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Ngô Kha, Vietnam's Civil Wars, and the Need for Forgiveness

When I taught English in Đà Nẵng and Huế in central Vietnam in the late 1960s and early 1970s, my students introduced me to the songs of Trịnh Công Sơn and I've been a fan ever since. I have since written some articles and am currently writing a book about him.¹ In this article, however, I focus on Ngô Kha, one of Trịnh Công Sơn's talented friends.² Because Trịnh Công Sơn, who passed away in 2001, is probably Vietnam's best-known composer of popular songs, his talented friends are often mentioned in books and articles about the singer. Information about these friends' own lives and accomplishments is harder to find. In this article I attempt to correct that imbalance by focusing on Ngô Kha, though Trịnh Công Sơn's name will inevitably come up because I believe one understands Ngô Kha better by learning how he resembled and how he differed from his famous friend.

Though I wanted to correct the aforementioned imbalance, I hesitated because I feared opening up old wounds. Ngô Kha was a poet, teacher, officer in the Army of the Republic of Vietnam, and leader of protests against the military regimes in Sài Gòn. In 1973 he was executed by men acting on the orders of Liên Thành, the chief of police in Thừa Thiên-Huế Province.³ Liên Thành, who lives in California, has accused three of Ngô



FIGURE 1: Ngô Kha Elementary School in Huế.⁴

Kha's close friends, who all joined the National Liberation Front [NLF] in 1966, of returning to Huế during the Tết Offensive and identifying Huế citizens for execution.⁵ I worried that in talking about Ngô Kha and his friends I would antagonize the many Vietnamese in the diaspora who do not want to hear anything except condemnation about people who they feel helped bring about the downfall of the Republic of Vietnam. I also worried that admirers of Ngô Kha in Huế and elsewhere, should they come across my article, might not wish to be reminded of the gruesome way he died. It is enough, Ngô Kha's admirers may feel, that the Socialist Republic of Vietnam named him a martyr [*liệt sĩ*] in 1981 and that in Huế a street, an elementary school, and a scholarship fund for poor students bear his name.⁶

What persuaded me to write about Ngô Kha was Viet Thanh Nguyen's discussion of war and the ethics of remembrance. "How can we," Viet Thanh Nguyen asks, "recall the past in a way that does justice to the forgotten, the excluded, the oppressed, the dead, the ghosts?"⁷ Ethical memory, he argues, involves remembering not only our own but all those who suffered in a war,

but typically war memorials remember only our own. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington D.C., for example, remembers fifty-eight thousand Americans. Three million Vietnamese, four hundred thousand Laotians, and seven hundred thousand Cambodians who died in the war are forgotten.⁸ In Biên Hòa there is now a grand martyrs cemetery built and maintained by the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. On the other side of Highway 1A there is a cemetery, now in complete disrepair with graves defaced, that was once the National Cemetery of the Army of the Republic of Vietnam [Nghĩa Trang Quân Đội Việt Nam]. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington and the neglect of the RVN cemetery are, Viet Thanh Nguyen suggests, examples not of just memory but of unjust forgetting—of disremembering.⁹

Ethical memory, Viet Thanh Nguyen says, involves a kind of forgiving that Jacques Derrida calls “pure forgiveness” that arises, Viet Thanh Nguyen says, from “the paradox of forgiving the unforgivable.”¹⁰ It involves “an ethical awareness of our simultaneous humanity and inhumanity, which leads to a more complex understanding of our identity, of what it means to be human and to be complicit in the deeds that our side, our kin, and even we ourselves commit.”¹¹ Derrida himself calls his notion of pure forgiveness “excessive, hyperbolic, mad,” and Viet Thanh Nguyen admits that he felt that way about it at first—how can one forgive mass bombing, genocide, etc.?¹² But later he decides he can “forgive, in the abstract, what America and Vietnamese—in all their factions and variations—for what they have done in the past.”¹³ But he “cannot forgive them for what they do in the present because the present is not yet finished. The present, perhaps, is always unforgivable.”¹⁴ I write about Ngô Kha in this spirit of pure forgiveness, fully aware that because I worked in Vietnam during the war in programs supported by the US government, I can be considered among those who need forgiveness.¹⁵

Ngô Kha: Army Officer, Charismatic Teacher, Protest Leader

Ngô Kha was from Huế, a city that before 1954 was rather traditional—more insular and conservative—than Sài Gòn or even Đà Nẵng. But after the Geneva Accords ended the First Indochina War in 1954, Huế became more worldly as students and teachers returned from studying abroad, bringing

new ideas with them. Huế became a university town when the University of Huế was founded in 1957. In that same year the Huế School of Fine Arts [Trường Mỹ thuật Huế] was established. In 1958 the first issue of a scholarly journal called “Đại Học: Tạp Chí Nghiên Cứu Viện Đại Học Huế” [University: A Research Journal of the University of Huế] was established. It was edited by a northern Catholic intellectual named Nguyễn Văn Trung who had recently returned from study in Belgium. This journal featured many articles on existential philosophy, some written by Professor Nguyễn Văn Trung himself. There were also articles about Sartre, Camus, Merleau-Ponty, and other Western writers and philosophers. Intellectuals in Huế became intrigued with various “-isms” associated with Euro-American modernism—existentialism, cubism, surrealism. We see modernism in French literature which became surreal in, for example, the poems of Jacques Prévert, Paul Éluard, and Louis Aragon—all poets whose works, according to the French teacher (and Trịnh Công Sơn’s friend) Bửu Ý, were read by Trịnh Công Sơn and his coterie of friends, which included Ngô Kha.¹⁶ Two world wars shattered the faith of Europeans and Americans that life was coherent and comprehensible, which led to works that were obscure, hard to decipher. Trịnh Công Sơn’s songs and Ngô Kha’s poems are also obscure. Artists and writers are obscure for different reasons; sometimes it is to avoid censorship, but clearly both Trịnh Công Sơn and Ngô Kha were influenced by European-American modernism generally and by surrealism in particular.

Ngô Kha was born in Huế in 1935 and studied at the prestigious National Academy [Trường Quốc Học] from 1954 to 1957.¹⁷ Then he studied at the Faculty of Pedagogy of the University of Huế, where he specialized in Vietnamese literature and culture. Ngô Kha graduated first in his class in 1959. In 1962 he received a Bachelor of Law degree from the University of Huế. While studying law he was also writing poems and teaching Vietnamese studies at the National Academy and three other secondary schools in Huế. Ngô Kha’s former students and others who knew him report that he was a charismatic teacher but not one who stuck to a lesson plan.¹⁸ He recited poems, talked about current events, and got students involved in demonstrations against the military regimes of Nguyễn Cao Kỳ and Nguyễn Văn Thiệu. Ngô Kha was a very effective organizer of student protests. An admirer of Che Guevara, he wore a black beret at a rakish angle like the

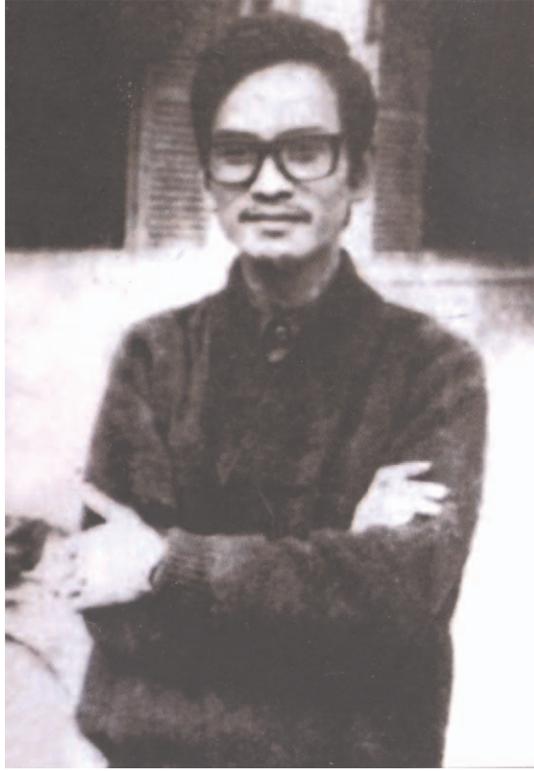


FIGURE 2: Ngô Kha.¹⁹

Latin American revolutionary. He was smart, a moving poet and eloquent speaker who backed up his words with action. Ngô Kha's students demonstrated their devotion to him by taking to the streets to demonstrate for his release after he was arrested at the beginning of 1972, an incident I describe in the following section.²⁰

In 1962 he was drafted into the army and went to Thủ Đức near Sài Gòn to attend officer candidate school. When he graduated he became an assistant press officer in the Đà Nẵng headquarters for the Army General Staff in the I-Corps Tactical Zone. Those who have written about Ngô Kha do not agree as to who got him this relatively safe job. The poet Ngô Minh says it was Ngô Kha's sister Ngô Thị Huân, a nurse in the Sài Gòn army.²¹ Nguyễn Đắc Xuân says it was "a *người anh*, the general Ngô Du" who got him the job

“so he wouldn’t have to carry a rifle and go to battles.”²² The phrase *người anh* is ambiguous: it could refer either to a brother [*anh ruột*] or a cousin [*anh họ*]. Nguyễn Đắc Xuân must mean cousin. Although Ngô Kha did have a brother named Ngô Du, he was not a general. Nguyễn Duy Hiền lists all six of Ngô Kha’s siblings and says this about his brother Ngô Du: “Ngô Du (who is dead) is not the general Ngô Dzu of the Sài Gòn army as some documents wrongly indicate.”²³ Ngô Kha’s brother Ngô Du was an assistant leader of Hương Trà District in Huế who was later killed during the Tết Offensive. To be sure that Nguyễn Đắc Xuân believes that a cousin and not a brother was Ngô Kha’s protector, I asked my brother-in-law, who lives in Huế, to contact the historian. He confirmed that by “*người anh*” he meant cousin.²⁴

This cousin of Ngô Kha’s later became a powerful general. His name is sometimes written “Ngô Dzu,” not “Ngô Du,” probably to discourage foreigners from pronouncing his given name like the English word “do” when it should be pronounced like the English word “zoo” (northern dialect) or “you” (southern dialect). During the North Vietnamese Easter Offensive in 1972, Ngô Dzu was the Army of the Republic of Vietnam [ARVN] commander of Tactical Zone II and worked with the famous US advisor John Paul Vann in the battle for Kontum and the central highlands. In the early 1960s, however, he had only recently been promoted to general and was not assigned to Tactical Zone I, which included Huế and Đà Nẵng. It seems likely, however, that he was Ngô Kha’s protector. Around 1964 Ngô Kha was detached [*biệt phái*] from the army and allowed to return to teaching in Huế, where he continued to be active in the struggle movement.²⁵ Ngô Kha must have tested his cousin Ngô Dzu’s patience. Both Nguyễn Đắc Xuân and Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường report that Ngô Kha supplied those in the struggle movement with military intelligence regarding the ARVN’s plans both when he was a press attaché in the ARVN and later when he was detached to teach in Huế. As I will explain, information they received from Ngô Kha enabled Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường and Nguyễn Đắc Xuân to avoid being imprisoned.²⁶

I have said that Ngô Kha was an effective organizer of student protests in Huế, but people in Huế, particularly Buddhists, had a lot to protest about and so it probably was not too difficult for someone to get them stirred up. Intellectually Huế showed signs of becoming an exciting city but politically it

was troubled. From 1955 to 1963 the country was ruled by President Ngô Đình Diệm, a fervent Catholic, with help from his brothers Ngô Đình Nhu, Ngô Đình Thục, and Ngô Đình Cẩn. Ngô Đình Nhu was Ngô Đình Diệm's advisor and also head of the secret police and promoter of the family's Cần Lao Party. Ngô Đình Cẩn had no official title but was the de facto governor of an area stretching from Phan Thiết in the South to the seventeenth parallel. Ngô Đình Cẩn ruled the region, which included Huế, like a warlord. Ngô Đình Thục, the oldest living brother of President Ngô Đình Diệm, was a Catholic priest. In 1961 he became archbishop of central Vietnam. The president of the University of Huế, Cao Văn Luận, was also a Catholic priest. The result was an overwhelming Catholic presence in a region where most of the people were Buddhists who resented the fact that President Ngô Đình Diệm had left in place a French decree (Decree Number 10) which classified Buddhism as an association rather than a religion.²⁷ And they resented having to sing, at flag ceremonies and in movie theaters, a song called "Venerating President Ngô" [Suy Tôn Ngô Tổng Thống], which contained these lines:

All the people of Vietnam are grateful to President Ngô
 President Ngô, long live President Ngô
 All the people of Vietnam are grateful to President Ngô
 Please God convey Your blessings upon him.

Buddhists in Huế feared the elevation of Catholicism into a national religion. These religious tensions boiled over in 1963 when officials in Huế refused to let Buddhists display Buddhist flags in the days preceding Vesak day, the celebration of the Buddha's birthday [*ngày Phật Đản*], despite the fact that the streets had recently been filled with Vatican flags for the anniversary of Ngô Đình Thục's investiture as Archbishop. On the night of May 8, Buddhists went to the Huế radio station to hear the broadcast of a special Vesak day program, which included remarks by Thích Trí Quang. When the broadcast was delayed, protestors grew rowdy. When an army major ordered his troops to restore order, bombs went off, shots were fired, and nine protestors were killed. This event intensified the Buddhist Struggle Movement and enhanced Thích Trí Quang's reputation.²⁸

The struggle movement entered a climactic phase in 1966. US policy had changed. In 1963, US leaders wanted to stop President Ngô Đình Diệm from

oppressing the Buddhists; in 1966, however, they wanted a Vietnamese general in the I-Corps Tactical Zone who was willing to squash the Buddhist Struggle Movement because it was destabilizing the Sài Gòn military regime. What provoked protestors in 1966 was Prime Minister Nguyễn Cao Kỳ's decision, announced on March 10, to remove General Nguyễn Chánh Thi, the military commander of the I-Corps Tactical Zone, a region that included the five northernmost provinces of South Vietnam. Nguyễn Cao Kỳ removed the general, a Buddhist from Huế, because he was popular in the region and had developed a good relationship with Thích Trí Quang, a leader of the Buddhist Struggle Movement. Because Prime Minister Nguyễn Cao Kỳ feared this movement and distrusted the loyalty of ARVN commanders and their soldiers in the region, he had already, on April 5, gotten the Americans to fly one thousand nine hundred elite troops loyal to the Sài Gòn government, along with tanks and armored personnel carriers, into the Đà Nẵng airport.²⁹

What Stanley Karnow calls a "civil war within a civil war" developed: a confrontation between different units of the South Vietnamese army.³⁰ ARVN soldiers stationed in Huế and Đà Nẵng remained loyal to local commanders and fought troops flown in by Prime Minister Nguyễn Cao Kỳ and the Americans from other regions. In other words, local troops joined forces with the Buddhist Struggle Movement. According to General Lewis Walt, commander of the III Marine Amphibious Force stationed in Đà Nẵng, "It was as if California, with Los Angeles and San Francisco, had seceded from the United States."³¹ In Đà Nẵng there were violent clashes in May when rebel forces took refuge in three pagodas in the southern part of the city. Monks threatened to immolate themselves if the pro-Nguyễn Cao Kỳ forces attacked. Many women and children were wounded in the fighting. Neil Sheehan reported in *The New York Times* that after this confrontation "more than 40 bodies, draped with Buddhist flags, lay in an anteroom off the sanctuary of the [Tĩnh Hội] pagoda."³² By May 23, however, the rebel forces in Đà Nẵng had surrendered and the battle moved to Huế.

When this civil war within a civil war broke out, Ngô Kha became a core member of a group that organized ARVN soldiers in Huế into a battle group to resist ARVN forces loyal to Nguyễn Cao Kỳ and Nguyễn Văn Thiệu, forces which, after subduing the struggle movement in Đà Nẵng, were

advancing toward Huế.³³ This unit was called the Nguyễn Đại Thúc Battle Group [Chiến đoàn Nguyễn Đại Thúc] to memorialize an ARVN officer who was killed on May 17 when he tried to kill an ARVN General named Huỳnh Văn Cao, the new I Corps commander. Ngô Kha and others in the struggle movement considered Nguyễn Đại Thúc a martyr in a noble cause.

Nguyễn Đắc Xuân says that Ngô Kha's Nguyễn Đại Thúc Battle Group, whose members wore purple scarves to identify themselves, performed heroically and slowed the advance of Nguyễn Cao Kỳ's troops toward Huế.³⁴ Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường says that Ngô Kha told him that he would try to delay the arrival of Nguyễn Cao Kỳ's troops in Huế to give him a chance to escape into the mountains. This message was passed on to Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường by Trịnh Công Sơn's sister Trịnh thị Vĩnh Thúy, who a year later became Ngô Kha's wife. Ngô Kha warned his friend that as soon as Nguyễn Cao Kỳ's troops arrived in Huế they would search out people in the struggle movement that they considered dangerous.³⁵ I doubt that this battle group was very effective against tanks and armored personnel carriers, but both Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường and his brother Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Phan, along with Nguyễn Đắc Xuân, did manage to get out of Huế and escape capture, much to the regret of police chief Liên Thành. He says he failed to capture these three men because he was new to intelligence work and so lacked competence and experience. He had not yet developed, Liên Thành says, the "coldness" [*lạnh lùng*] that an intelligence officer needs to do his job.³⁶ Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường had been his teacher and, Liên Thành says, he had learned from his father and from Vietnamese culture generally that one must respect one's teachers. Not wanting to arrest his former teacher himself, he assigned the task of arresting Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường and his friends to an assistant. Letting these three men escape was, Liên Thành says, "a very big mistake, one that I have regretted all my life."³⁷ We know from his treatment of Ngô Kha, who was also a teacher of Liên Thành, that the police chief later developed sufficient coldness to be ruthless even to a former teacher.³⁸ It is possible Ngô Kha received no mercy from Liên Thành because he was a close friend of the three men that he let get away. Certainly in his books Liên Thành makes no attempt to hide his desire for revenge against anyone connected, no matter how tenuously, to the communist underground.

It is unclear how much the Nguyễn Đại Thúc Battle Group delayed the arrival of Nguyễn Cao Kỳ's troops in Huế. What is certain is that Ngô Kha's actions in 1966 got him arrested and put in jail on the island of Phú Quốc. Nguyễn Đắc Xuân says that without General Dzu's intervention Ngô Kha would have gotten the death penalty.³⁹ The exact length of time Ngô Kha was imprisoned on Phú Quốc Island is unclear. We know that he was imprisoned in May or June 1966, and that he was married in Huế in the summer of 1967, so it seems he could not have been in prison longer than a year or so.

On May 26, 1966, after a public funeral for Nguyễn Đại Thúc, protests intensified in Huế. A group of students—ignoring Thích Trí Quang's pleas to avoid violence—destroyed the US Information Service's library.⁴⁰ A few days later, they destroyed the American Consulate.⁴¹ At Thích Trí Quang's suggestion, the people of Huế placed family altars in the streets to block the progress of Nguyễn Cao Kỳ's forces.⁴² This was largely a symbolic act. Nguyễn Cao Kỳ's forces removed them and eventually took control of the city on June 19.

Ngô Kha's Activities Before His Death in 1973

After he was released from the prison in Phú Quốc, Ngô Kha returned to Huế and resumed teaching at the National Academy. The late 1960s and early 1970s were important years both politically and artistically for Ngô Kha. During this period he and Trịnh Công Sơn spent a lot of time together and influenced each other in various ways. In the summer of 1967, Ngô Kha married Trịnh Công Sơn's sister Trịnh thị Vĩnh Thúy.⁴³ (The marriage did not last, but it represents another connection between the two men.)⁴⁴ On January 31, 1968, the Tết Offensive began and Huế was occupied by communist forces for about three weeks. Then the Paris Peace Talks opened in May 1968, and though it was five years before an agreement was signed, the announcement that talks were starting brought hope to Vietnamese everywhere.

In 1969 Ngô Kha wrote two long poems: “Ngụ ngôn của người đãng trí” [Fable of an Absent Minded Person] (788 lines) and “Trường ca hòa bình” [A Long Poem for Peace] (1,004 lines). Vietnamese writers describe the first poem as surreal and obscure. Đỗ Lai Thúy says it is “unrealistic and

dreamlike, a surreal labyrinth of the subconscious.”⁴⁵ Ngô Minh says it expresses Ngô Kha’s personal loneliness and his reaction to the horror of war.⁴⁶ “A Long Poem for Peace” is less obscure. Many passages in it resemble Trịnh Công Sơn’s songs in his collections *Kính Việt Nam* [Prayer for Vietnam] and *Ta phải thấy mặt trời* [We Must See the Sun].⁴⁷ I will describe these similarities in the section “Ngô Kha, Trịnh Công Sơn, and Civil War.”

Contributors to the two books honoring Ngô Kha, one of which was published in 2005, the other in 2013, suggest that after writing “Fable of an Absent-Minded Person,” Ngô Kha abandoned surrealism and also abandoned any pretense of neutralism and began to support fully the positions of the NLF.⁴⁸ He certainly was active in the struggle movement. In 1970 he was one of six people, among them Trịnh Công Sơn, who formed Self-Determination [Tự Quyết], a group of left-leaning intellectuals. Ngô Kha was also elected chair of another organization, The People’s Cultural Front of the Central Region [Mặt trận Văn hóa Dân tộc Miền Trung]. Both organizations published journals and organized demonstrations.

In early 1972 Ngô Kha was arrested, presumably for his anti-government activities, and tried in a military court in Đà Nẵng. He was released, his friends and supporters say, because he had committed no crimes and also because students in Huế and other parts of South Vietnam took to the streets to protest his arrest and demand his release.⁴⁹ Nguyễn Duy Hiền says there were student demonstrations in Huế on March 7, 10, 11, and 14.⁵⁰ Ngô Kha’s mother, Cao Thị Uẩn, in a letter she wrote in 1974 to the President of the Republic of Vietnam demanding to know what happened to her son, mentions this arrest and quick release and hints that it may explain why, though guiltless, he was arrested a year later by police in Huế. Here is what she wrote:

During the 1971–1972 school year my son was arrested and taken to the Đà Nẵng Military Court but was released. Because of warm ties between teacher and student his arrest caused a reaction among students at the National Academy, the Nguyễn Du School, and other schools. They demonstrated against the government concerning the arrest of my son. That is why, although the Military Court ruled that he was innocent and released him, the local government [in Huế] harbored hatred for him.⁵¹

Communist cadre clearly attempted to control and direct the struggle movement in Huế. Both Nguyễn Đắc Xuân and Nguyễn Duy Hiền say that

the People's Cultural Front of the Central Region that Ngô Kha was chairman of was directed by the Huế City Party Committee [Thành ủy Huế].⁵² In other words, it could be considered a front organization working for the NLF. The unofficial office for this organization was conveniently located within the headquarters of the General Association of University Students at 22 Trương Định Street in Huế.⁵³ Although most cadre were forced from Huế after Tết in 1968, the NLF leadership left behind sympathetic individuals not publically known to have ties to the NLF who could operate openly. One of these, a man named Hoàng Hòa, a Huế university student preparing to be a math teacher, explains that his NLF handlers directed him to organize student activities, especially cultural events, that would fill students with patriotism and get them to oppose the Nguyễn Văn Thiệu-Nguyễn Cao Kỳ regime.⁵⁴ He mentions that Ngô Kha recited poems and Trịnh Công Sơn sang songs at these events. Working undercover as Hoàng Hòa did was dangerous work. At the end of 1968 Hoàng Hòa was betrayed by a contact who shared messages he had written with the police. He ended up spending seven years in the infamous prison on Côn Sơn Island.⁵⁵

But Hoàng Hòa lived. Ngô Kha did not. On January 30, 1973, three days after the Paris Peace Treaty was signed, Ngô Kha was seized and beaten to death with a hammer by men acting on orders from Liên Thành, the commander of the police in Huế. He was first buried on the road to Thuận An beach but then Liên Thành, fearing his body would be discovered, ordered that it be dug up and buried in An Cựu, a village south of Huế. What happened to Ngô Kha was not known for years, but slowly information accumulated. In 2005 Nguyễn Duy Hiền presented the basic facts in an article in "Ngô Kha ngụ ngôn"⁵⁶ and four years later Nguyễn Đắc Xuân wrote a more complete account of his death that appeared first online in 2009 and later in *Ngô Kha hành trình* [Ngô Kha: Poetic Journey].⁵⁷ Nguyễn Đắc Xuân's account is based on information obtained from people who knew Liên Thành, the police chief, and relatives of Ngô Kha, including a man named Phạm Bá Nhạ, an assistant to the chief of the secret police in Huế, whose stepmother was Ngô Kha's sister.⁵⁸ Nguyễn Đắc Xuân's account is very detailed. For example, he names the two undercover policeman who, on Liên Thành's orders, arrested Ngô Kha in the home of the widow of Ngô Kha's brother Ngô Du (42 Bạch Đằng Street, Huế).⁵⁹



Thiếu Tá Liên Thành

FIGURE 3: Major [Thiếu Tá] Liên Thành.⁶⁰

My account of Ngô Kha's execution is based primarily on Nguyễn Đắc Xuân's account. I present it here because Nguyễn Đắc Xuân cites sources who witnessed Ngô Kha's arrest and because no one, to my knowledge, has challenged its veracity. For me it has the ring of truth. That he was arrested is clear. He was taken from his home in broad daylight in the presence of Ngô Kha's sister-in-law. His arrest was also witnessed by a man named Nhất Huy, a friend of Ngô Kha, who happened to be in the area when he was arrested. He saw Ngô Kha being taken away on a Honda motorcycle, squeezed between two large men who were not, Nhất Huy says, in Ngô Kha's circle of friends.⁶¹ Nguyễn Đắc Xuân also provides details regarding Ngô Kha's reburial that he learned from family members. He explains that Phạm Bá Nhạc, whose stepmother was Ngô Kha's sister, asked Liên Thành to let him take Ngô Kha's naked corpse, which, after having been dug up from its first burial site, was lying in the police interrogation center, and bury it in a proper

coffin in an area of Huế known as An Cựu. Liên Thành gave Phạm Bá Nhạc permission but told him he would be killed immediately if the news was leaked.⁶² Phạm Bá Nhạc was a GVN policeman who after 1975 spent time in a communist reeducation camp and later was allowed to leave the country under a program of the United Nations High Commission on Refugees known as HO (Humanitarian Operation), a subprogram of the Orderly Departure Program reserved for Vietnamese who had spent three years or more in a reeducation camp. Nguyễn Đắc Xuân could, of course, have made up this story of Ngô Kha's death and reburial out of whole cloth, but this, to me, seems unlikely.

Credibility Issues

Nguyễn Đắc Xuân's story may have the ring of truth, but credibility is an issue that must be discussed. Some people who live in Huế and many more who live in the diaspora do not like or trust Nguyễn Đắc Xuân or his friend Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường. Nguyễn Đắc Xuân has been accused of presiding over people's courts and identifying people for execution when he returned to Huế with communist soldiers during the 1968 Tết Offensive. Nguyễn Đắc Xuân admits he was in the city during the battle for Huế but says at that time he had been with the NLF for only a year and a half and had no authority to make decisions about who should be killed.⁶³ Nguyễn Đắc Xuân had been active in the Buddhist Struggle Movement in 1966 and left Huế to join the NLF at the end of June 1966, when he learned he was going to be arrested by the police.⁶⁴ He says that rumors that he identified people for execution during the Tết Offensive spread after a book by Nhã Ca, *Giải khăn sô cho Huế* [Mourning Headband for Huế], appeared in 1969.⁶⁵ Nhã Ca was in Huế during the fighting there, and an important character in her account is a man named Đắc who, in one scene, threatens to kill a man named Trần Mậu Tý, who later is killed but not, apparently, by Đắc. This character named Đắc is not described as presiding over people's courts. His name comes up in conversations among characters in the book who knew him before he left Huế in 1966 to join the NLF. They express the hope that he will vouch for them with his superiors and thereby save their lives. Vietnamese do not address or refer to people by their middle name, and Nguyễn Đắc Xuân insists that he is not the character Nhã Ca calls Đắc.⁶⁶

Clearly, however, Nhã Ca had Nguyễn Đắc Xuân in mind when she wrote about Đắc. On one page she mistakenly calls him Xuân when clearly she intends to refer to Đắc.⁶⁷ In an article titled “The Consequences of ‘My Death’” [Hậu Quả Của ‘Cái Chết’ Của Tôi], Nguyễn Đắc Xuân says that when he encountered Nhã Ca by chance in Hồ Chí Minh City after 1975, he asked her why she named this man Đắc (his middle name).⁶⁸ Nhã Ca told him that she didn’t know any liberation soldiers from the north and she needed someone to model her character on, so she chose him and named this character Đắc. She made up things about him, he says she told him, because she wanted to make her story more exciting. She had heard that he had been killed and so felt free to embellish his character.⁶⁹ Nguyễn Đắc Xuân says he can’t remember the exact year he met Nhã Ca, but says it was before 1980. At this time Nhã Ca had only recently been released from a reeducation camp and her husband, the poet Trần Dạ Từ, was still imprisoned. They had six young children and Nhã Ca was peddling cakes on the street to support her family. It is possible she talked about embellishing her Đắc character to avoid antagonizing someone who could help or hurt her and her family.⁷⁰

In the Vietnamese diaspora the most persistent and prolific accuser of Nguyễn Đắc Xuân and Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường is Liên Thành, the police commander that Nguyễn Đắc Xuân says ordered the brutal killing of Ngô Kha. According to Liên Thành, both Nguyễn Đắc Xuân and Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường were members of a Security Force to Protect City Districts [Lực lượng An ninh Bảo vệ Khu phố], a force which, he says, “brought death and suffering to the people of Huế for twenty-two days during the Tet Offensive.”⁷¹ Liên Thành says that Nguyễn Đắc Xuân was the leader of this group and refers to him as the “Number One Killer during Tet 1968.”⁷² Liên Thành alleges that among the terrible deeds committed by this group was the capture and killing of Dr. Horst Gunther Kranick and his wife, as well as two other German doctors, Dr. Raimund Discher and Dr. Alois Altekoester.⁷³

Liên Thành accuses Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường of presiding over people’s courts in the Gia Hội area of Huế and ordering the death of 204 people. Those he accused, Liên Thành says, were buried alive.⁷⁴ Alje Vennema, a Dutch medical volunteer in Huế in 1968, says that both Hoàng Phủ Ngọc

Tường and Nguyễn Đắc Xuân were in Huế and both presided over people's courts.⁷⁵ Vennema, however, did not witness people's courts. He does not explain clearly who told him about them, but implies that his source was a twelve-year old boy named Luong who was the cousin of a young woman named Kim, a member of the Nguyễn family.⁷⁶ Vennema's account differs from Liên Thành's. He says that Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường presided over a tribunal held in a small seminary at the "St. [Saint] Xavier Student Center" which is on the south side of the Perfume River.⁷⁷ Liên Thành, however, says that the tribunal that Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường presided over was in Gia Hội, a district on the north side of the river.⁷⁸ Nguyễn Đắc Xuân and Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Phan (Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường's brother) were also present, Liên Thành says.⁷⁹

Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường, however, says he was not in Huế during the Tết Offensive, explaining that he left Huế to join the NLF in the summer of 1966 and did not return to Huế until 1975.⁸⁰ The poet Ngô Minh, a former soldier in the North Vietnamese Army from Quảng Bình who now lives in Huế, insists that Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường was at the NLF's vanguard command office [Chi huy sở Tiền Phương] on Kim Phụng Mountain southwest of Huế during the Tết Offensive. He suggests that Huế residents may blame Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường for the executions because while in the mountains he recorded an appeal [*Lời hiệu triệu*] calling Huế residents to rise up and join the revolutionary forces. This recording was played all over Huế when the offensive began.⁸¹

In her introduction to her translation of Nhã Ca's *Mourning Headband for Huế*, Olga Dror discusses charges that have been leveled against Nguyễn Đắc Xuân and Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường and their rebuttals to them. After the fighting ended, over two thousand eight hundred bodies were dug up in Huế. Dror discusses evidence regarding who was responsible for the deaths of these people, but, as she explains, no one can say for sure how they died. Nor can anyone say for sure whether Nguyễn Đắc Xuân and Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường are telling the unvarnished truth about their actions during the Tết Offensive. They were and remain to this day in a difficult position. They elected to return to live in Huế after 1975 among people who had lost loved ones in the fighting. Some relatives of the deceased blame the two men for their deaths. Both men are also members of the communist party and must

write articles and give interviews that would not displease their superiors. In seeking information about Ngô Kha, it is very difficult to find sources that stand above the fray and are therefore trusted by people with different backgrounds and political views.

I should note that recently Nguyễn Đắc Xuân has been more candid and has admitted that he played a role in the purges during the Tết Offensive, though he insists it was an indirect role. Surprisingly he made this admission to Mark Bowden, an American who interviewed him while doing research for his book *Huế 68*, a thorough account of the Tết Offensive based on interviews with both Vietnamese and Americans.⁸² Nguyễn Đắc Xuân was an important source for Bowden, who interviewed him and paid to have his book *Từ Phú Xuân đến Huế* [From Phú Xuân to Huế], an account of the battle for Huế, translated into English.⁸³ According to Bowden, “Xuân believed in the necessity of some retribution but watched it spin into bloodlust.”⁸⁴ “I was not a general, I was only a civilian,” Nguyễn Đắc Xuân told Bowden. “I’m very sorry that in the war, we couldn’t avoid many mistakes . . . There is cruelty that happened due to naiveté.”⁸⁵

Since at least 2008 Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường, who is now eighty-one years old, has also been more candid. When interviewed in 2008 he again denied that he was in Huế during the Tết Offensive in 1968 but admitted that he had become disenchanted with the current government because, he explained, it cannot “reconcile the people” and because it employs a “communist system.” When asked how the country could become unified, he said that Vietnamese must “reevaluate history, forget the bitter past full of hate, and truly respect and love each other.”⁸⁶

And just as I was finishing this article on Ngô Kha I came across a Facebook entry by Nguyễn Quang Lập, a close friend of Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường’s wife. Included is a letter that Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường has dictated to his daughter. Titled “Last Words on a Really Sad Story” [Lời cuối cho câu chuyện quá buồn], it is written, Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường says, for people who love him, not for people like Liên Thành and his group. In this letter, dated February 1, 2018, he says that there is one thing that he must mention or “I will not be able to close my eyes peacefully. That is the story of Tết 1968.”⁸⁷

In his letter Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường again insists that he was not in Huế during the Tết Offensive. What made people think he was there, he says, was an interview in the early 1980's with an Australian journalist named William Burchett. In this interview he talks as if he were an eye witness to the events he described in that interview.⁸⁸ He explains in his letter that he was not there—that he was describing not what he saw but what his friends had told him. He gives this example: “In particular, when I talked about the American plane attacking a small hospital at Đông Ba⁸⁹ and killing two hundred people, I said ‘I walked along lanes in Huế at night and stepped on something I thought was mud and then turned on a light and it was all blood.’”⁹⁰ Others told me about these things, he says in his letter. I did not personally experience them.

Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường says in his letter that he regrets blaming only the Americans for the massacre in Huế. In 1981 when he was interviewed he was, he explains, still enthusiastic about the revolution but now he realizes his mistake. “One cannot take the crimes of the Americans,” he says, “to cover up the mistakes that occurred in Tết 1968.”⁹¹

Finally, he talks about how pained he is as a “son of Huế” when he thinks about the “unjust killings” by the “uprising troops [quân nổi dậy] on the Huế front” during the Tết Offensive. “That is,” he says, “a mistake that cannot be supported by any reasoning, when looked at from the point of view of national conscience and the standpoint of revolutionary war.”⁹²

We will probably never know for sure whether Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường was in Huế during the Tết Offensive, and if he was there whether he presided over people's courts. My belief, after reading many articles by both Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường's attackers and defenders, is that he was not present in Huế during the Tết Offensive but remained at the NLF's vanguard command office [Chi huy sở Tiền Phương] on Kim Phụng Mountain in Hương Trà District. Đặng Tiến, a respected scholar who lives in France, came to the same conclusion in an article in *Thông Luận* [Discussion] written in 1995.⁹³

Ngô Kha, Trịnh Công Sơn, and Civil War

The fog of war creates credibility problems, but no one denies that the city of Huế, once serene and peaceful, one of the most Buddhist cities in the country, became a violent place, a place of “twenty years of civil war”—*Hai mươi*

năm nội chiến từng ngày—as Trịnh Công Sơn sang in “Gia tài của mẹ” [A Mother’s Legacy]. People, especially young men who faced the draft, had to make hard choices. One thinks of the legacy of one mother—Ngô Kha’s mother—who in her 1974 letter to the President of the Republic of Vietnam and other officials demanded to know what happened to her son. “I’m now 80 years old,” she wrote. “I don’t have many more years to live. I’m sad because one son died during Tết Mậu Thân in Huế (Ngô Du). I rely now on only one son—Ngô Kha—whom the government has arrested and won’t release any information. How can I live?”⁹⁴

Communist leaders do not like it when people call the Vietnam war a civil war. Trịnh Công Sơn’s song “A Mother’s Legacy” still cannot be publically performed primarily because it calls the war a civil war. Communist officials do not like Trịnh Công Sơn’s anti-war songs because in them he opposes war generally and doesn’t distinguish a non-righteous [*phi nghĩa*] war from a righteous [*chính nghĩa*] war.⁹⁵ In other words, he opposed war in a general [*chung chung*] way and did not embrace their war for national liberation. Nguyễn Đắc Xuân says that this was an issue that came up in a meeting in Huế in 1975, a meeting to decide Trịnh Công Sơn’s fate in the new communist regime. Ngô Kha’s influence on Trịnh Công Sơn was crucial to the defense that Nguyễn Đắc Xuân and Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường presented to help their friend.⁹⁶ They argued that yes, it was true: in early songs, especially those he called “Ca khúc da vàng” [Songs of Golden Skin],⁹⁷ Trịnh Công Sơn did oppose the war in a general way [*phản chiến chung chung*]. But that was before he came under Ngô Kha’s influence. In songs written after the Tết Offensive, songs in the collections *Kinh Việt Nam* and *Ta phải thấy mặt trời*, he fully supported the goals of the NLF.⁹⁸ This argument worked: it was decided that Trịnh Công Sơn’s contributions outweighed his offenses, and that in the end he “stood completely on the side of the Revolution.”⁹⁹

Comparing Trịnh Công Sơn to Ngô Kha helps us understand both men better. My sense is that neither man stood completely on the side of the Revolution, but that Ngô Kha was closer to joining the NLF, perhaps in part because he knew he was in danger if he remained in Huế. Three people who worked for the NLF have said that Ngô Kha expressed interest in joining the communist movement.¹⁰⁰ The poet Ngô Minh says that he once asked Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường why “the organization” didn’t help Ngô Kha “*lên*

xanh” [go into the green, climb into the mountains]. Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường replied that the organization had contacted Ngô Kha but before Ngô Kha could go he was arrested. It is also possible, he said, that Ngô Kha hesitated because he couldn’t decide whether to “go into the jungle” [*lên rừng*] or remain in Huế and continue struggling with his friends. Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường added that “the enemy’s secret police [*mật vụ địch*] were following his every step and so he couldn’t get away.”¹⁰¹

Many Vietnamese living in the diaspora believe that the creative works and actions of both Ngô Kha and Trịnh Công Sơn increased anti-war sentiment and contributed to the defeat of the GVN. A few Vietnamese living abroad go further and suggest that Ngô Kha and Trịnh Công Sơn were communist underground agents. The leading proponent of this view is Liên Thành, the police commander who ordered Ngô Kha’s brutal execution and accuses Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường and Nguyễn Đắc Xuân of identifying people for execution during the Tết Offensive. He believes that both Ngô Kha and Trịnh Công Sơn were part of what he calls “a giant net of communist underground agents who had sold their souls to the devil.”¹⁰²

Liên Thành was in charge of “intelligence security” [*an ninh tình báo*] in Huế and Thừa Thiên Province and worked with the CIA’s Phoenix Program [Chương trình Phụng Hoàng] to eradicate members of the communist infrastructure. He has written two long books: *Biến Động Miền Trung* [Disorder in the Central Region] (482 pages), first published in 2008 and now in its eleventh edition; and *Huế—Thảm Sát Mậu Thân* [Huế—The Massacre of Tết Mậu Thân] (766 pages), published in 2011.¹⁰³ I perused Liên Thành’s works to see whether he describes the arrest and execution of Ngô Kha but he does not. In fact, he does not discuss Ngô Kha at all in *Biến Động Miền Trung*, though he devotes many pages to accusations that Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường and Nguyễn Đắc Xuân identified people for execution during the Tết Offensive. A strange twist in this story is that both Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường and Ngô Kha were Liên Thành’s teachers.¹⁰⁴ Liên Thành does not discuss Ngô Kha’s teaching, but in *Biến Động Miền Trung* he says that Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường was a great teacher. At the National Academy, he says, students skipped their English and Natural Science classes but never missed Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường’s Vietnamese studies class because “no teacher could teach this course as well as he did.”¹⁰⁵ This praise surprises the reader because on



FIGURE 4: Liễn Thành standing in front of an American advisor to the Phoenix Program.¹⁰⁶

the previous page he has accused Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường of committing genocide. In civil wars the social fabric that holds communities together is disrupted and teachers and students—and even siblings from the same family—may end up on different sides.

This civil war in Vietnam was not a religious war but it had a religious dimension. Catholics were more likely to be anti-communist than Buddhists. Monks frequently led the anti-government protests in Huế in 1963 and 1966 and most of the participants in these protests were no doubt Buddhists, not Catholics. Ngô Đình Diệm, Nguyễn Cao Kỳ, and Nguyễn Văn Thiệu were all Catholics and many Buddhist residents in Huế distrusted their motives. Rulers in Sài Gòn, as we have seen, questioned the loyalties of Buddhist generals and police officers posted to the I-Corps Tactical Zone. It is worth noting, however, that the fiercely anti-communist Liễn Thành was raised a Buddhist. His mother was, he explains, a very devout disciple of

a monk named Thích Thiện Lạc, known locally as Thầy Ngoạn, and she arranged for him to perform a *quy y* ceremony for Liên Thành and his siblings.¹⁰⁷ This ceremony involves pledging to accept the Three Jewels of Buddhism [Tam Bảo]—Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha [Phật, Pháp, Tăng già] and also to obey the Five Precepts (Skt. *pancasila*): to refrain from killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying, and taking intoxicants. After making this pledge, the monk gives the person a Buddhist name [*Pháp danh*].

Liên Thành's relationship to Thầy Ngoạn became an issue in December 1970 when he interrogated a recently captured high level communist operative and learned that Thầy Ngoạn was working for the NLF and that his pagoda, An Lăng, located two kilometers southwest of Huế, was a refuge and meeting place for communist cadre. Aided by two platoons of heavily armed police [Cảnh Sát Dã Chiến] in commando cars, Liên Thành raided An Lăng Pagoda, killed three NLF soldiers, and arrested Thầy Ngoạn. When Liên Thành's mother learned that her son had arrested Thầy Ngoạn, she had another son relay him this message: "Release Thầy [Ngoạn]. Since when does someone go and capture the monk that conducted his *quy y* ceremony and gave him a Buddhist name? Only a child who has no filial piety [*con bất hiếu*]!"¹⁰⁸ But her plea fell on deaf ears. At a meeting of the Provincial Security Council [Hội Đồng An Ninh Tỉnh] to decide Thầy Ngoạn's punishment, one member proposed six months in prison, another one year, but Liên Thành convinced them to imprison him two years on Côn Sơn Island.¹⁰⁹

An interesting sidelight to this story is that the commander of the two commando cars in this raid was Trịnh Công Hà, Trịnh Công Sơn's brother. Trịnh Công Hà was an old friend of Liên Thành's since their school days, and both were members of the Huế Judo Club. (Liên Thành says he was a black belt, Trịnh Công Hà a brown belt.)¹¹⁰ Huế was not a small town in the 1960s and 1970s, but it struck me as being like a small town. Everyone seemed to know everyone else. But that did not mean that they understood, or wanted to understand, the political views of their friends and neighbors. Because of his job, Liên Thành did want to know everyone's political views—and he was especially interested in Trịnh Công Sơn's. He does not discuss Trịnh Công Sơn in *Biến Động Miền Trung* but in *Huế—Thăm Sát Mậu Thân* he includes a long article that he posted on the web in May 2009. Liên Thành says he was moved to write this article, "Trịnh Công Sơn và những

hoạt động nằm vùng” [Trịnh Công Sơn and Underground Activities],¹¹¹ after reading two articles that appeared on the web in 2009. The authors, both friends of Trịnh Công Sơn and both formerly soldiers in the ARVN, criticize Trịnh Công Sơn for his leftist views and his failure to support the Republic of Vietnam.¹¹²

Liên Thành mentions Ngô Kha’s name seven times in his first article about Trịnh Công Sơn, but only in passing. For example, in one section of his article he describes four places—homes and cafes—where, he alleges, members of the communist underground met. Ngô Kha’s name appears on the list of people who frequented two of these places, a café that he calls “Quán Bạn Tôi” [My Friends’ Café] but was actually “Quán Bạn” [Friends’ Café] and a grass hut owned by Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường and Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Phan’s parents that the brothers and their friends called “Tuyệt Tình Cốc” [A Hut for Those Who Are Done with Love], a location in a popular novel by the Chinese writer Kim Dung [Jin Yong]. Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường’s brother Phan and his friends had failed their law school exams because they were demonstrating against the Nguyễn Văn Thiệu-Nguyễn Cao Kỳ regime and so avoided girl friends to concentrate on their studies in this thatched roof hut.¹¹³ Some of the people who met at these places mentioned by Liên Thành were members of the communist underground, but many clearly were not. For example, a friend of mine—the writer Thế Uyên (Nguyễn Kim Dũng)—visited the Quán Bạn and stayed at Tuyệt Tình Cốc on a visit to Huế in 1965.¹¹⁴ I traveled with Thế Uyên to Vietnam in 1992 on a research grant and co-authored an article with him. He was the nephew of Nhất Linh (Nguyễn Tường Tam), a very famous and progressive—but anti-communist—writer. Thế Uyên was an officer in the ARVN who spent three years in a reeducation camp before coming to the United States. He clearly was not a communist underground agent. To my knowledge no one has suggested that the Huế novelist Túy Hồng (Nguyễn Thị Túy Hồng), who, according to Liên Thành, often attended gatherings at Tuyệt Tình Cốc, was a communist agent. She came to the United States in 1975.

Ngô Kha, according to Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Phan, was not a communist agent. “Here is the truth,” he says: “Ngô Kha was not an underground Việt Công agent. He acted like anti-American and anti-war protestors around the world. And this is why later, after 1975, his friends in Huế ran into

difficulties when they tried to follow regulations and have him named a martyr [*liệt sĩ*].”¹¹⁵ Liên Thành, operating on the principle of guilt by association, catches a lot of innocent people in that giant net he casts on his hunt for those who have “sold their souls to the devil.” Of course, according to Liên Thành, Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Phan is one of those devils. In *Huế—Thăm Sát Mậu Thân*, he accuses Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Phan of being a member, along with Nguyễn Đắc Xuân, of the group that killed the German doctors in the incident described previously.¹¹⁶ Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Phan denies killing anyone and says that if Liên Thành presents irrefutable proof that he did, he will commit suicide in front of him.¹¹⁷

Regarding Trịnh Công Sơn, Liên Thành’s most stunning and perhaps most damaging accusation is not that Trịnh Công Sơn was a communist underground agent but that he, in return for favored treatment, agreed to supply him with information about other agents, many of whom were Trịnh Công Sơn’s good friends. In “Trịnh Công Sơn và những hoạt động nằm vùng,” Liên Thành says that he gathered evidence that Trịnh Công Sơn was associating with known communist agents and when he confronted the singer-composer with this evidence, he agreed to supply him with information about communist underground agents [*Việt Cộng nằm vùng*] in Huế.¹¹⁸ In return, Liên Thành says he gave Trịnh Công Sơn a paper, called an “Order for Special Assignment” [*sự vụ lệnh công tác đặc biệt*], that enabled him to avoid the draft and kept him from being arrested at anti-war demonstrations and music concerts. This paper was the carrot, Liên Thành says. The stick was imprisonment for four years on the island of Phú Quốc, a sentence that he could arrange because of his high rank in the security forces—Chief Commander of the National Police, General Secretary for Administration of the Provincial Phoenix Program, General Secretary of the Provincial Security Council.

I do not know what to make of Liên Thành’s account. In his article about Trịnh Công Sơn and in his books, he brags about his successes in capturing intellectuals in Huế who he determined were working for the NLF.¹¹⁹ Certainly some intellectuals were underground agents for the NLF and certainly terrible acts were committed by people on both sides of the conflict, but because Liên Thành writes with such undisguised anger and contempt for anyone associated with the NLF, his books read like propaganda tracts, not objective historical accounts. His book *Biến Động Miền Trung* is published

by the Committee to Prosecute Crimes of the Vietnamese Communist Party. Liên Thành is chairman of this committee, which he established in January 2010. His other book, *Huế—Thăm Sát Mậu Thân*, is self-published.¹²⁰

Liên Thành charges Trịnh Công Sơn with two crimes. One was helping his friends Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường and his brother, Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Phan, leave Huế and join the NLF, a departure which was, Liên Thành says, “directly arranged by the Huế City (Communist) Committee [thành ủy Huế].”¹²¹ The other crime was associating with known communist agents in Huế, particularly with a man named Lê Khắc Cầm, who liked to read and translate English and French literary works. Liên Thành says that Lê Khắc Cầm was “the cadre that directly controlled and guided” Trịnh Công Sơn.¹²²

Lê Khắc Cầm and Trịnh Công Sơn were obviously friends and they both worked together on a Christmas 1974 issue of *Đứng Dậy* [Stand Up] containing articles by friends and former students demanding that the government explain what happened to Ngô Kha.¹²³ Trịnh Công Sơn wrote the rough draft of “Tuyên cáo” [Declaration], eventually signed by forty-six teachers, writers, and artists, that appears at the beginning of the issue and also a letter addressed to Ngô Kha titled “Lá thư gửi cho người đang ở trong tù hay đã bị thủ tiêu” [A Letter for a Person Who is Now in Prison or Has Been Exterminated].¹²⁴ This letter created a stir when it was republished in books and journals in 2003 and 2004 because it suggested that Trịnh Công Sơn was more fully engaged in the political struggle than was commonly known.¹²⁵ At first some readers, including Nguyễn Đắc Xuân, did not believe Trịnh Công Sơn wrote it because it contained communist jargon—phrases like “people’s collective” [*tập thể nhân dân*] and “the problem of structural organization” [*vấn đề tổ chức cơ cấu*]. But it is clearly authentic: Nguyễn Đắc Xuân did some investigating and found out that Bửu Ý has Trịnh Công Sơn’s handwritten drafts of both the “Declaration” and his letter to Ngô Kha.¹²⁶

In the letter Trịnh Công Sơn has harsh words for the “*công an mật vụ trí thức*,” the secret police targeting intellectuals. “Kha,” he asks, “do you remember that once before we were the victims of an informer in this group?”¹²⁷ He describes the present situation as being terrible but suggests this is a good thing because people will see they have nothing more to lose. “When people realize,” he says, “that they don’t have anything left to be seized, that they can’t be



FIGURE 5: The cover of *Đứng Dậy* [Stand Up].¹²⁸

exploited anymore, then they rise up and take to the streets.” Trịnh Công Sơn uses the image of ripe fruit to suggest the end of the current regime is near:

Kha, probably you remember that we used to tell each other that we must wait for the day when the facts of the situation are like ripe fruit. Could it be that today the fruit we waited for is ripe? The fruit of poverty, hunger, death, unemployment, ruined fields and gardens, etc. which are all mutually affected by a society torn to pieces, by factionalism, by corruption, division, imprisonment, torture . . . So, Kha, has not the time come for a new opportunity to appear?¹²⁹

Trịnh Công Sơn wants to give Ngô Kha hope but not provoke him to do anything rash. His warnings suggest that he is well aware of his friend’s fiery personality. “We know you are eager like an uncontrollable horse,” he tells his friend, “but try to be calm and cool, don’t be overhasty [*nôn nóng*] like in the old days.”¹³⁰ He repeats this warning not to be overhasty two pages later.

Trịnh Công Sơn is clearly the author of this letter—but does this mean he was a member of the communist underground and Lê Khắc Cầm was his handler? Nguyễn Đắc Xuân, in his article about Trịnh Công Sơn’s letter, says that he asked Lê Khắc Cầm: “Was Trịnh Công Sơn a revolutionary agent [*cơ sở cách mạng*]?” “That’s hard to say,” Lê Khắc Cầm replied. “But Sơn knew that I was an agent of the City Party Committee. To work with me means that he was working for the Revolution.”¹³¹ When asked about the revolutionary language in Trịnh Công Sơn’s letter, Lê Khắc Cầm says it could reflect the fact that “at that time we, including Trịnh Công Sơn, read a lot of books and newspapers sent from the war zone and also every night listened with admiration to the Hà Nội radio station. There’s nothing surprising about someone being influenced by revolutionary language.”¹³²

Clearly Trịnh Công Sơn and Lê Khắc Cầm were friends, but it is interesting that Lê Khắc Cầm, who Liên Thành claims was Trịnh Công Sơn’s handler, tells Nguyễn Đắc Xuân that he does not know whether Trịnh Công Sơn was or was not a revolutionary agent. If he knew he was an agent, it would seem that in 2011, when Nguyễn Đắc Xuân interviewed him, he would have no reason to withhold this information.

The crimes Liên Thành accuses Trịnh Công Sơn of committing would not seem to be crimes that would get someone imprisoned indefinitely on Phú Quốc Island, but no doubt Trịnh Công Sơn knew that Liên Thành had the power to do what he wished and that, as he told Trịnh Công Sơn, there would be no trial. He could order him imprisoned, saying the “security situation” justified it. If Liên Thành’s story is true, if Trịnh Công Sơn did agree to be some kind of double agent, it could have been because he sensed he had no choice, that if he wanted to continue to write and sing songs opposing the war he had to make some deal with Liên Thành. It is significant that Liên Thành says that although Trịnh Công Sơn gave him names of some Việt Cộng agents, he revealed “only one-tenth of what he knew.” “There were very important matters,” Liên Thành says, “that Trịnh Công Sơn participated in and knew clearly and thoroughly, but kept quiet about, never told us.” (Liên Thành says he learned about these matters from other sources.)¹³³

Mysteries remain regarding both Ngô Kha and Trịnh Công Sơn, but what seems undeniable is that Ngô Kha and Trịnh Công Sơn inspired and influenced each other. Many passages in Ngô Kha’s “Long Poem for Peace”

resemble passages from Trịnh Công Sơn's songs in the collections *Kinh Việt Nam* and *Ta phải thấy mặt trời*—songs like “Ta quyết phải sống” [We Are Determined that We Must Live], “Huế, Sài Gòn, Hà Nội,” and “Việt nam ơi hãy vùng lên” [Vietnam Rise Up]. Here are the opening lines of Ngô Kha's “Long Poem for Peace”:

Brothers and sisters meet happily as if just beginning life
 On this day when Vietnam gives birth to a new language
 Thirty million fellow citizens rise up
 Waiting like the great *trường sơn* mountains¹³⁴
 For peace to return in people's hearts

Here are lines 50–57:

We advance together
 Singing the song of a Reunified Vietnam
 In the midst of historic change
 We go from Nam Quan to Cà Mau¹³⁵
 From the Mekong, the Perfume river, the Red River
 Phú Quốc, Côn Lôn, Ba Vì, Tam Đảo¹³⁶
 From Huế, Sài Gòn to Thái Bình, Hà Nội
 Our voices echo beneath the sky

Note the similarities between the above lines and these lines from Trịnh Công Sơn's song “Huế Sài Gòn Hà Nội”:

From the Center, the South, and the North people wait to light torches hailing
 freedom
 On the road there are prisons where we'll build schools and markets
 Our people will till the fields and we'll be well clothed and fed
 As hands work to build the country the old hatred fades

And these lines from Trịnh Công Sơn's song “Ta thấy gì đêm nay” [What do we see tonight?]:

What do we see tonight?
 A hundred flags flying
 The forests and mountains spread the news to every region
 The wind of peace blows in a thousand directions

Both Ngô Kha in his long poem and Trịnh Công Sơn in his songs talk about the wonderful things that will happen when peace comes: the bombing

will end, hate will turn into love, and eventually the country—all three regions—will be unified. The Paris Peace Talks opened in May 1968. These talks dragged on for five years—the final agreement was not signed until January 27, 1973—but their beginning was cause for great optimism in both Vietnam and the United States.¹³⁷ Trịnh Công Sơn's language sometimes sounds militaristic. His songs in *Kinh Việt Nam* and *Ta phải thấy mặt trời* are movement [*nhạc phong trào*] songs—songs to mobilize people. His intent in these songs, however, it seems to me, is to appropriate the energy inherent in militaristic language and channel it into peaceful projects. Like Martin Luther King in his famous drum major speech, Trịnh Công Sơn wanted to be a drum major but a drum major for love, a drum major for peace and reconstruction, not war.¹³⁸ “We become part of a proud revolution [*cách mạng*],” Trịnh Công Sơn sings in “Việt nam ơi hãy vùng lên.” But then come these lines: “We will seize a hundred building sites / We will build a thousand peaceful streets.”

But how do Ngô Kha and Trịnh Công Sơn differ? The struggle movement in Huế was in large part—but not completely—a Buddhist movement. Ngô Kha, was, it seems, a Buddhist, and Trịnh Công Sơn has described the important role Buddhism played in his life in several articles and interviews.¹³⁹ In the 1960s, Buddhist monks in South Vietnam did not concentrate solely on cultivating inner peace; they wanted peace in Vietnam; they wanted to end the war. They were what are now called “engaged Buddhists.” Styles of engagement differ, however, and in Vietnam in the 1960s different styles were on display. Thích Trí Quang's approach differed from Thích Nhất Hạnh's. And Thích Tâm Châu, who was close to the Nguyễn Văn Thiệu-Nguyễn Cao Kỳ regime, had his own approach. In a book titled *Being Peace*, Thích Nhất Hạnh argues that “being peace” is “making peace.” “It is not by going out for a demonstration against nuclear missiles that we can bring about peace,” he writes. “It is with our capacity of smiling, breathing, and being peace that we can make peace.”¹⁴⁰ To achieve world peace, Thích Nhất Hạnh emphasizes, one has to begin by cultivating inner peace. Trịnh Công Sơn, I think, would agree. He strove to be merciful and compassionate himself and to get others to admire these qualities as well. He wanted, as he sings in “Đề gió cuốn đi” [Let the Wind Blow It Away], to “have a good heart.” He wanted people to love each other, he sings in another song, “though the night brings bullets, though the morning brings bombs.”¹⁴¹ Ngô Kha, however, was different. He

encouraged students to burn American vehicles and filled his pockets with stones to throw at policemen.¹⁴² He would be at that demonstration against nuclear missiles that Thích Nhất Hạnh mentions and probably would provoke the police to arrest him, or beat him, or shoot him.

What does the story of Ngô Kha teach us? One thing it teaches us is the horror of civil war. Americans think of war as “over there,” Viet Thanh Nguyen points out. Our Revolutionary War and Civil War are in the distant past and our memories of them, he adds, are now “rehearsed and sanitized by reenactors.”¹⁴³ Ngô Kha’s story suggests how very personal and familial the Vietnam War was. Both Ngô Kha and Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường were Liên Thành’s teachers. Ngô Kha’s brother and his cousin, General Dzu, were in the ARVN and so was Ngô Kha himself. While in the ARVN, however, his Nguyễn Đại Thúc Battle Group fought the ARVN and so in his own person he embodied the civil war nature of the conflict. Of course, this civil war was not a pure civil war: It was also a battle between the United States and the communist nations of Russia and China. A photo in Liên Thành’s book *Biển Đông Miền Trung* of the diminutive Liên Thành dwarfed by a large US advisor for the Phoenix Program vividly reveals the international dimensions of this conflict (see figure 4). According to a Vietnamese proverb, “When buffaloes and cows fight, mosquitoes and flies die.”¹⁴⁴

There are also things to learn from Ngô Kha’s story about remembering and forgiving. Ngô Kha loved his country and lost his life doing what he thought had to be done to save it. He acted with a passionate, reckless courage. He deserves to be remembered by people on both sides of the conflict in Vietnam. People on one side have to sympathize with and remember those on the other side. Forgiveness is also necessary because without it we will have at best what Viet Thanh Nguyen calls “unjust forgetting,” a papering over of differences that ignores the past, as happens, for example, when former enemies agree on treaties but refuse to forgive, leaving resentment and hatred still simmering beneath the surface calm. Both winners and losers may forget unjustly and see themselves as victims and not victimizers, but defeat, Viet Thanh Nguyen says, “aggravates this sentiment.” Losers are more likely to see themselves as victims. Vietnamese refugees in the United States, who lost everything, he says, “tend to forget, particularly in public commemoration, the venality of the southern regime.”¹⁴⁵ But the

winners too are forgetful. They see themselves as victims of foreign aggression and refer to the war as the American War. They are, Viet Thanh Nguyen says, “conveniently stricken with amnesia about what they did to one another.”¹⁴⁶ They forget that the war was also a civil war.

The forgiveness that Viet Thanh Nguyen desires—not just for Vietnam but for the world—is pure forgiveness, the forgiving of the unforgiveable. Pure forgiveness may sound unreasonable and unrealistic—mad even—but isn’t it, he asks, more sensible and more realistic than perpetual war? If the species is to survive, he says, “we need a realism of the impossible.”¹⁴⁷

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ABSTRACT

This article describes Ngô Kha, a teacher, poet, army officer, and anti-government activist from Huế who was seized by undercover policemen in February, 1973, and never seen again. It describes his teaching, writing, friendship with Trịnh Công Sơn, and his antiwar activities, including his participation in a breakaway unit of the Sài Gòn army that fought Nguyễn Cao Kỳ’s forces in 1966. It highlights the sadness of Vietnam’s civil wars and the difficulty, in reconstructing wartime events, of finding unbiased sources. It concludes by proposing that “pure forgiveness,” discussed by the Vietnamese American writer Viet Thanh Nguyen, may be the only way to end perpetual war.

KEYWORDS: Ngô Kha, forgiveness, civil war, Trịnh Công Sơn, Liên Thành, Viet Thanh Nguyen

Notes

1. “The Trịnh Công Sơn Phenomenon,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 66 (2007), 597–643; “Death, Buddhism, and Existentialism in the Songs of Trịnh Công Sơn,” *Journal of*

- Vietnamese Studies* 2 (2007), 144–186. A short book I wrote comparing Trịnh Công Sơn to Bob Dylan appeared in Vietnamese in 2012. See John C. Schafer, *Trịnh Công Sơn—Bob Dylan: Như Trăng và Nguyệt?* [Trịnh Công Sơn—Bob Dylan: Like Trăng and Nguyệt?], trans. by Cao Thị Như-Quỳnh (Hồ Chí Minh City: Trẻ, 2012). The words “Trăng” and “Nguyệt” both refer to the moon and appear in a well-known song by Trịnh Công Sơn called “Nguyệt Ca” [Moon Song].
2. Other talented friends of Trịnh Công Sơn include the painters Bửu Chỉ (1948–2002) and Đinh Cường (1939–2016); the historian Nguyễn Đắc Xuân (b. 1937); the writer Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường (b. 1937); and the writer, translator, and French teacher Bửu Ý (b. 1937).
 3. Liên Thành’s full name is Nguyễn Phúc Liên Thành.
 4. Photo by author, March 2017.
 5. The friends are Nguyễn Đắc Xuân, Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường, and Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Phan. The latter two men are brothers. Liên Thành accuses all three of involvement in the executions of Huế citizens in two of his books: *Biến Động Miền Trung: Những bí mật lịch sử trong các giai đoạn 1966–1968–1972* [Disorder in the Central Region: Historical Secrets from the Periods 1966–1968–1972], Eleventh Edition (California: Ủy Ban Truy Tố Tội Ác Đảng Cộng Sản Việt Nam [Committee to Prosecute Crimes of the Vietnamese Communist Party], 2014), which was first published in 2008; and *Huế thảm sát máu thân* [Huế—The Massacre of Tết Mậu Thân] (Southern California: Published by the author, 2011).
 6. Ngô Kha Street is in Phú Hiệp Ward near the northwest corner of the Citadel (but outside it). The school named after Ngô Kha is Trường Tiểu học Ngô Kha [Ngô Kha Elementary School] on Cao Bá Quát Street in Huế. A copy of the document conferring martyr status on Ngô Kha appears in Bửu Nam and Phạm Thị Anh Nga, eds., *Ngô Kha hành trình thơ, hành trình dân thân & ngôi nhà vĩnh cửu* [Ngô Kha: Poetic Journey, Engaged Journey, Eternal Home] (Huế: Hội Nhà Văn, 2013), 459.
 7. Viet Thanh Nguyen, “Just Memory: War and the Ethics of Remembrance,” *American Literary History* 25, no. 1 (2013), 150.
 8. Viet Thanh Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 6–7, 66–67.
 9. *Ibid.*, 33–40.
 10. Jacques Derrida, *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, trans. Mark Dooley and Michael Hughes (London: Routledge, 2001), 27–60; Viet Thanh Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies*, 286–287.
 11. Viet Thanh Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies*, 283.
 12. Derrida, *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, 39.
 13. Viet Thanh Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies*, 288.

14. *ibid.*
15. From 1968 to 1970 I taught English in Vietnam as a member of International Voluntary Services, which was funded primarily by a grant from the United States Agency for International Development. From 1971 to 1973 I taught English under the auspices of the Fulbright Program, which was funded and administered by the US Department of State.
16. Bửu Ý, *Trịnh Công Sơn: Một nhạc sĩ thiên tài* [Trịnh Công Sơn: A Genius of a Musician] (Hồ Chí Minh City: Trẻ, 2003), 87–89.
17. Biographical information on Ngô Kha can be found in two collections of articles and documents: Bửu Nam and Phạm Thị Anh Nga, eds., *Ngô Kha hành trình* (hereafter referenced by title only); and Trần Thúc et al., eds., *Ngô Kha: ngụ ngôn của một thế hệ* [Ngô Kha: A Fable for a Generation] (Huế: Thuận Hóa, 2005).
18. The following authors describe how Ngô Kha motivated students both in and out of the classroom: Lê Văn Lân, “Ngô Kha, Lẫy lừng trên bục giảng” [Ngô Kha, His Resounding Fame at the Lectern], in *Ngô Kha hành trình*, 128–131; and Lê Văn Ngăn, “Ngô Kha, người thầy cũ, người bạn” [Ngô Kha: A Former Teacher and a Friend], in *Ngô Kha hành trình*, 252–256.
19. Bửu Nam and Phạm Thị Anh Nga, eds., *Ngô Kha hành trình*, back cover.
20. Nguyễn Duy Hiền mentions these demonstrations in “Ghi chép ngắn về cuộc đời nhà thơ—nhà giáo Ngô Kha” [A Short Note about the Life of the Poet and Teacher Ngô Kha], in Trần Thúc et al., eds., *Ngô Kha ngụ ngôn*, 12–13.
21. Ngô Minh, “Ngô Kha, một cõi tang bồng” [Ngô Kha, an Ambitious Free Spirit], in *Ngô Kha hành trình*, 278–279.
22. Nguyễn Đắc Xuân, “Ngô Kha—Trịnh Công Sơn, từ tình bạn đến tình nước” [Ngô Kha—Trịnh Công Sơn, From Friendship to Love of Country], in *Ngô Kha hành trình*, 237.
23. Nguyễn Duy Hiền, “Ghi chép ngắn,” 9, note 2. The poet Ngô Minh also states clearly that Ngô Kha’s blood brother [*anh ruột*] named Ngô Du was not the General Ngô Dzu. See Ngô Minh, “Ngô Kha, một cõi tang bồng,” 278.
24. However, in an article about how Ngô Kha died posted on the web in 2009, Nguyễn Đắc Xuân says that Ngô Dzu, “a general at the time of the Republic of Vietnam,” was an uncle [*bác*] of Ngô Kha’s. Nguyễn Đắc Xuân, “Vài điều về Liên Thành, Tác giả *Biến Động Miền Trung*” [A Few Things about Liên Thành, the Author of *Biến Động Miền Trung* [Disorder in the Central Region]], Sachhiem, November 25, 2009, <http://sachhiem.net/NguyễnĐắcXuân/NguyễnĐắcXuân017.php> (accessed October 30, 2016). A shortened version of this article, titled “Cái chết của Ngô Kha như tôi đã biết” [What I Know about Ngô Kha’s Death], appears in *Ngô Kha hành trình*, 220–222.
25. Ngô Minh says Ngô Kha was “discharged” [*giải ngũ*] from the army in 1964. (It seems he was “detached” from the army [*biệt phái*] rather than discharged

- because in early 1972 he was tried in a military court.) However, Nguyễn Đắc Xuân says Ngô Kha did not get out of officer training school in Thủ Đức until 1965 and then was assigned by his relative, General Dzu, to be a press attaché. See Ngô Minh, “Ngô Kha, một côi tang bồng,” 279; and Nguyễn Đắc Xuân “Ngô Kha—Trịnh Công Sơn,” 237.
26. Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường, “Căn nhà của những gã lang thang” [Home of Wandering Guys], in *Ngô Kha hành trình*, 229; and Nguyễn Đắc Xuân, “Ngô Kha—Trịnh Công Sơn,” 237.
 27. Robert J. Topmiller, *The Lotus Unleashed* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2002), 2. When General Nguyễn Khánh and the “Young Turks” took power after Ngô Đình Diệm’s assassination General Khánh repealed Decree Number 10. See also Cao Huy Thuần, “Vài điều căn bản về phong trào Phật giáo” [Some Fundamental Aspects of the Buddhist Movement], *Thời đại mới* [New Era] 21 (May 2011), available at *Thời đại mới*, http://www.tapchithoidai.org/ThoiDai21/201121_CaoHuyThuan.htm (accessed September 23, 2014). Thiên Đo explains that “the infamous *Decree No. 10* put all religious organizations, except the Catholic and Protestant missions, in the category of public associations. Article 7 of the decree stipulates that “permission to establish an association can be refused without any explanation given.” See Thiên Đo, “The Quest for Enlightenment and Cultural Identity: Buddhism in Contemporary Vietnam,” in *Buddhism and Politics in Twentieth-Century Asia*, ed. Ian Harris (London: Pinter, 1999), 270–271.
 28. For information on this specific incident and an account of Ngô Đình Diệm’s battle with the Buddhists in 1963, see Edward Miller, “Religious Revival and the Politics of Nation Building: Reinterpreting the 1963 ‘Buddhist crisis’ in South Vietnam,” *Modern Asian Studies* 49 (2015), 1903–1962.
 29. George McTurnan Kahin, *Intervention: How America Became Involved in Vietnam* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1986), 423 and 535, note 49.
 30. Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York: Viking Press, 1983), 445.
 31. Lewis W. Walt, *Strange War, Strange Strategy: A General’s Report on Vietnam* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1970), 117.
 32. Neil Sheehan, “Airbase is Shelled,” *The New York Times*, May 21, 1966; see also Robert J. Topmiller, *The Lotus Unleashed*, 124.
 33. Nguyễn Đắc Xuân suggests that Ngô Kha established this battle group, but Nguyễn Duy Hiền says that Ngô Kha was “one of a core group of people who led this break away [*ly khai*] unit of the Saigon army.” See Nguyễn Đắc Xuân, “Ngô Kha—Trịnh Công Sơn,” 237; and Nguyễn Duy Hiền, “Ghi chép ngắn,” 11.
 34. Nguyễn Đắc Xuân, “Ngô Kha—Trịnh Công Sơn,” 238.
 35. Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường, “Căn nhà của những gã lang thang,” 229. See also Nguyễn Đắc Xuân, “Ngô Kha—Trịnh Công Sơn,” 237.

36. Liên Thành, *Biến Động Miền Trung*, 145–146.
37. *Ibid.*, 145. See also Liên Thành, *Huế thăm sát máu thân*, 211–213.
38. Nguyễn Đắc Xuân states that Liên Thành was a student of Ngô Kha, but he does not indicate when or in what school. See Nguyễn Đắc Xuân, “Vài điều về Liên Thành,” 220.
39. See Nguyễn Đắc Xuân, “Ngô Kha—Trịnh Công Sơn,” 238.
40. R.W. Apple Jr., “Buddhist Students Wreck American Center in Huế,” *The New York Times*, May 27, 1966.
41. “Student Mob in Huế Burns American Consular Office,” *The New York Times*, June 1, 1966.
42. Robert J. Topmiller, *The Lotus Unleashed*, 131–132.
43. Hoàng Trọng Tấn, “Những năm tháng sống trong nhà vườn Cậu Kha” [Months and Years Living in the Garden of Uncle Kha], in *Ngô Kha hành trình*, 116.
44. Thái Ngọc San, who spent a lot of time with Ngô Kha in Huế in 1968, says that Ngô Kha’s marriage had “just fallen apart” [*vừa tan vỡ*]. See “Bài ca bi tráng của phong trào đô thị Huế” [A Woeful but Mighty Song of the Struggle in Huế], in *Ngô Kha hành trình*, 98.
45. Đỗ Lai Thúy, “Người Đọc không đấng trí [A Reader Who Is Not Absent-minded],” in *Ngô Kha hành trình*, 40.
46. Ngô Minh, “Ngô Kha, một cõi tang bồng,” 277.
47. Trịnh Công Sơn composed the songs in these two collections after the 1968 Tết Offensive. A printed booklet of words and music [*tập nhạc*] titled *Kính Việt Nam* [Prayer for Vietnam] was published in 1968; A similar booklet titled *Ta phải thấy mặt trời* [We Must See the Sun] was presumably published in 1969. I say “presumably” because my copy of *Ta phải thấy mặt trời* does not include the date of publication; however on the second page are the words “finished at the end of October, 1969.” Both these song books were published by Nhân Bản [Humanism].
48. I refer to the two collections mentioned in notes 6 and 17.
49. Nguyễn Duy Hiền, “Ghi chép ngắn,” 12.
50. *Ibid.*, 12, note 8.
51. Cao Thị Uẩn, “Thư đòi con” [A Letter Asking for a Son], in *Đứng dậy* [Stand Up] nos. 65–66 (December 1974): 163–164. The entire issue of this journal is reprinted in *Ngô Kha hành trình*, 159–214. Page numbers refer to this reprinted version of the journal.
52. Nguyễn Đắc Xuân, *Trịnh Công Sơn: Có một thời như thế* [Trịnh Công Sơn: There Was Such a Time] (HCMC: Văn Học, 2003), 79; and Nguyễn Duy Hiền, “Ghi chép ngắn,” 11.
53. Lê Văn Thuyền, “Anh Ngô Kha trong ký ức tôi” [Ngô Kha as I Remember Him], in *Ngô Kha hành trình*, 106.

54. Hoàng Hòa, “Nhớ Anh Ngô Kha” [Remembering Brother Ngô Kha], in *Ngô Kha hành trình*, 118–123.
55. The French called this island Poulo Condore and jailed Vietnamese political prisoners there during the First Indochina War. In 1970 Don Luce, former director of International Voluntary Services who was then working in Vietnam for the World Council of Churches, led a US congressional delegation to a part of the prison where prisoners were chained in small five-foot-by-nine-foot cages called tiger cages. (Luce used a map given to him by a former detainee to find these cages.) Côn Sơn island, also called Côn Lôn, is 143 miles from Hồ Chí Minh City, one of sixteen small islands in an archipelago of islands called Côn Đảo.
56. Nguyễn Duy Hiền, “Ghi chép ngắn,” 14, note 10.
57. Nguyễn Đắc Xuân, “Vài điều về Liên Thành”; and Nguyễn Đắc Xuân, “Cái chết của Ngô Kha,” 220–222.
58. Nguyễn Đắc Xuân, “Cái chết của Ngô Kha,” 220.
59. *Ibid.*, 220–221.
60. Liên Thành, *Biến Động Miền Trung*, 474.
61. Nhất Huy, “Trường hợp Ngô Kha” [The Case of Ngô Kha], *Đứng dậy* [Stand Up] nos. 65–66 (December 1974), 168.
62. Nguyễn Đắc Xuân, “Cái chết của Ngô Kha,” 221.
63. Nguyễn Đắc Xuân, interview with Dương Minh Long, “Nhà Văn Nguyễn Đắc Xuân một chứng nhân của những năm sáu mươi ở Huế” [The writer Nguyễn Đắc Xuân, a Witness of the 1960s in Huế], *Đông Dương Thời Báo* [Indochina News], <http://dongduongthoibao.net/view.php?storyid=561> (accessed December 4, 2016).
64. As previously explained, Liên Thành regrets letting Nguyễn Đắc Xuân, Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường, and Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Phan escape his clutches in 1966.
65. Nhã Ca, *Giải Khăn Sô Cho Huế* [Mourning Headband for Huế] (Saigon: Đất Lành, 1971). Olga Dror has produced an award-winning translation of this book: Nhã Ca, *Mourning Headband for Hue* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014).
66. Nguyễn Đắc Xuân, “Đọc Nhã Ca hồi ký - Bình luận của một người trong cuộc” [Reading Nhã Ca’s Memoir—Comments by an Insider], *Tạp chí Sông Hương* [Perfume River Journal], <http://tapchisonghuong.com.vn/tap-chi/c112/n881/Doc-Nha-Ca-hoi-ky-Binh-luan-cua-mot-nguoi-trong-cuoc.html> (accessed January 16, 2017). This article originally appeared in *Tạp chí Sông Hương* 235 (September 2008).
67. Olga Dror points out that Nhã Ca fixed this mistake in a later edition of her book. See Olga Dror, “Translator’s Introduction,” in Nhã Ca, *Mourning Headband for Hue*, lii.
68. Nguyễn Đắc Xuân, “Hậu Quả Của ‘Cái Chết’ Của Tôi” [The Consequences of My Death], <http://sachhiem.net/NDX/NDXo20.php> (accessed January 27, 2011). This

- BB%9Di-cu%E1%BB%91i-cho-c%C3%A2u-chuy%E1%BB%87n-qu%C3%A1-bu%E1%BB%93n/306426446548435/?pnref=story (accessed February 14, 2018).
88. This interview is available online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MaNr16RDrzQ> (accessed February 13, 2018).
 89. Đông Ba is the name of the main market in Huế on Trần Hưng Đạo Street and also the name of a gate into the Citadel on Mai Thúc Loan Street. It is not clear which area Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường is referring to.
 90. “Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường “Lời cuối cho câu chuyện quá buồn.”
 91. Ibid.
 92. Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường’s comment about the pain he feels for unjust killings by uprising troops is a verbatim repetition of what he said in an interview with Thụy Khuê, a reporter for Radio France Internationale (RFI), on July 12, 1997. See “Nói chuyện với Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường về biến cố Mậu Thân ở Huế” [Speaking with Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường about the Events of Tết 1968 in Huế]. A transcript of this interview is available at: <https://sites.google.com/site/namkyluctinhorg/tac-gia-tac-pham/s-t-u-v/thuy-khe/noi-chuyen-voi-hoang-phu-ngoc-tuong-ve-bien-co-mau-than-o-hue?tmpl=%2Fsystem%2Fapp%2Ftemplates%2Fprint%2F&showPrintDialog=1>
 93. Đặng Tiến, “Trường hợp Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường” [The Case of Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường]. This article can be found on the website mentioned in note 87.
 94. Cao Thị Uẩn, “Thư đòi con.” Ngô Kha’s mother’s letter is included in *Ngô Kha hành trình*, 163–165. Her letter first appeared in a special edition of *Đứng dậy* [Stand Up], a mimeographed magazine edited by a journalist named Nguyễn Quốc Thái. This special edition consisted of fifty-five pages and was released in December 1974. It consisted primarily of letters by artists and writers in Huế addressed to Ngô Kha. The purpose of publishing these letters was to apply pressure on the government to explain what happened to Ngô Kha. Trịnh Công Sơn wrote one of the letters, which I discuss later in this section.
 95. Thu Hà, “Cái gì đã thuộc về nguyên tắc thì không có ngoại lệ” [There Are No Exceptions to Matters of Principle], *Tuổi trẻ* [Youth], April 18, 2003, <http://www.tuoiitre.com.vn> (accessed May 11, 2004).
 96. Nguyễn Đắc Xuân describes this meeting in *Trịnh Công Sơn: Có một thời như thế*, 98–101.
 97. Two different song books titled *Songs of Golden Skin* [Ca khúc da vàng] were published. Early editions had twelve songs; later editions had fourteen songs. I have copies of both editions that I bought when I was in Vietnam in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Neither the edition with twelve songs nor the one with sixteen songs has a date of publication but both are fifth editions. Trịnh Công Sơn wrote and performed many of the songs in these song books before these printed collections appeared.

98. Nguyễn Đắc Xuân, *Trịnh Công Sơn*, 73, 83.
99. *Ibid.*, 101.
100. Hoàng Hòa, “Nhớ Anh Ngô Kha,” 120–121; Lê Văn Lân, “Ngô Kha, Lầy lùng trên bục giảng,” 130; and Thái Ngọc San, “Bài ca bi tráng,” 99.
101. Ngô Minh, “Ngô Kha, một cõi tang bồng,” 279.
102. Liên Thành, “Trịnh Công Sơn và những hoạt động nằm vùng” [Trịnh Công Sơn and Underground Activities], Khai phóng [Emancipation], May 28, 2009, <http://khaiphong.org/showthread.php?1929-Tr%26%237883%3Bnh-C%F4ng-S%26%23417%3Bn-v%E0-nh%26%237919%3Bng-ho%26%237841%3Bt-%26%23273%3B%26%237897%3Bng-n%26%237857%3Bm-v%F9ng> (accessed November 1, 2016). See also Liên Thành, “Liên Thành trả lời một số thắc mắc trong bài về Trịnh Công Sơn” [Liên Thành Answers Some Questions Regarding His Article about Trịnh Công Sơn], *Biển Động Miền Trung*, June 30, 2009, <http://biendongmien-trung-lienthanh.blogspot.com/2009/06/lien-thanh-viet-bai-2-ve-trinh-cong-son.html> (accessed January 9, 2017).
103. See note 5.
104. Nguyễn Đắc Xuân mentions that Liên Thành was a student of Ngô Kha’s in “Cái chết của Ngô Kha,” 220.
105. Liên Thành, *Biển Động Miền Trung*, 140.
106. Liên Thành, *Biển Động Miền Trung*, 338.
107. *Ibid.*, 363.
108. *Ibid.*
109. *Ibid.*, 364–365.
110. *Ibid.*, 361.
111. Liên Thành, “Trịnh Công Sơn.”
112. Trịnh Cung, “Trịnh Công Sơn không quan tâm đến chính trị?” [Trịnh Công Sơn Doesn’t Pay Attention to Politics?] *Tạp Chí Da Màu*, <http://damau.org/archives/5055> (accessed November 3, 2016); and Bằng Phong Đặng Văn Âu, “Nhạc sĩ Trịnh Công Sơn—một thiên tài đồng lõa với tội ác [Trịnh Công Sơn—A Genius who allied himself with cruelty], *Tiền Vệ*, <http://www.tienve.org/home/activities/viewThaoLuan.do;jsessionid=5B274D833247970BDBCC546A441CA824?action=viewArtwork&artworkId=8532> (accessed November 3, 2016).
113. Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường, “Tuyệt tình cốc” [A Hut for Those Who Are Done with Love], *Hợp Lưu* [Convergences] 22 (1995), 52–58.
114. Thế Uyên describes this visit in an article that he wrote in 1989. See Thế Uyên, “Những người từ Tuyệt Tình Cốc” [People from the Hut for Those Who Are Done with Love], *Sáng Tạo*, <https://santao.org/2016/07/14/nhung-nguoi-tu-tuyet-tinhcoc/> (accessed November 21, 2016).
115. Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Phan, “Trịnh Công Sơn và Những Hoạt Động Nằm Vùng” [Trịnh Công Sơn and Underground Activities], *Saigon Echo*, <http://saigonecho.com>.

- info/main/lichsuavn/37-chientranhvn/9318-Tr%E1%BB% (accessed November 18, 2016).
116. Liên Thành, *Huế thăm sát*, 227–230.
 117. Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Phan, “Trịnh Công Sơn.”
 118. Liên Thành, “Trịnh Công Sơn.”
 119. I refer to the two books by Liên Thành cited in note 5.
 120. Liên Thành, *Huế thăm sát*.
 121. Liên Thành, “Trịnh Công Sơn.”
 122. Ibid.
 123. The entire issue of this journal is reprinted in *Ngô Kha hành trình*, 159–214.
 124. Trịnh Công Sơn, “Lá thư gửi cho người đang ở trong tù hay đã bị thủ tiêu” [A Letter for a Person Who is Now in Prison or Has Been Exterminated], in *Ngô Kha hành trình*, 183–194. This letter originally appeared in *Đứng Dậy* [Stand Up] nos. 65–66 (1974), 107–114. Page numbers in ensuing notes, however, will refer to the letter as reprinted in *Ngô Kha hành trình*.
 125. It was republished in these books: Nguyễn Đắc Xuân, *Trịnh Công Sơn*, 153–162; and Lê Minh Quốc, ed., *Trịnh Công Sơn: Rơi lệ ru người* [Trịnh Công Sơn: Shedding Tears, Singing Lullabies] (Hà Nội: Phụ Nữ, 2004), 26–35. It also appeared in these journals: *Thơ* [Poetry], a supplement to *Báo Văn Nghệ* [Journal of Literature and Art] (June 6, 2004); and in *Thanh Niên* [Youth] 178 (June 26, 2004).
 126. Nguyễn Đắc Xuân, “Sự thực ‘Thư gửi Ngô Kha’ của Trịnh Công Sơn” [The Truth about Trịnh Công Sơn’s ‘Letter to Ngô Kha’], in *Ngô Kha hành trình*, 217.
 127. Trịnh Công Sơn, “Lá thư gửi cho người,” in *Ngô Kha hành trình*, 188–189.
 128. Bửu Nam and Phạm Thị Anh Nga, eds., *Ngô Kha hành trình*, 159.
 129. Ibid., 191–192, ellipses in original.
 130. Ibid., 190.
 131. Nguyễn Đắc Xuân, “Sự thực ‘Thư gửi Ngô Kha,’” in *Ngô Kha hành trình*, 218.
 132. Ibid.
 133. Liên Thành, “Trịnh Công Sơn.”
 134. The Annamese Cordillera, a mountain range that extends parallel to the coast from the northwest to southeast, forming the boundary between Laos and Vietnam.
 135. “Nam Quan” is a pass on the Vietnam-China border. “Cà Mau” is the name of a city and province on the southernmost tip of Vietnam.
 136. “Phú Quốc” and “Côn Lôn” (also known as Côn Sơn) are islands in the South China Sea. (Ngô Kha was imprisoned on the island of Phú Quốc in 1966.) For information on Côn Lôn see note 54. “Ba Vì” is a mountain range in the north. “Tam đảo” is the name of another mountain range in north Vietnam, a range with three high peaks.

137. Đặng Tiến argues that the opening of these talks helps explain the glorious visions of a peaceful Vietnam found in Trịnh Công Sơn's later songs. See Đặng Tiến, "Trịnh Công Sơn: Tiếng hát hòa bình" [Trịnh Công Sơn: Voice of Peace] *Văn Học* [Literary Studies] 186 & 187 (2001), 190–191.
138. Martin Luther King delivered his sermon, titled "The Drum Major Instinct," at the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia, on February 4, 1968, two months before he was assassinated. In this sermon he told the congregation what he wanted people to say about him at his funeral. "I'd like for somebody to say that day that Martin Luther King, Jr., tried to love somebody. I want you to say that day that I tried to be right on the war question."
139. This and other comments that Trịnh Công Sơn has made about his Buddhist background can be found in "Nhạc sĩ Trịnh Công Sơn: Phải biết sống hết mình trong mỗi sát na của hiện tại" [The Musician Trịnh Công Sơn: "You Must Know How to Live Completely in Each Moment of Reality"]. A preface explains that these comments appeared previously in the journal *Nguyệt San Giác Ngộ* [Monthly Review]. See Lê Minh Quốc, ed., *Trịnh Công Sơn: Rơi lệ ru người* [Trịnh Công Sơn: Shedding Tears, Singing Lullabies] (Hà Nội: Phụ Nữ, 2004), 202. See also an interview with Thích Tâm Thiện, "Trịnh Công Sơn và ảnh hưởng của đạo Phật trong ca khúc" [Trịnh Công Sơn and the Influence of Buddhism in His Songs], Vietnam Express, November 1, 2002, <http://vnexpress.net/Vietnam/Van-hoa/2002/01/3B9B83Ao/> (accessed February 14, 2005). This online version is not, it seems, the complete interview, which originally appeared in the Buddhist magazine *Phật Giáo Giao Điểm* [Buddhist Intersections] (March 3, 1999). Parts of this interview are also in "Nghĩ về thiền" [Thinking about Zen] in *Trịnh Công Sơn: Tôi là ai là ai . . .* [Trịnh Công Sơn: Who Am I, Am I . . .], eds. Nguyễn Minh Nhựt et al. (HCMC: Trẻ, 2011), 212–214.
140. Thích Nhất Hạnh, *Being Peace* (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 1987), 12.
141. "Hãy yêu nhau đi" [Love Each Other].
142. Hoàng Phủ Ngọc Tường, *Trịnh Công Sơn và cây đàn lya của hoàng tử bé* [Trịnh Công Sơn and the Lyre of the Little Prince] (Hồ Chí Minh City: Trẻ, 2004), 41.
143. Viet Thanh Nguyen, "Just Memory," 145.
144. Trâu bò húc nhau ruồi muỗi chết.
145. Viet Thanh Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies*, 280.
146. *Ibid.*, 6.
147. *Ibid.*, 290–291.