



## THE GLOBAL LITERACY PROJECT

### VOICES OF THE COMMON PERSON FROM AROUND THE WORLD: VIETNAM



#### Letter from Dinh Mai-Ly to her brother Dinh Manh Pham (translated from Vietnamese)

May 9, 1963

My Dearest Pham,

*Do you remember this picture? It is from a long time ago when our family was still together and we were still happy. Our country had been divided by that decision in Geneva, but that did not matter to us then. You were 18. I was 16. It was 1955 and the rice was beginning to grow in Bien Hoa. Do you see our little sister Tan-Xuan to the left? She really did admire you then. Then there is our brother Trang Tu. He has always been so reckless and stubborn. Mother told him to wear a shirt. I remember the sunburn he got that day. Then there is you and I. We are smiling! I guess we thought Chinh looked foolish with the camera he stole from a businessman in Saigon. I can't remember where and when he was able to get the picture developed. The last person is Hoang Thu-Lee. She misses you more than I do. She does not want to wait much longer to marry, but she can not move to Haiphong in the North to be with you. Her father says she would have to use her dowry to pay for the move and then she would have nothing left to offer. I know your politics, but can you reconsider coming home for her sake? It would be nice if you brought Chinh with you for my sake. Would the both of you leave us to marry others? We would have a hard time of it anyway. There are very few men in Bien Hoa who have not joined Mat Tran Dan Toc Giai Phong (National Liberation Front) by now. More are leaving now in light of what happened 2 days ago.*

*I am sure you have heard about Thich Quang Duc by now. He committed the ultimate sacrifice by burning himself in order to make it clear to President Ngo Dinh Diem that a Catholic minority can not suppress Buddhism. The city of Hue must have been such a sight with all the rioting. The Buddha would say that this monk's act shows the pain and suffering that comes from the selfish desires of others. If only Diem was Buddhist, he would understand. I pray to Tho Cong often now for the hope I need to look to a better future for Vietnam. Giung has never heard our prayers regarding foreign invaders. The Americans have obviously corrupted Diem. All I know is that grandfather has been watching over us and protecting us from any harm. Father lights the incense and says a prayer to him and Buddha every night before we go to sleep. I often think about grandfather's influence on you as I drift off. His lessons about the struggle to keep Kinh land belonging to the Kinh really influenced you. We were always afraid that someone like the Chinese or the French or the Japanese would come again and take our land. It is a shame he died*

before Ho Chi Minh declared our independence. I was only 6 at the time, but I remember father and mother being so proud. Now Diem has sold our independence to the Americans for his sharkskin suits and his "forbidden palace" in Saigon.

You told us all three years ago when you left to join the Viet Minh in the north that things could only get worse. You told us that only Ho Chi Minh would try to reunite all of Vietnam from what grandfather had explained was the French way of keeping us weak. Nam Ky (Cochin China), Trung Ky (Annam), and Bac Ky (Tonkin) would again be three petals of a lotus if Ho Chi Minh could tend to our needs, instead of the trodden flower it had become. You said that Diem had proven his selfish desires when he never agreed to the national election in 1956. You warned father then that Trang Tu's naïve obsession with the Americans had already set into Diem's thinking. Father would not listen because he knew what you said meant leaving our farm or putting it at risk by challenging the local government. Besides, he used to say, we are promised more land from the old system. Our 2 acres will double when Diem delivers on his changes. You left a year after that never happened.

Our family had been so close until you started reading Ho Chi Minh's speeches and writings. The arguments you had with father used to make mother cry so often. For the eldest son, you did not show the respect our parents deserve. You know that father only wanted you to help with the farm and the growing of the rice. He wanted to pass the land onto you as his father had to him. He thought that your love for grandfather meant that the land would be as sacred to you as it was to him. You always looked out on the sea and the land around us in the Mekong delta and saw a bigger picture than father. He saw our home, our farm, and our family, but Ho Chi Minh and grandfather's words made you see Vietnam. That is why you 2 argued so much the day Pham Ti Tuyen came for the rent on our land and told us that the land that had been promised us was going to a Catholic refugee family from the north. You had tried to stop father from paying the bribe so that he could get the property's papers. I remember we had told father we would take other jobs part time in Saigon to pay for the rent increase instead of paying the bribe to Ti Tuyen. We all cried when he paid out half of Tan-Xuan's dowry because he did not want to have us work so hard. He had said that there would be time to save for a larger amount since she was so young, and that the extra land would bring in extra money to make up for the bribe.

When you left a year later, that land became a burden instead of the reward he had hoped for. All of us had to work constantly to get the rice to grow on every acre. Trang Tu was not as good with the water buffalo as you and father. The rice would grow in crooked lines and get tangled too easily. We lost a lot of our crop that year. You had written shortly after to tell me that near Haiphong it was so much better. Ho Chi Minh's model of life with his plain clothes and plain house had made everyone determined to make the cooperative farms work. I wish that father understood that there is no joy left working on paddy dikes that represent the wall that has been built up between you two. His single-minded determination is strong though. When he saw the letter you wrote a year ago asking me to go

to a meeting of the new People's Revolutionary Party and take Trang Tu. His anger was greater than any *khởi nghĩa* (general uprising) they could preach. He did not want to lose anymore of his family to the political fight around us. I think that he feels as long as we keep to the business of our farm and Bien Hoa, the problems of Saigon will not reach us.

I do not know what to think. I miss you and I miss Chinh. Thu-Lee has said she would go with me if I decided to join you in Haiphong. Neither of us could go alone, but with her dowry money, we might be able to manage getting there together. Father would not give me any of my dowry money to use I'm sure. It would be easier if you and Chinh would return to Binh Hoa. You could join the People's Revolutionary Party down here. I know it would be hard to live with father, but what if you kept your involvement secret? The work of the Viet Minh is just as important here in the South. Maybe you could do more good here by getting more resistance to Diem? All I know is that you should be with Thu-Lee and I should be with Chinh. If you come home, I will make pickled eggplant, herring, and rice for you. I know this is a small offer, but what is a sister to do for her brother besides help feed him and show him that he is loved and needed. Will you return home, or must Thu-Lee and I bring father further grief?

Love Always,

Mai-Ly