate distant ones. Still others illegally transferred arable land to economically less fortunate households, who were often kin, to work for them in exchange for a portion of their harvests (Marr 1995, 97n103).

These everyday forms of resistance, in conjunction with inclement weather, contributed to a 15 percent decline in the amount of paddy produced between 1941 and 1944, even though the total area under cultivation remained approximately the same (Shiraishi and Furuta 1992; Văn Tạo and Furuta 1995, 583–600; Nguyễn Sinh Cúc and Nguyễn Văn Tiêm 1996, 13, Table 2). The decline prompted French officials, who were likely pressured by Japanese ones, to take more decisive action; however, their decision to further raise quotas, raid private granaries, and sharply restrict the import of paddy from Cochinchina to compel compliance only served to exacerbate existing food shortages. These shortages rapidly gave way to widespread famine during the summer of 1944.

Food shortages were not limited to the countryside. In Hanoi, monthly food rations declined dramatically between late 1943 and early 1945 from 15 to 7 kilograms of paddy per person. Much of that paddy was either stale or moldy and heavily cut with rice husks and bran, according to the survivors I spoke with in Hanoi. The steady decline in size and quality of the rations fed fears that existing stockpiles were approaching exhaustion. The fear led the black market price for paddy to rise dramatically from 57 to 700–800 VNĐ/kilogram over this period. The price eventually peaked at 2,400 VNĐ in July of 1945 (Đặng Phong 2002, 71). Vietnamese-language newspapers, although subject to censorship prior to publication, also carried regular reports and, later, photographs of the worsening famine as well. Several poets hauntingly conveyed in verse what it was like to helplessly watch thousands of men, women, and children collapse and die of starvation in the streets of the city on a daily basis (e.g., Vũ Khiêu 1945; Bànng Bá Lân [1957] 1985; Tố Hữu [1945] 2003). Yet, high-ranking French and Japanese officials remained largely silent, at least publicly, on the mounting crisis (Marr 1995, 96–107).

In recent decades, a limited number of memoirs written by former high-ranking French officials have appeared, but these accounts either minimize or overlook the significance of the Great Famine entirely. By contrast, Japanese memoirs, although equally small in number, offer a somewhat more accurate description, perhaps because low-ranking soldiers authored them. These autobiographical accounts notwithstanding, no persuasive new evidence has emerged to counter Vietnamese claims that neither French nor Japanese officials took any decisive action to curtail the famine; instead, representatives of both sides attributed the disaster to the policies and incompetent personnel of the other (Huỳnh Kim Khánh 1986, 301; Bùi Minh Dũng 1995; Marr 1995, 105n140). But to this day, many elderly Vietnamese I spoke with continue to assert that although

the Japanese were primarily responsible for the conditions that gave rise to the Great Famine, it was the French who sought to exploit the tragedy as a means to delay Vietnam's independence. However, the authors of the Joint Committee's report, as well as the famine survivors featured in it, are mute on the question of blame and how it should be properly apportioned. The excerpts included in the report contain minimal descriptions of Japanese soldiers and their conduct, and almost none that pertain to French ones. Ethnic Chinese, who figured in two of the three ditties described earlier, are completely absent, even though they played a crucial role in the rural economy as moneylenders and rice mill owners. So, too, did Vietnamese who actively collaborated with the French-Japanese regime, such as members of the rice unions. This silence reflects the lack of sentiment expressed in the report more generally.

Suppressing Sentiment

At first glance, the heavy emphasis on personal testimonies of the eyewitnesses would appear to undercut the broader goal of collecting and presenting "objective" data on the Great Famine. But the members of the Joint Committee repeatedly justified the inclusion of the oral accounts by claiming that their recollections made the report more "penetrating" (*sâu sắc*), "truthful" (*chân thực*), and "appalling" (*rùng rợn*). The intended effect was to convey the "terrible" (*khủng khiếp*) nature of the event. Yet, the reader is confronted with a persistent flatness in the oral testimonies that leaves one strangely unmoved. The flatness is particularly striking when juxtaposed against the highly emotional accounts, excerpted at the end of the same report, from Vietnamese writers and journalists who survived the Great Famine, the report's editors among them (Văn Tạo and Furuta 1995, 610–679).

To a certain extent, the form conditions the content. Many of the testimonies, for example, reproduce a style of oral expression that I have repeatedly heard when ordinary people are requested by government officials to express their views on a particular topic. Typically, such orations begin with the stock phrase: "I request permission to express . . ." (*xin phép phát biểu . . .*). Then, after specifying which issue(s) are to be addressed, the speaker locates himself or herself in bureaucratic space and time, as is the case below:

I am Hoàng Hải Nam, 68 years old, residing in Pác Gà Village, Nhượng Bạt Commune [now in Bế Triều Commune], Hoà An District, Cao Bằng [Province]. My family during the period 1944–45 had five people; we had 10 *pùng* [5,000 square meters] of land and were considered to be a middle peasant household. When the French colonialists built the farm and stables in Bê-na, they stole one-third of the land . . . (*ibid.*, 279)

Visually reinforcing the flatness of such accounts are the “inquest reference tables” (*bảng tra cứu*), which consume more than one-third of the 728-page study. The tables always precede the oral accounts of the eyewitnesses and offer a quite different sense of the Great Famine. Unlike the accounts, the information included on these charts, which mimics the form used today for detailing local land tenure patterns, varied considerably. Typically, the charts were organized in hierarchically descending order by village, hamlet, lineage, and then household. Some of them merely recorded the names, number of people within the household, and the household’s economic situation (i.e., amount of land, draft animals, and type of house—either wood or bamboo) at the time of the Great Famine. Others included the number of deaths within the household and their kinship status (son, mother, etc.). Still others, more elaborate in design, stated the primary occupation of the household members, age at the time of death, current location of surviving members if known, and detailed statistical breakdowns of death rates by hamlet.

Again, no explanation is provided for this idiosyncratic presentation, which may simply reflect the disparate interests of individual members on the research team and/or the level of detail available in different locales. But regardless of the answer, the same question remains: what evidentiary weight should be given to these decontextualized fragments of people’s lives that fill the tables, especially as the report contains few methodological details on the circumstances of their collection? Were the statistics derived from the memories of the survivors and their descendants? Or were local documents and the revolutionary histories they later informed crucial to this effort as well? Alternatively, were the tables used as memory aids to prompt the recollections of the eyewitnesses, as I often witnessed during my fieldwork? If so, does this help explain why detailed mortality statistics are so firmly embedded within their oral accounts?

Close attention to the respective content of both forms of evidence suggests that each helped fashion the contours of the other. Access to arable land, for example, clearly emerged as an important site for knowledge production. Stage I of the research project narrowly focused on the impact of the Great Famine on one commune, Tây Lương, in Thái Bình Province. While overall mortality rates were severe throughout the area (over 66 percent of the inhabitants perished), households that had access to some private land in addition to the communal fields not surprisingly reported lower death rates (Vân Tào and Furuta 1995, 120). Questions regarding landholdings became progressively more detailed during Stages II and III of the project. Interestingly, the data collected on this topic resulted in dozens of inquest tables that noted in precise detail what portion of a *sào* (360 square meters) a household cultivated, but not the “class status” that was commonly associated with its inhabitants (*ibid.*, 444–447). The omission is interesting for several reasons. Bureaucrats employed such “Marx-ish” categories from the 1950s

onward to label people in ideological terms (Pelley 2002, 9). The designation given had a determining effect on one's life chances, as well as those of one's children (MacLean 2013, 31–53). These designations are rarely employed in everyday speech today. But scholars and local officials routinely project them back in time to describe colonial-era class relations and to justify the postcolonial campaigns in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam to abolish the material basis of “feudal” and “capitalist” forms of exploitation in the countryside (*ibid.*, 54–110). Consequently, one would expect that class terminology would permeate the testimonies of the eyewitnesses, especially as more than half of them were low-level cadres who “served the people” during the 1950s and 1960s. Yet, this is not the case.

A few scattered references to a landlord or a collaborator (almost always anonymous) can be found in the report, but almost none of the witnesses openly or directly blamed other Vietnamese. Two tragic examples from Tây Lương Commune in Thái Bình Province follow. Nguyễn Văn Tư sold all his rice to buy his neighbors' precious heirlooms, and then died of starvation when his food supplies ran out and no one was willing to buy back these goods. Nguyễn Văn Lý made the same wager and similarly lost. Of the 16 people in the Lý household, 15 died (Văn Tạo and Furuta 1995, 689).

However, vast areas of productive land were abandoned or sold for a song as the owners, both French and Vietnamese, fled or died of starvation and the cholera that quickly followed. Conditions were reputedly so severe in nine provinces in Tonkin that approximately 50 percent of the arable land was temporarily abandoned during the winter of 1945 (HNDVN 1998, 154). Landlords, at least those with better luck than either Tư or Lý, reportedly bought much of this abandoned land at prices a mere fraction of their market value, which became a major point of contention when land reforms began in the mid-1950s (Trần Phương 1968, 56–84). But again, no one mentions these practices in the study.

Nowhere is this silencing of affect and, by extension, blame more apparent than in the accounts of what people ate during the famine. Individual recollections typically take the form of lists that convey both the passage of time and the steady decline of viable food sources, but not the terror this experience must have evoked when family members began to die in great numbers. Cô Kim Thành offers a typical example: “During that time in my house, we first ate gruel, after that rice bran with pennywort [and] sweet potato vines. After that was gone, we ate roasted rice bran, with a little bit of salt, which caused bad heartburn and extreme constipation” (Văn Tạo and Furuta 1995, 488). By contrast, famine survivors I spoke with in Hưng Yên and Hải Dương, as well as other written accounts I gathered over the years, vividly describe the taste, textures, and smells of what they were able to eat as the sources available to them became increasingly scarce.

The first to disappear were sources of protein, they explained. Meat, never common, disappeared quickly as people consumed all their chickens and ducks and then the frogs, snakes, salted fish, and field rats; after that, they ate their own dogs, cats, and songbirds. Bad weather and poor storage facilities meant that stale, musty rice, though widely despised, remained the staple food, at least during the early months of the Great Famine. When cooked, it produced a sour smell that caused most people to lose their appetite. To help fool themselves, survivors told me, they mixed stale rice with water to produce a weak gruel to which small bits of whatever was still on hand could be added. Water spinach and sweet potato vines were common, as were other fast-growing vegetables, such as bitter melons and mustard greens. Aubergines and salt, according to one survivor, made the gruel more palatable because “they went together perfectly, like the moon loves the color white.” But even these vegetables, which form the cornerstone of the everyday diet of the rural poor, began to disappear as peasants became too weak to grow them. This left pennywort leaves, since their sharp, acrid smell helped counter-balance the gruel’s insipidity, as well as banana and potato peels, soybean dregs, rice bran, and corn stalks. But these scraps, which Vietnamese normally fed to their pigs, quickly became scarce as neighbors “began to steal from one another to eat,” one survivor confessed. When this swill was exhausted, those who sought to stay alive turned to edible grasses and plants, such as dayflower and duckweed, which traditionally served as meals of last resort whenever crops failed.

But perhaps the most tragic aspect of the famine concerned those people who died from “being full” (*chết no*). Famine victims require the careful reintroduction of foods in small quantities, due to the deterioration of the digestive system and to correct for multiple nutritional deficiencies brought about by chronic malnutrition or the complete absence of food. Many people were either unaware of this need or, more likely, simply could not control themselves when they finally got access to some food, especially during the spring harvest of 1945. By this point, the Great Famine had already lasted six months in most places. According to Nguyễn Thị Chúng, people in her hamlet went out to the drought-stricken fields in March, just prior to the harvest, where they ate the immature rice grains raw. Many of them, she noted, promptly died from intestinal blockages (*ibid.*, 326). In other places, people were able to wait until April, when the rice was ready for harvest. But again, their patience proved insufficient. Trần Văn Sứ lost four of his relatives, including his maternal grandmother, when the smell of partially steamed rice overcame them. According to Sứ, they ate the contents of the pot before the rice had completely cooked and died a short time afterward (*ibid.*, 454–455). Nguyễn Duy Nhi also watched his paternal uncle eat four small bowls of rice and then die (*ibid.*, 259).

Similar examples are scattered throughout the text. Yet, the circumstances are

again described in strikingly unemotional terms and frequently appear almost incidental due to the prominence eyewitnesses gave in their “testimonies” to enumerating the dead. One startling exception to this pattern appears in the report. Nguyễn Thị Chúng, quoted above, was 10 years old when the Great Famine began. When asked by the research team what she remembered, Chúng responded in “double-seven six eight” (*song thất lục bát*) verse. Chúng noted that the rhyme scheme, which is typically used in Vietnam to chant lengthy elegies and ballads, helped preserve the events in her mind. An excerpt from her 75-line poem follows:

People appear like underworld ghosts,
 Wearing torn ill-matched clothing,
 Peering at you for a long while without showing their eyes.
 Eating pennywort leaves, clusters of figs and amaranth
 Banana tubers boiled with a side plate of salt
 Eat hoping to ward off our hungry stomachs.
 Dry cakes pretending that they are rice dumplings filled with green bean paste.
 People slit open sweet potatoes and smeared them with ancient bran dregs
 To keep from wilting like swine.
 Ponder how depressing and miserably wretched this is and then
 Judge those watching outside the store
 What reason is there for their misery? (*ibid.*, 325–326)

What I find most distinctive in this poem is the open recognition of misery and depression, especially when one compares it to the emotional flatness of the other eyewitness reports. But it is the issue of non-judgment, upon which the excerpt ends, that foregrounds these differences most clearly. In Chúng’s view, the starving were already little more than hungry ghosts. For this reason, they should be forgiven—if not entirely absolved—for the shameful acts they frequently committed in the effort to remain alive.

Depersonalizing Suffering

Võ An Ninh captured on film what Chúng conveyed through verse. Ninh was a young photographer when the Great Famine began, and he traveled throughout Tonkin on assignment to document the tragedy as it happened. His photographs were first published in the Việt Minh’s *Cứu Quốc* (Save the Nation) magazine (No. 133, January 3, 1946) and then quickly reprinted elsewhere. Forty-two plates of his black-and-white photographs are reproduced at the end of the Joint Committee’s report, and their content forms a stark contrast with the rest of the report. The report’s authors state that they included them because Ninh’s photographs “note the truthfulness [of what happened], and call on

us to remember, with deep grief and resentment, what can never be forgotten” (Văn Tạo and Furuta 1995, 673). In a later interview, Ninh said his photo-“reportage” (*phóng sự*) constituted a visual denunciation of the French and Japanese crimes but added that what struck him the most was the inescapable smell of the dead and of those about to die (*ibid.*, 679). These sentiments, which stand in marked contrast to the subdued tone of the Joint Committee’s report as a whole, are embedded in the images themselves, but in a manner that depersonalizes the victims, hence the additional attention they receive here.

Vietnamese reportage first appeared in 1932. The genre was modeled after investigative French *reportage*, which itself was derived from the literary tradition of social realism. But the Vietnamese word for *reportage* carried an additional connotation. *Phóng sự* means “to blow up” or “to magnify events” and conveyed the popular understanding that it was acceptable, if not required, for the writer to enlarge the facts to achieve a desired aesthetic and/or political effect (Lockhart 1996, 27). By using this term, Ninh is signaling that the “truth” of the Great Famine requires something more than “facts” to fully represent the tragedy to people who did not personally endure it. Ninh achieves his desired effect in several ways. Most of his photos are hand-signed on the front (though without the requisite diacritics) rather than the back, as if to evoke Western-style paintings and other artworks. The lengthy captions, with their liberal use of exclamation points, also move beyond simply factual descriptions to create short, almost cinematic stills that dictate what we are to conclude from the presented image. Photograph No. 18, for instance, is a close-up shot (head and shoulders) of a male corpse lying on the ground, with disheveled hair, and severely sunken eyes staring blankly upward. The caption reads, “Dead and unable to shut [his] eyes! The rancor and bitterness are spent here!”

The emotional power of the photographs arises not simply from their content, which is often disturbing in its own right, but through their juxtaposition with the “testimonies” in the report, as previously mentioned. Photos of the nearly dead in Thái Bình and Nam Định Provinces show small groups of emaciated women and children standing, squatting, or lying down on the ground. The subjects are either dressed in filthy rags or completely naked. Their gaze is aimed in every direction, often directly at the camera lens, but only rarely at each other. The recently dead, by contrast, appear in great numbers and take the form of corpses piled on wagon carts and the back of flatbed trucks or in great stacks at impromptu graveyards. Still others are shown wrapped in mats made of sedge—normally used in rural areas as a dining surface—and then placed in shallow graves in rice fields. The differences in formal composition aside, all of the individuals portrayed in Ninh’s photographs are depicted as nameless victims whose anonymity is further reinforced by the captions that accompany them (see also Campbell 2012). These cap-

tions offer little to contextualize the scenes Ninh captured on film. Instead, the captions instruct viewers on how to respond emotionally to their visual content, compassion for those “near the earth and far from heaven” (*gần đất xa trời*), and outrage on behalf of the already dead.

The instructions provide a useful reminder of a broader dilemma people faced at the time: namely, what should be done with the corpses, especially given the dangers they presented to the people who handled them? Ironically, professional gravediggers were often the first to die because they had no arable land of their own and thus no reliable sources of income and food. As the speed with which people died accelerated, others had to find ways to dispose of their kith and kin to avoid cholera outbreaks. In rural areas, the most common solution was the creation of “ghost graves” and “hunger tombs,” such as the ones described at the outset of the essay, which were normally placed apart from those used for one’s ancestors. This problem was further compounded in urban areas due to the sheer number of people who arrived in cities each day in desperate search of food but perished shortly afterward. Since there were no known relatives to take responsibility for their unidentified remains, tens of thousands of corpses were placed in hastily constructed mass graves, typically in close proximity to the bus stations and markets where they collapsed.

In 1950 residents of Hanoi raised funds to exhume, wash, and then rebury some of the remains in the city’s charity cemetery, according to the caretaker of the famine memorial whom I met. The reburial effort was unusual for several reasons, the least of which was that it occurred during the middle of the First Indochina War (1946–54). Funerary practices in north and central Vietnam commonly require two burials, the first in special containers located at geomantically auspicious locations in one’s own rice fields or near bodies of water. The remains are generally exhumed after two years, when they are carefully cleaned with alcohol, counted, and then re-interred by a ritual specialist, as an incomplete skeleton can result in serious problems for the living as well as the dead. However, the mass burials made this impossible, which perhaps explains the decision made in 1951 to further violate normal mortuary practices and collectively entomb the remains inside the memorial that was erected on the grounds of the charity cemetery. Ninh’s photos of the reburial, although not published until five years after the process was completed, showed the culturally unthinkable: piles of skulls three meters deep, rows of femurs stacked like kindling, and jumbled masses of ribs. An elderly woman, Nhung, who lived next to the memorial and regularly encountered the spirits of the famine victims, told me the collective reburial was nonetheless a marked improvement. Before 1951, she explained, it was not unusual to see bits of exposed bone lying on the ground among the weeds; however, the decision to place all of the disarticulated remains

in a large ossuary under the memorial ensured, in her opinion, that the “thirsty and hungry victims of injustice” (*oan hồn đói khát*) would never be fully at peace.

Missing Resistance

Rural Vietnamese employed a range of strategies with mixed success to survive the famine. Theft was an obvious choice, as was buying and selling rice on the black market while supplies lasted. However, most turned to begging, but the scale of the famine was so terrible that it was impossible. “The markets,” the former assistant chairman for Thái Bình Province, Bùi Thọ Ty, recalled, were too crowded with people “who were nothing but skin and bones” (Văn Tạo and Furuta 1995, 85). Nguyễn Văn Đăng similarly remembers how Vũ Thị Ang (*sic*), who was 12 years old at the time, went to the local market to beg after her grandmother, Bà Mẫn, collapsed. “She was too hungry to ask for food, so she lay down at the corner of the market and died . . .” (*ibid.*, 387). The comparatively better off sold their property and clothing, piece by piece until there was nothing, and then they sold their homes. Once the money from that was gone, they sold whatever family heirlooms remained. But even that, according to Nguyễn Thanh Vân, the former president of Thái Bình Province’s historical research council, was often not enough. “When everything was gone [sold],” he explained, “you would still die, impoverished, of starvation” (*ibid.*, 87–88). The only other option, according to Chu Bá Hoan, was to leave for the mountains in the far north, where rumor had it food could be had if one joined the Việt Minh (*ibid.*, 232).

There were, of course, more active forms of everyday resistance *prior* to the Great Famine. Rural households, as I noted earlier, sought to hide the true extent of their landholdings and to harvest crops in secret to limit what the rice unions and others could seize from them. Fields officially designated by Japanese officials for the production of cash crops (e.g., peanuts, cotton, and jute) needed to supply the war effort commonly went under-planted and thus reduced the amount of materials available to them. In several isolated instances, mobs “borrowed” (i.e., seized) paddy from landlords and Japanese-managed granaries as well (*ibid.*, 86). But these isolated actions were not coordinated (*ibid.*, 626–629); moreover, they appear to have largely ceased by August 1943, months before the Great Famine began (*ibid.*, 124–131, 626–629). The apparent lack of organized action is significant, again by contrast. Peasant uprisings hold a conspicuous place in the new histories of the national past written after the creation of the DRV in 1954. Details regarding them are routinely cited as proof of two things: (1) the revolutionary potential of Vietnamese peasants, and (2) the concomitant need for the

Communist Party to guide their actions in an effective manner (Vũ Huy Phúc 1979, 387; Pelley 1995).

The lack of large-scale, organized resistance on the eve of the Great Famine helps explain the peculiar position of the tragedy within historical accounts of the period. Slump famines are generally associated with a sudden and unexpected drop in the economy or one of its sub-sectors, which produces catastrophic mortality rates—even though sufficient food exists to prevent it. The sudden onset of the crisis instead leads to loss of a household's substantive ability to establish ownership over an adequate amount of food to preserve life, either by growing it or by purchasing it. But in this particular instance, there was no sudden economic downturn, only an inexorable decline that began in 1930 (Nguyễn Thế Anh 1987; Bùi Minh Dũng 1995, 580; Gunn 2014, 75–105). By the eve of the famine's beginnings, there was no fat left on the land—or, for that matter, on Vietnamese bodies. So, within a very short period of time, people were too weak to do anything.

For many of those who witnessed the Great Famine, their survival cannot be separated from intense personal feelings of shame. Their shame has several causes, many of which fall under the generic heading of selfish acts committed in the name of self-preservation, such as the abandonment of families, sale of children, theft of food and clothes from others who were weaker, and cannibalism (Tô Hoài 1994, 58–70; Marr 1995, 106n144; Văn Tạo and Furuta 1995, 638, 649). “A hungry belly renders the ears deaf,” (*bụng đói thì tai điếc*) one survivor in Hanoi told me, by which he meant being momentarily indifferent to the needs of others. But the crime that appears to haunt survivors the most was a ritual one. As conditions worsened, it became impossible to present daily offerings to one's ancestors, much less to bury family members properly when everything of value was sold to purchase food:

An offence against Heaven has been committed
 The antiques are brought out
 Everything belonging to the Grandparents is sold
 The [lesser] lines of descent are also sold
 Now, on this day, even the ancestors are sold.

This lullaby and the shame it describes alludes to another obstacle to state-sponsored commemorations of the Great Famine. The Communist Party justifies its monopoly on political power by placing itself at the head of a long line of “ancestors” that defended the “nation” against “foreign aggressors” (Pelley 1995). The Great Famine did not contribute to any well-known acts of heroic sacrifice, however. Consequently, the accounts of individual suffering and passive nature of their deaths have little historical significance,

except in statistical form as a means to validate Vietnamese claims regarding the scale of the tragedy. When viewed from this perspective, the Great Famine constitutes an example of suffering without “sacrifice,” a point Ninh’s photographs continually reemphasize.

The absence of any mention of “sacrifice” in the oral testimonies is a further reminder that not all deaths are equal. Since the victims of the Great Famine did not die in defense of the “nation,” they cannot be interred in the “martyrs’ cemeteries” (*nhã trảng liệt sĩ*) the government has constructed throughout the country to honor individuals who sacrificed their lives to achieve its political goals. While the millions of hungry ghosts produced from the First, Second, and Third Indochina Wars can be converted into martyrs once their physical remains are located (typically with the assistance of spirit mediums) and properly buried, victims of the Great Famine cannot be similarly transformed. The ontological status of these hungry ghosts remains ambiguous, as no officially approved ritualized procedures have emerged to change them into either benevolent ancestors or the “exceptional dead” (Malarney 2007, 521), whose sacrifices are worthy of emulation by others.

Partial Reincorporation

Despite the Joint Committee’s findings, the Great Famine remains a non-event, at least within official histories of the revolutionary struggle. The tragedy produced no heroes, a point that Văn Tạo, senior historian and co-editor of the volume, stated in the report’s concluding section. He painfully noted that the indignities Vietnamese suffered and the shame they carried from what they had to do to survive made people “lose their humanness” (Văn Tạo and Furuta 1995, 693). As time passes, therefore, the Great Famine becomes increasingly marginal in depictions of the national past.

That said, restoration work on the 1951 memorial to the famine victims, which began in 2001 under the direction of faculty at Hanoi Architectural University, updated its existing features using historical sources, and added some new ones. The result was a modestly sized “zone of recollection” (*khu tưởng niệm*) on what remained of the former charity cemetery. Sturdy cement walls and a padlocked gate now protect the zone, poetically named “the sleeping place of a thousand years” (*nơi an giấc ngàn thu*), from further encroachment by the private homes that surround it on all sides. Once inside the zone, a curved pathway bordered by decorative trees and potted flowers leads visitors around the monument, which was fully restored and repainted in the same colors as the national flag. Two further elements were added in 2003. The first was a large polished

black granite slab that features the full text of the 114-line poem by Vũ Khiêu, a famine survivor and former vice-director of the Institute of History. (He composed the poem in March 1945 to honor its victims.) The second was a small two-story structure built a few meters to the left of the memorial. The top floor contains reproductions of the photographs Võ An Ninh took of the Great Famine on its walls, while the bottom one houses a large altar for visitors. Thăng, the part-time caretaker of the zone, informed me that visitors are largely limited to government officials and Japanese dignitaries, who periodically come to “recall” (*tưởng niệm*) the dead with a ritual prayer, incense, and small offerings, especially during the festival to appease the wandering souls of the dead.

The zone was not simply about honoring the famine victims, however. The funds the People’s Committee allocated for it were drawn from a much larger item in the city’s budget. Funds were earmarked for the restoration of other sites of historical and cultural significance, then scheduled for completion prior to September of 2010, when nationwide celebrations would mark the 1,000th anniversary of the founding of Hanoi. The restoration thus prompted renewed discussions among the historians who participated in the research project. The topic was whether the memorial, in its new form, should serve as the national “site of memory” (Nora 1989) for all victims of the Great Famine. These informal discussions gained strength prior to the 60th anniversary of the tragedy—a date that carried additional cosmological significance. The year 2005 marked the completion of the sexagenary calendar, which in Vietnam is used not only to predict the future, but to account for the moral character of the past as well.

The historians organized a number of public events that year to mark this anniversary, which included the release of a revised and expanded version of the Joint Committee’s 1995 report. But the most notable of these events was the symposium held in May 2005. The event brought together scholars from the Institute of History, many of whom had participated in the inquiry in 1995, assorted government officials, reporters, and several eyewitnesses. Dr. Vũ Khiêu opened the event by tearfully reciting his well-known poem regarding the event. The discussion then turned to the question of how to prevent further ritual marginalization of the victims.

Professor Văn Tạo, the co-author of the 1995 report and a famine survivor as well, argued that this outcome could best be forestalled through the establishment of “one death anniversary and one shrine” (*một ngày giỗ và một bàn thờ*) to commemorate the victims. Not everyone agreed with his proposal, however. Some participants noted that it would require the adoption of a national standard, which would reduce and possibly eradicate the diverse array of commemorative practices that now exist. For example, one person pointed out that at least four different dates were currently used to present offerings to the Great Famine’s victims: (1) September 3, when Hồ Chí Minh announced

that a mass movement would be organized “to raise production to resist famine”; (2) October 11, when he provided concrete details on how to implement the campaign; (3) the full moon in March, when death rates reached their peak in 1945; and (4) the full moon of the seventh lunar month, when all hungry ghosts annually emerge (Quang Thiện 2005).

The tensions over whether the death anniversary should coincide with the political or religious calendar also resurfaced around the question of whether a national monument was needed. Most felt that the restored memorial, which also included the remains of individuals killed during the 1946 bombing of Hanoi that marked the start of the First Indochina War, was too small and difficult to find to serve this purpose. But there was sharp disagreement over where a new one should be erected, especially since a substantial number of the dead were also buried at the Phúc Thiện Cemetery, near the zoo. Some proposed other sites in Hanoi where large numbers of people perished, such as the Hàng Da Market in the Old Quarter or the Giáp Bát Bus Station on the southern outskirts of the capital. Others argued that a national monument should be placed in Thái Bình Province, where more than a quarter of a million people died. Advocates of this site wanted to place it next to the road marker three kilometers north of the provincial seat on Highway One in honor of the famous photograph Võ An Ninh took there of two young male victims. Participants from Thanh Hóa, a province farther south, claimed it experienced a higher death toll and should host the monument. Still other participants expressed concern that a national monument would encourage the mass graves scattered across the countryside to gradually “fall into oblivion” (*ibid.*).

These debates over how the hungry ghosts should be recalled and ritually “cared for” (*chăm sóc*), as one participant in the symposium put it, remain unresolved despite ongoing efforts to establish a larger place for the Great Famine in the historical imagination, including public exhibitions of the photographs in the Museum of Vietnamese History and university textbooks (Hoàng Phương 2015; *Thanh Niên News* 2015). They remain unresolved because the archive that resulted from the Joint Committee’s inquiry documents features the unmaking of an entire population rather than its productive management toward officially desired ends: the struggle for revolutionary independence prior to and immediately after the August Revolution. And it is primarily for this reason that the Great Famine and the hungry ghosts it produced continue to resist incorporation into official narratives about the “exceptional dead,” who sacrificed their lives to defend the “nation” from foreign aggressors.

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