

A Vietcong Memoir: An Inside Account of the Vietnam War and Its Aftermath Study Guide

A Vietcong Memoir: An Inside Account of the Vietnam War and Its Aftermath by Truong Nhu Tang

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Plot Summary

The story begins with Truong Nhu Tang's description of his childhood, a situation he calls the "family cocoon." In this protective life, it is decided by Tang's father that Tang is to become a pharmacist. His older brother was told by their father to become a doctor, and the plan is for the two brothers to go into practice together, a practice that will be exemplary and profitable for both. Of Tang's younger four brothers, one is to be a banker, who will finance the engineering endeavors of the remaining three, all destined by their father to become engineers.

Tang describes his childhood as a "cocoon," and though he has little interest in pharmacy, he doesn't refuse his father. When Tang reaches Paris, he meets Ho Chi Minh. Tang is extremely impressed with the leader's methods of instilling loyalty and finds himself quickly caught up in the political climate of the day. Tang begins by spending all the time he has free studying politics, then drops out of pharmacy school to continue this course of study. As the military of the opposing forces clash, Tang is kept in the country near Saigon until his father feels it is safe for him to return to Paris. During that time, he meets and falls in love with a girl. His father, believing the young woman can bring Tang out of his misplaced interest in politics, encourages the liaison and the two are soon married, though Tang continues his support of the political endeavors of the National Liberation Front. His natural intelligence combined with his degree makes him a prime candidate for positions within the new government, and he serves in several.

Over time, Tang continues his work with the NLF though he is arrested and tortured on one occasion. His parents have forced him to give up his wife, but when his father contacts Tang with news that the family businesses are floundering, Tang immediately comes home to help support his five brothers who are all still in school. Tang is almost immediately drafted and volunteers for a teaching position at a remote area to keep from having to serve in a combat capacity. Tang continues to send money home. When the NLF is at its height, Tang and others are forced into hiding. Tang endures the hardships of the jungle for years, returning as Saigon falls following the United States' decision to pull out military backup.

Tang soon becomes disillusioned with the government and likens the harsh practices to those exercised by the communist party. When he sees no other way, he and his wife escape by boat, landing on an Indonesian oil drilling tanker.



Chapters One through Three

Chapters One through Three Summary and Analysis

The story begins with Truong Nhu Tang's description of his childhood, a situation he calls the "family cocoon." In this protective life, Tang's father decides Tang is to become a pharmacist. His older brother was told by their father to become a doctor and the plan is for the two brothers to go into practice together, a practice that will be exemplary and profitable for both. Of Tang's younger four brothers, one is to be a banker, who will finance the endeavors of the remaining three, all destined by their father to become engineers. Tang and his brothers are kept at home unless they are at school. They have little interaction with anyone outside their home and teachers. Each son has a nanny and any son experiencing difficulty in a subject is provided a tutor. The boys are given a thirst for knowledge. Tang notes he doesn't have a natural affinity for chemistry, which is necessary for a pharmaceutical degree, but that it doesn't occur to him to ignore his father's orders.

Tang and his brothers attend a French school, following in their French-educated father's footsteps. Tang notes that it's in this school yard that he is first subjected to prejudice because of his race. He admits he has no knowledge at this time of the history of his people or of how the French came to dominate the Vietnamese. When a revolution takes place in Saigon in 1945, Tang is caught up in the fervor and joins the "Jeunesse d'Avant-Garde," or the "Vanguard Youth." He notes that it's merely by the fact that he has a high school diploma and a gun (without ammunition) that earns him the position of leader for the neighborhood contingent, but he soon sees a horrific beating of an unarmed person and loses his belief that anything good will come of the uprising. He's relieved to realize that he'll soon be going away to school in Paris to complete his education, but in chapter two, his departure is delayed as the family spends some time away from the violence of the city. There, Tang meets and falls in love with a girl, and the two families support the match.

Then there's an apparent ceasing of hostilities and Tang goes away to school in Paris. There he is among a group of students who meet Ho Chi Minh, though none of them know of the man's role in the politics of the day. Tang is taken with the man who instructs the students to call him "Uncle Ho" and is invited back on another afternoon with one other young woman from South Vietnam. Chapter three describes this time with Ho Chi Minh as prompting Tang to begin an in-depth study into the politics of the country. Tang's father, in an attempt to put his son back on the planned course, announces that Tang's fiancé will join him. The two are married and Tang's wife is soon caught up in the political life. When the fathers hear of this, they unite to demand that the two come home. Both want to refuse, but Tang's wife is now six months pregnant and they worry over how Tang can support the family. His wife finally returns home with the hope that the arrival of a child will "soften" their parents. Instead, they demand that she stop communicating with Tang, and he is effectively cut off from his family, including his wife and child. He gets a job washing dishes, which seems to make his father even



angrier. Though he is hurt at the action of his father, he remains firm and does not return home to make amends.

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It's interesting that Tang is taught to desire knowledge and this very thirst is what eventually takes him from his father's plan of studying pharmaceuticals and into the realm of political activism. It's also interesting that in all his study, Tang has apparently been given little in the way of historical instruction about his own people. When he first meets Ho Chi Minh, Tang has almost no information about the war that is being fought for the freedom of his people. Nor is he alone. He notes that none of the students that initially meet with Ho Chi Minh have anything of significance to offer to the conversation.

Tang's descriptions of Ho Chi Minh on the two occasions they meet indicate that the leader realizes the strength of establishing personal relationships. He does this with Tang, and by the end of their first meeting, Tang is enamored with all the things Ho Chi Minh represents. By the end of the second meeting, Tang is a faithful follower. This faithfulness will be costly in that he will lose contact with his family, who will no longer give him any money for support, but he remains firm in his faith. It should be noted that it doesn't seem that Tang has a case of hero worship for Ho Chi Minh, but that Tang immediately begins to study the principles being touted by Minh. With that knowledge, Tang becomes a faithful follower. It seems possible that Tang could have become disenchanted with the political wrangling, as was the case with his brief tenure as a member of the "vanguard" in Saigon. It's also interesting that Tang's father apparently doesn't object to that brief encounter.



Chapters Four through Six

Chapters Four through Six Summary and Analysis

For a year and a half, Tang continues to live on his own, then receives word from his father that the family businesses - a printing house and a rubber tree plantation - are in serious trouble and that Tang, as the only of the six sons who has graduated, must come home to help pay expenses for those still studying. Tang notes that there's no question as to whether he will help, but he is immediately drafted upon his return. To avoid combat, he takes a job at a teacher in the province of Chau Doc in the "Cambodian frontier." Being some two hundred miles from Saigon, it's not a desirable station. Because of his degree, he's immediately made a "professor" and sends his pay home to his family, returning home to help out with the businesses as often as possible. He soon meets and falls in love with a young woman and they marry. In December of 1953, his daughter, Loan, is born.

It's also during this time that Tang becomes increasingly aware of the political climate and resolves to become active. He briefly spends time with guerrilla fighters and notes that he's amazed that the sight of killing doesn't bother him. He's then drafted yet again and weighs his limited options. He believes Ho Chi Minh will remain in power in the North, and Bao Dai will remain in power in the South. Tang admits disappointment that the country is divided but relief that France is no longer in control of any part of it. As Tang serves out a brief Navy career, he sees Ngo Dinh Diem take over in the South and wonders what kind of man Diem is. In chapter five, Tang soon finds out that Diem is ruthless and has none of the finesse of Ho Chi Minh. At every turn, Diem tries to force his will on others, choosing to rule by fear and oppression. Tang continues to hope for a united Vietnam but admits it isn't likely to happen.

In this situation, Tang encounters an old friend, a man named Vo Van Hai, who serves as Diem's secretary and who encourages Tang to support the regime. Tang considers it for some time but eventually declines. Tang then encounters old friends Tran Huu The and Ngo Khac Tinh, who encourage Tang to join Diem's support, a group called the National Revolutionary Movement. Tang believes joining to be a mistake and doesn't, though the others do. Tang then takes a job as "chief comptroller for the Industry and Commerce Bank of Vietnam," believing this would allay government attention while he decides where to throw his support. In chapter six, Tang reunited with another friend, Albert Pham Ngoc Thao, who has political feelings that match Tang's. Albert catches Tang up on his life, including a period spent with the resistance, and the two immediately begin spending time together. Albert is secretly working to overthrow Diem and takes a position in the government toward that end.

Tang notes that he is working with a group who is forming the basis for the National Liberation Front. Albert and Tang never discuss their roles, but both continue their work. Then Albert helps a young man rise to a high rank and later calls in a favor from that young man as Albert becomes involved in planning a coup. The coup fails and Albert is



exiled for a period and then forced into hiding. There's another coup attempt and then a series of arrests. Tang is among those arrested. He learns that Albert escapes, but then finds out that Albert is killed. Tang notes that the biggest failure of Albert - and of the National Liberation Front - is that their efforts don't eliminate United States intervention.

It's noteworthy that Tang does not pretend to hide his animosity for the United States. He notes early in the 1960s that the threat of United State intervention remains a constant source of worry for those who, like Tang, hope for a unified country. He later points out that the political maneuvering by those opposing Diem make at least some decisions based on what actions might conceivably keep the United States from interfering with Vietnam. It's also interesting that Tang believes there to be such a high level of support for a unified government that he can't imagine any outcome other than that unified government.

Tang notes that Diem's regime has some serious problems and that an endeavor to create self-contained villages fails. While these problems continue to plague Diem, and he is faced with jockeying for political placement with the United States, Diem is meanwhile overly busy with worrying about the loyalty of those immediately around him. The fact that Diem is cruel and intolerant strengthens the National Liberation Front. Tang will later point out additional situations in which the lack of popularity among the people is a problem for Diem and that members of the National Liberation Front allow situations to continue when it hurts Diem's regime.



Chapters Seven through Nine

Chapters Seven through Nine Summary and Analysis

Tang notes that Diem's successes are all "of a negative sort," and that those include an initiative to eliminate all those who are against him - especially those working near him in his own regime - and that he spends the vast majority of his time and effort in a quest to gain and hold power. There are several programs implemented, including urban renewal projects and rural development, but these are all evaluated for their usefulness in keeping control over those who might be against Diem. For this reason and others, the programs are hated by the common people and often completely unsuccessful. Tang next describes how he and a small group of men begin networking to find those who would form the National Liberation Front. He notes that they all know they must have a neutral leader who will lend an air of credibility to the group.

The first three who are asked turn down the leadership of the NLF, so the group settles on Nguyen Huu Tho, though Tho is under house arrest. Members then generate a list of objectives that include creating a system unifying the country and overthrowing Diem. Tang notes that Ho Chi Minh plays a role in formalizing the organization; Tang sees nothing unexpected in this, given Minh's experience. When the Resistance Veteran's Association becomes active in the South and calls for military action, Tang and the others realize that the NLF will also have to have a military facet, though the political arena continues to be the ultimate goal. Tang admits that the NLF can't possibly defeat Diem with his mass of forces and United States' backing but hopes to present a "controlled" military presence to force a decision without calling the U.S. into the battle.

Tang describes the first official meeting of the NLF, which includes a great deal of secrecy in an effort to keep the names of those attending a secret. The day after his return to Saigon, he hears a radio broadcast of the establishment of the NLF. In chapter eight, Tang notes that Diem, in his fifth year of the presidency in 1960, is bound to be nervous because of the increased guerrilla action. The NLF uses the disruption of an attempted coup to strengthen its own presence. Tang attends another NLF meeting but misses the next, having had an attack of ulcers. He learns later that he has been appointed a "secret member" of the NLF's Central Committee.

In Chapter Nine, Tang writes that he is assigned the public office of director of the national sugar company, a huge conglomerate of mills that produce sugar, distilled alcohol and sacks for packaging sugar. Diem's successor, Tran Van Don, is even less effective as a leader than Diem had been. Members of the Front now want to do everything they can to keep the American military out of the conflict. One effort toward this goal is the establishment of NLF government officials and having those people constantly visible with the hope that the people will simply accept this as fact. Tang notes that the quest for "mass support" continues as well.



It's about this time that another movement takes off, the "Movement for Self-Determination," of which Tang is a member. Their message is that North and South Vietnam should enter into a negotiated peace because South Vietnam has the right to "determine its own future." The goal of this movement is chiefly to keep American military out of the conflict. At a press conference, police want to arrest members of the movement but hesitate because of the number of foreign press correspondents. A few days later, Tang arrives at work to find police officers waiting to take him into custody, though they issue a request rather than a summons. He arrives in an interrogation room to find he's one of many. Tang denies involvement in the NLF but is held in jail anyway. Tang notes that the time in jail is comfortable and that he and the other members of the resistance movement have time to get to know each other and to make plans for the future. Sentence lengths vary but Tang's wife offers up a five-thousand dollar bribe, and Tang is sentenced to only two years with the sentence suspended.

Tang admits he believes those who join the group that will eventually become the National Liberation Front are true to their cause, as he is, and that it will be a great blow to those who are faithful when he discovers the truth. He notes that as the Front formally begins its work, he holds to specific hopes and dreams that he hopes will come to pass with the Front at work.

There's an interesting story of the Front's attempt to "kidnap" Nguyen Huu Tho from where he's being held under a lenient house arrest. Those who attempt the rescue arrange to have the guards called away. The rescuers have never seen Tho and so go into the house in search of the man, only to find that he has been granted time with his family and is not even in the house. The rescuers take two men with them who look something like Tho, and when it's revealed they aren't Tho, both agree to remain as part of the resistance movement anyway. Through this botched attempt, the Front holds its first meeting without benefit of a formal leader.

Tang seems to have learned an important lesson from Ho Chi Minh during the early days of coming to political awareness. As a member of the Front, he spends a great deal of time networking. He notes that a very small fraction of the people he meets are ever approached about membership in the Front but believes that every bit of support that can be mustered from the public will benefit the Front in the long term.



Chapters Ten through Twelve

Chapters Ten through Twelve Summary and Analysis

Tang is suspended for a period of time and notes that it's serious because the Vietnamese put great stock in a person's title. Without his job, Tang is less credible in his position with the Front. He quickly comes to the forefront of organizing youth, not with any overt political agenda, but seeming just to be gathering with young people and espousing concern over the current political situation. Tang notes that the objective is to have the young people in place, ready and willing to be led, when the time is right. Then he's arrested, his name having been given up by a fellow member of the Front. Tang admits to membership in that organization, apparently believing that the information is already known, but denies anything else, including membership in the communist party. He's systematically tortured and then, after a month, his wife arrives with food and clothing, advising him that she's going to try to get him transferred to a safer prison and that he should admit to being a communist to stop the torture. He does make the admission and later discovers that his wife bribed the torturer with six thousand dollars, earning him a move to National Police Headquarters.

In chapter eleven, Tang notes that conditions are little better. He remains in his cell with little human contact, no exercise time and no stimulation other than the prison grapevine for six months. Then he gets a cellmate - Dinh Zang who is a friend of Tang's and who had supported the Front, though was not a formal member. It's apparently this support that prompts his arrest. On January 31, 1968, the prison comes alive and Tang learns a coup is underway, but the effort fails. In late February, Tang is told to gather his things and he expects to be executed. He and two women are loaded into a van, then into a Red Cross truck and then told that they're being exchanged and are to remain at a safe house for several days until the exchange can take place. As they're being released, they're given money, a radio and a small booklet but refuse the gifts. They're then told that the booklet is communication meant for top NLF officials. They take the booklet but refuse the cash and radio, fearing the radio holds a tracking device. The three travel for weeks, eventually ending their travels at the NLF hospital near the Cambodian border.

In chapter twelve, Tang remains in the hospital under the care of Dr. Thuy Ba, the first woman to survive the six-month trek across the Ho Chi Menh Trail. Tang receives a letter from Huynh Tan Phat, requesting that Tang come to the NLF headquarters as soon as he is able to participate in a new group, The Alliance of National, Democratic and Peace Forces, which was created in response to the American military presence that began in 1965. The alliance of North Vietnam and the United States continues to provide problems for the guerrilla fighters, and then the Vietnamese learn that Lyndon B. Johnson has decided not to seek another term as president. When Richard Nixon takes the office, Tang and his fellow Front members know that Nixon will step up military offensives in an effort to bring a close to the battle.

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Tang describes the personal attachments that form among the members of the Front. To make this clear, he points out that he had grown up with a young woman, now a doctor, and that he had helped hide a young man, the brother of Albert. He tells of someone taking a huge risk to visit Tang's parents to tell Tang's mother that Tang was alright at a time when the police were searching for members of the Front. Tang says he isn't the only member with these kinds of stories and connections. If the reader multiples these stories by the number of members in the NLF at any given time, it's easy to see that more than just the quest for political concessions tie and bind the members together. Tang says there are many new members by the time he reaches NLF Headquarters after his release from prison and that these are mostly people who had been supporters but had never formally allied themselves with the Front. Now, having taken that step and being tied by the bonds already described here, it's easy to see that these people put themselves fully into their work as members of the Front.



Chapters Thirteen through Fifteen

Chapters Thirteen through Fifteen Summary and Analysis

Tang and members of the NLF realize that Nixon is taking a new course that means the United States could be more willing now to negotiate, and that the reason for this is to handle rising pressure in America to end the United States' role in the conflict. He notes that France attempted a similar course, but that the American plan could prolong the war indefinitely. On the same day Nixon is slated to meet with Vietnam President Thieu, The NLF plans to hold a meeting establishing the Provisional Revolutionary Government. Tang is selected to head up the Department of Justice in this new administration. The story of the new government is picked up by news media and is soon airing on televisions around the world.

In chapter fourteen, Tang describes the conditions of his life while in the jungle, where he remains for six years following the formation of the PRG. Tang and his fellow revolutionaries live in a constant state of fear as American bombers drop their explosives on regions very near Tang's jungle hideouts in 1969 and 1970. He notes that he learns to eat jungle moth, though he never learns to like it. He's paid monthly - about two dollars - and uses the money to purchase necessities such as sugar and toothbrushes. In 1970, there's an "invasion" of motorbikes and the PRG officials in the jungle are given several, followed by typewriters, cigarettes and other goods. Despite this, there's never enough food, and malnutrition is a constant problem. Malaria is also a serious problem, as is snakebite. Tang notes that more people fall victim to malaria than to the enemy but the bombardment by U.S. troops produces gut-wrenching fear and abject fatalism. He credits Soviet surveillance as the reason they are so often caught in the fire.

Training is constant and includes class time discussing political and current affairs, though the subjects are carefully chosen and patriotic. Tang notes that his major duty during this period - other than surviving - is to prepare for the time when a mixed government, including PRG officials, will rule in Saigon.

In chapter fifteen, there's a coup eliminating the president of the PRG from office followed by increased bombing, which prompts Tang and some others to leave Vietnam for Cambodia. An attack by Americans on the site of their bunkers forces the members of the resistance to flee in an arduous journey over the course of days with only cold rice balls to eat. At the arranged meeting place, Dr. Duong Huyinh Hoa, minister of health for the PRG, assists in the birth to a premature but healthy baby boy, though he notes that the child dies seven months later of malaria. The traveling and establishing of new camps continues; an important aspect of their job in each new place is to garner public support.

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Tang was not originally recommended for the position as head of the justice department in the PRG but was chosen for the department of the interior instead. It was believed that he was an excellent candidate for that position for several reasons, including that he had always kept a low profile with regard to his political actions and that his five brothers were involved with the already-established government. This is a perfect case of the situation that arises when any type of civil conflict occurs in that families are sometimes torn apart as individual members seek to do what they feel is right. Tang writes that there are conflicts among the fighters, but they are relatively few. With the conditions, in-fighting might have been much more common. Tang cites the fact that those involved believe fully in the cause as the reason conflicts seldom occur.

Tang talks at length about the impact of the war on Americans and about American sentiment, which is largely against the war effort. With the attack on Cambodia, that sentiment turns even more and the gamble Nixon had taken that an extended bombing campaign would reap solid advances on the PRG fails. Tang cites the initiative as a "resounding victory for the Front."



Chapters Sixteen through Eighteen

Chapters Sixteen through Eighteen Summary and Analysis

Those still in exile in the jungles are suddenly having trouble getting along—class distinctions seem to be at the root of the problem. Tang also points out that most people outside their organization will bow before the strongest power and are ready for a peaceful solution to the constant conflict. Toward that end, Tang and his fellow members of the resistance begin laying the groundwork for a "coalition" government that they hope will soon be in control. While the group remains officially intact, there comes a split between those in favor of communistic ideals and those against those principles. Tang remains in the latter. During one heated debate, Huynh Van Nghi, husband of the doctor who had given birth at a meeting of the group, says that if Nghi appeared to go along with the communist party, it's because their ideals matched his own. He goes on to say that he won't follow the communist party ideals when they stray from his own, earning him a strong dressing down by Bui Thi Nga, wife of President Phat. Tang soon discovers that the few within his group do not represent the whole of the communist party. In chapter seventeen, Tang admits that members of the party had actually done an effective job, beginning with "the brutal softening up followed by the kindly offer of friendship."

Tang describes in detail the political and military maneuvering that would eventually lead to American troop withdrawal. He says the entire situation can be summed up in a single sentence: "Practically the entire North Vietnamese army was now inside South Vietnam - to stay." Nixon realizes that accepting Northern presence is the only option. Henry Kissinger proposes a plan that is eventually accepted in which there is no coalition government as Tang had hoped and planned for but does include a requirement to include members of the PRG in the government. The plan of the controlling Vietnamese has two main points: removal of the American military and a permanent North Vietnamese military, and Tang believes this will eventually result in the fall of Saigon. In South Vietnam there are three "parties" - those that support NLF, those that support the Saigon leaders, and those who are neutral to both. Tang says Kissinger won't allow formation of a coalition government consisting of these three groups because Kissinger believes that will lead to North Vietnamese control.

In chapter eighteen, Tang says he looks ahead to the need for recovery from the war and sees many problems. Both military groups have taken heavy loans to fund the conflict. The country's poor have been exploited as has the land. There are few families that have not been negatively impacted, and who are not holding grudges. Members of the communist party refuse all arguments of "compassion," and loyal party members again clash with those seeking the best course for independence. An agreement is reached and promptly cast aside. Then comes news of the Watergate scandal. Though the resistance fears the return of American fire power, their spies continue to plant



seeds of discord and worry at home. As Americans worry over a gas shortage at home, the Vietnamese military battles become more modern and a dozen men from the Vietcong blow up a large oil storage facility.

Tang addresses the role of Henry Kissinger in the events of the Vietnam conflict and says that some have called Kissinger incapable and inept when faced with handling the situation in Vietnam for the United States. Tang disagrees and says that Kissinger's problem is not that he is incapable, but that he is unable to fully understand the Vietnamese. Kissinger is handling the situation with policies that are traditional to Kissinger's way of thinking, but Kissinger doesn't understand the thoughts of the people who are driving the situation on the ground. Kissinger is unable to see the weaknesses of those people in time to use them. Meanwhile, Tang and his fellow resisters are ready and able to use the public opinion in America to help their own cause.

Tang admits that, looking back on the situation, it's easy to speculate whether a coalition government would have survived. He believes that a government body of this kind would have received widespread support from other nations, including China. He ends this section of speculation by saying that the potential outcomes are "tantalizing thoughts."



Chapters Nineteen through Twenty-One

Chapters Nineteen through Twenty-One Summary and Analysis

Tang cites the case of several officials who are chastised for their actions, which are not in keeping with the group's wishes. In one case, Tran Bach Dang is "educated" in the correct ways. In chapter twenty, Tang travels the Ho Chi Ming Trail, which he notes bears little resemblance to the rough trail originally hacked through the jungle brush. In 1974, soldiers are camped all along the trail to protect this vital supply and transportation route. With the constant bombing, crews steadily create bypasses around damaged sections of road and make repairs. Tang travels this trail to reach Hanoi where he is to receive medical treatment before going on a mission to seek "political and material" support from several foreign governments. He is dismayed by the subdued air and horrible living conditions in Hanoi, having not been there for thirty years. He is in the hospital for a time, then transferred to an East German facility before finally leaving on his support-seeking mission in November, stopping first in Algiers where he is warmly received. He returns to Vietnam to find the group has made great strides on the military front. Tang notes that the PRG has gained support and sympathy, commodities that were not always available to the Northern Vietnamese.

The relationship between the government of the North Vietnamese and the resistance of the South is "more complex and more direct than Westerners like to believe." In 1975, the military makes a final push in Vietnam and to Tang and others of the movement, it seems victory is imminent. Meanwhile, Cambodia is having problems of its own. In chapter twenty-one, Tang learns that Saigon has fallen and prepares to return home. As soon as he arrives, he phones his mother and learns that his father died only a month earlier. Tang recalls the last time he'd seen his father, when Tang was in jail. His father then said he could not understand Tang's commitment to a cause and party that would undoubtedly betray him. Tang replied that his father should be "willing to sacrifice" one of his six sons for the ultimate goal of freedom and unity. Now he returns to Saigon as a member of the new government and that conversation with his father haunts him.

Next Tang learns from his mother that his wife is granted a divorce during their long separation and was living in the United States. Tang notes that his pain is "nothing special" in a country filled with people who sacrificed greatly to achieve the current situation. The next day, more than a half million people gather at Independence Palace Square to celebrate the victory. It's noted by one of the speakers that only the Americans are losers in the war—that all Vietnamese are winners. Then the armies of the North put on a tremendous display followed by a small "ragtag" contingency. When Tang asks about the remainder of their troops, he's told the army has already been consolidated. At that moment, realizing the decision had been made without approval of the coalition government, Tang has a foreboding of what's to come. Tang and his colleagues busy themselves with the next step in the consolidation of the governments,



and he notes that all try to bury their concerns as well. In just weeks, it becomes an impossible situation with the members of the communist party taking on the role of the conquerors rather than that of the vanquished. Faced with the knowledge that the communists plan to control the government and were taking steps to do so, Tang and his fellow members of the resistance are forced to make a decision as to their next step.

Tang describes an event in which a member of the resistance, Tran Bach Dang, makes a joking comment that the labor movement seems to be "on lunch break." Dang is a brilliant leader and noted poet in addition to his work with the resistance. His career is ended with that comment and he's arrested. To Tang and others, this seems the attitude that prompted Tang's arrest and is yet another step in Tang's disillusionment with the resistance movement, and indicates that these fanatics have a greater hold on the actions of the group than Tang had previously believed. Tang says that many years later, after his own retirement, he and Dang meet and that they purposely avoid any discussion of these painful events. He seems saddened that two men who shared such large roles in such an important resistance event would have to avoid speaking of that time.

During what would be one of the last general meetings of the resistance groups, a fellow member tells Tang that the event feels more like a funeral for the resisters. Tang agrees and during the break asks an official if this is the case. He tells Tang that a funeral "can be arranged." Tang says that he and the others who have remained true to their cause now know that there's no hope that the government will be any different over time. This time, they seem to have truly lost all hope. It should be noted that many, like Tang, lived in exile for many years and that many, like Tang, lost family members and years of time with their children, spouses and parents.



Chapters Twenty-two through Twenty-four

Chapters Twenty-two through Twenty-four Summary and Analysis

Tang writes that the PRG had ideas of how they would govern but had not expected Saigon to fall so quickly and so had not put their directives to paper. Tang notes that what the resistance officials had thought would be completed before it was needed was now needed desperately. Though Tang is still in Hanoi along with several other officials, a meeting is held and directives established that require those who had participated in the opposing government to undergo education, including a study of the history of the revolution. Tang notes that the offers are "magnanimous and humane," considering that the country had been at war for so long. Tang believes that the people of Vietnam must be able and willing to participate in the rebuilding of their country,

which is why "concord and reconciliation" is to be the attitude of the resistance. Among those who report for a thirty-day "reeducation" are two of Tang's brothers, Quynh and Bich.

Tang soon begins to hear from his mother and many friends regarding the fate of those who had gone for reeducation. When Tang confronts PRG President Huynh Tan Phat, Phat says that those reporting had never been told the stay would be for thirty days. He says they were told to report with enough food and clothing for thirty days. Tang is furious at the duplicity. Tang says that the crimes of those who are being detained vary and should be dealt with on a case-by-case basis, but Phat argues that they are all "in the same boat" - that of the side that surrendered. Tang, working with Prime Minister Pham Van Don, draws up a referendum calling for the establishment of rules by which arrests will be made, which angers Phat. A code is eventually created, but Tang notes that they've missed an opportunity that will never again arise, and that the code is flawed in several ways. Tang says that before his retirement in 1976, some three hundred thousand people are arrested and none freed.

In chapter twenty-two, Tang describes the election held in April of 1976 in which the police confiscate the ration card - necessary for all food purchases - from anyone who doesn't vote. This means the vote goes as expected by Phat's regime. Tang is asked to join the new government but declines, saying that his "only ambition was to get out." His mother notes that the communists in charge are "sowing the wind and will reap the whirlwind," an attitude that Tang says is becoming increasingly common. In chapter twenty-four, Tang describes marrying and moving with his new family to a rustic cottage in Go Vap. The government, having not accepted his resignation, continues to pay him and his body guards live in his town villa. In August, Tang and his wife decide to leave the country, though doing so is dangerous. They go by boat, have a scare when their inexperienced pilot grounds them on a sandbar and then encounter robbers. U.S.



President Jimmy Carter has given instructions that all "boat people" were to be picked up. On August 31, they arrive at an Indonesian oil drilling station and are allowed to remain.

Tang notes that Quynh had been an advisor to the old regime in his capacity as head of the Saigon General Hospital and that Bich had worked in the foreign exchange division of the National Bank. Two of his brothers had retired from the Southern Air Force and were not called for reeducation. The remaining brother, Khue, had worked as an executive for Shell and was never involved with the government. Tang notes that when Quynh and Bich report for their thirty-day stay for reeducation, they seem to believe that they will do what is required of them and then be accepted back into the society in need of their particular skills. Tang's statements on this point have an air of foreboding. It's also noteworthy that Quynh and Bich believe that their relationship with Tang will provide security and save them from harsh treatment.



Characters

Truong Nhu Tang

The author. Tang is a young man in college with plans to work toward a degree in pharmacology when he meets Ho Chi Minh. He is taken with the man who makes time to spend two afternoons with students and who tells them to call him "Uncle Ho." From this encounter, Tang learns about earning respect and loyalty rather than trying to beat others into submission. It's also from this encounter that Tang develops a desire to learn more about the political situation of Vietnam, and he soon drops out of pharmacology school to study politics.

Tang is allied with a resistance movement called the National Liberation Front, or "the Front." He gives up everything to work toward what he believes will be the ultimate goal of the Front - Vietnamese people living under a unified government. However, when the NLF forces a military surrender, Tang quickly becomes disillusioned with how members of the resistance movement are handling matters. He notes that they have one chance to implement the goal of a unified coalition government, and they don't take advantage of it. When Tang learns that members of the opposition are being held indefinitely after having been promised a thirty-day "reeducation program," his anger is complete. He attempts to retire, but the government refuses to acknowledge this. After spending some time in a small cottage near Saigon with his new wife, Tang decides it's time to flee the country, and he, his wife and several other people escape aboard a boat.

Tang's Father

Tang's father is an educated man, teacher and business man who focuses his entire life and attention on his six sons. He has plans for the boys so that he will essentially build a strong little empire around his family. Among those plans are that Tang will become a pharmacist and his brother will become a doctor, meaning the two will go into business together, and the younger four will be a banker and engineers. When it appears Tang will drop out of pharmacology school to study politics, his father brings pressure on Tang not to do so. He initially sends Tang's fiancé to Paris and arranges for the two to marry, hoping the girl will have influence on Tang and his decisions. When his father later refuses to send money for Tang to live on, Tang takes a job washing dishes.

Tang's father is not understanding of Tang's position in the resistance, even after many years and after the resistance is probably going to be successful. At what would be their final meeting, his father has harsh words for Tang, saying that he doesn't understand Tang's infatuation with the resistance movement.



Quynh

Tang's older brother who is destined by their father to become a doctor. While Tang doesn't follow through with his father's decree, Quynh does and works with the government in that capacity during the resistance movement. Quynh voluntarily goes for what he's been promised a thirty-day "reeducation program," but months pass. When Tang flees the country, Quynh and many others are still incarcerated.

Grandfather

Tang's grandfather and the man who teaches Tang and his brothers lessons of how to live a moral life. As the patriarch of the family, it's the grandfather's duty to teach, and he is only one of the many who help educate Tang and his brothers.

Ho Chi Minh

A leader of the South Vietnamese revolutionaries and who becomes president years before the conflict officially ends. Tang is impressed with Minh's ability and willingness to spend time with college students and from this encounter learns that public support and loyalty are valuable commodities.

Huynh Tan Phat

A leader among the revolutionaries, Phat is an architect. Tang seems to have the impression on one occasion that Phat misses the opportunity to use his skills. He's a member of the communist party in addition to being an office holder in the resistance. It's Phat who tells Tang that those who opposed the revolution haven't the right to want to be out of prison. Phat insists he made no promises, saying that he told them to bring enough food for a month but never said they would be released after that amount of time.

Albert Pham Ngoc Thao

Albert is a friend of Tang who reconnects with Tang several years after Tang completed his education. Albert tells Tang of his exploits during the intervening years and does not deny being a spy, though he also doesn't admit it. Both are soon heavily involved with the resistance but neither mentions it to the other for a long time. When Albert is apparently involved in a failed coup attempt, he is forced into hiding. He's killed later; some say priests reveals his whereabouts.



Bich

Tang's younger brother who is sent to school to study finances. Tang's father's plan was to have Bich in a position to fund projects for the three younger brothers, all destined by Tang's father to become engineers. Bich is among those who are subjected to "reeducation" by the National Liberation Front after the fall of Saigon and goes willingly. Tang later discovers that they have all be deceived on this point.

Dr. Thuy Ba

The physician who oversees Tang's care in the jungle during the beginning of his exile. This doctor is the first woman to travel the Ho Chi Minh Trail and survive to tell about it.

Dr. Duong Huyinh Hoa

The Minister of Health for the resistance movement, she is pregnant as the officials are summoned for a meeting. She reaches the destination with the others, having walked many miles just as the others did. The meeting is interrupted when Dr. Hoa gives birth to a son. The child is healthy but dies seven months later of malaria.



Objects/Places

Binh Xuyen Headquarters

Formerly the headquarters for the Binh Xuyen, this is where Tang is taken and tortured into admitting that he is a member of the communist party.

Chasseloup Laubat

The school Tang attends as a youngster.

Hanoi

Where Tang attends college and where several important meetings are held.

Ho Chi Mihn Trail

A network of roads used for decades, though Tang notes that the trail over which he travels in a jeep bears little resemblance to the rough trail originally hacked through the jungle growth.

Independence Palace Square

The place where more than a half million people gather to celebrate the final victory of the war.

Go Vap

The village outside Saigon where Tang retires with his new wife in 1976.

Saigon General Hospital

Where Tang's brother, Quynh, works in the health department.

National Sugar Company

The government entity that owns and operates huge sugar refineries, distilleries and a mill for making bags for the sugar. Tang is appointed director of this operation early in his active membership in the resistance.

National Liberation Front

Referred to as NLF or simply, "the Front," this is a movement designed to gain and retain control of the government. Tang is a member of this organization.

Paris

Where Tang attends college and where he first meets Ho Chi Minh. This is where Tang's interest in politics prompts him to disobey his father, studying politics rather than seeking a degree in pharmacy as his father had instructed.



Themes

The Quest for Independence/Freedom

The desire for an independent government and freedom from governmental oppression is among the main reasons The National Liberation Front is formed at all and the reason those involved are willing to continue giving of themselves and their time. This quest is so important to many that they are willing to make huge sacrifices. Not only are their own lives in constant danger through the constant threat of attack by United States military, many of them literally give up their families and/or lose family members. In Tang's case, his wives are not killed but simply give up waiting for him to complete his self-imposed mission and return home. His first two wives file for divorce.

An interesting point is that Tang stops to consider all he's lost after the fall of Saigon, which effectively puts an end to the ongoing military action. While he has given of himself, his time and energy, he also thinks about two failed marriages and the strain his decision to support the Front created between Tang and his father. With all this, Tang says that his suffering and loss is no more "significant" than any other person involved in the NLF.

Loyalty

Loyalty is an important theme in this story, and becomes more important following Tang's second meeting with Hi Chi Minh. After that meeting, Tang notes that Minh, who has invited the students to call him "Uncle Ho," has his loyalty. Tang approves of Minh's methodology and puts these same rules to use as he seeks support for the resistance movement of which he is a part. It should be noted that Tang's loyalty seems to lay with the efforts of those seeking to form a new government rather than with his own family.

Another aspect of loyalty as a theme is the dedication some feel for the communist party. During one particular meeting of the National Liberation Front, an argument erupts with one man saying that he is not loyal to the communist party and that he never will be. The man says that the only reason he is at all associated with the communist party is that the party generally seems to hold the same ideals and goals as the Front. A party member who is present immediately jumps to the defense of communism.

The Importance of Tradition

The Vietnamese have many traditions with a wide array playing a role in the day-to-day lives of families. For example, it's tradition that the six sons in Tang's family are directed into a field of study by their father. Children typically don't have the option to decide this important matter for themselves. Though Tang denies both a love and an aptitude for chemistry, which is vital to a degree in pharmacology, he obediently goes to college to study as directed. It's important to note that Tang bucks this tradition, taking on another

career for himself. Other aspects of tradition include the selection of names by the grandfather, which Tang's grandfather had done that for Tang and his five brothers.

Tang notes that an inherent respect for elders is another tradition and that the members of the National Liberation Front are faced with the difficult decision of whether to hold to this tradition in selecting the men to lead them, or to buck this particular tradition in favor of those most qualified to lead. It seems a compromise is reached on this score.



Style

Perspective

The book is written in first person with a limited view, which is the only option available to the author for this type of story. It should be noted that the point of view, while limited does include some details that the author did not personally witness. In some cases, these are things he learned from other people, but there are also some details that are historical and it seems reasonable that Tang got those from second-hand accounts of the war and from news casts at the time. For example, Tang talks on several occasions of the fact that public opinion in the United States is a factor in the decision to end the American military presence. Tang notes that he and others of the resistance are glued to the radio daily to discover these pieces of information.

One aspect of the story that is interesting is that Tang doesn't talk a great deal about his family. The reader gets bits of information, such as the fact that the author has married, but details about that woman are scarce. It appears that he married three times, and the reader is not even given the young women's names in one case. It seems likely the author is overly interested in presenting the facts of the conflict while leaving his personal life out as much as possible. If this was the goal, he succeeded.

Tone

The story is written in English, though the author uses several Vietnamese words and terms. Those are generally explained in sufficient depth so most readers will have no problems understanding the meaning. Typically, the author includes the translation in English immediately. Though some readers may find this distracting, the use of occasional Vietnamese phrases adds an air of authenticity for the reader. One problem English readers face is keeping track of the characters because the names are, for the most part, very different from English names. There is no option available to the author to solve this, but he has included a full "glossary of names" that will help readers. The political and social climate of the day plays a major role in the story and some readers may find the depth of explanation tedious.

The overall tone of the story ranges from excitement and optimistic to one of foreboding and despair. When Tang realizes he has spent the majority of his life working for a cause, and that those he helped put in power are self-serving and unwilling to create a true coalition government, Tang is filled with despair. Knowing he is unable to go on fighting, he gives up and leaves the country aboard a boat.

Structure

The story is divided into twenty-four chapters of varying lengths with the longest being about twenty pages. Titles are identified both by number and title with the title offering a



clue as to the content of that chapter. Chapter titles are "The Family Cocoon," "An Afternoon with Uncle Ho," "My personal Liberation," "Going Home," "Opposing Diem," "Albert Pham Ngoc Thao: Master Spy," "The Birth of the NLF," "Strengthening the Front," "The Urban Struggle," "Prison Once More," "Tet and a Secret Exchange," "The Alliance - South Vietnam's Third Force," "The Provisional Revolutionary Government," "Life in the Maquis," "Race Against Death," "First Troubles with the North, 1972: The Wasteland," "The Aftermath of Paris," "The Ideologues Claim a Victim," "PRG Ambassador," "Joys and Sorrows," "Concord and Reconciliation," "One Nation," and "Exile." The book includes a very brief epilogue and several maps. There are several photos scattered throughout the book, and readers who require visual stimulus may find these useful in keeping track of the characters Tang mentions.

The story is presented chronologically to some degree, but the chapters typically focus on some particular person or event and follow through with that person or event. For example, the chapter titled "Albert Pham Ngoc Thao: Master Spy," details the interaction between the author and a former classmate, Albert. Albert holds a place in the government of Diem, though he is working for the revolutionaries. The chapter picks up with the reunion of Albert and Tang and follows through the events that lead to Albert's death, ending with a detailed synopsis of Albert's accomplishments. The next chapter picks up with Tang's life but begins around the time he reunites with Albert. Some readers may find this somewhat confusing, but there are sufficient dates and explanations for most readers to understand the transition. This occurs several times over the course of the book.



Quotes

"I watched all this from relative safety, hunched in the reeds nest to the Maquis chief. I realized, not without some surprise, that I could stomach the sight of death." Chapter Four, Page 29

"Diem's inability to conceive of himself as a popular leader meant that he would have to put his regime in permanent thrall to American aid and protection." Chapter Five, Page 39

"South Vietnam was a society without leadership and without direction - and these essentials the Americans could not provide. They could not impose order on chaos." Chapter Six, Page 59

"Most damning of all, he had murdered many patriots who had fought in the struggle against France and had tied his existence to the patronage of the United States, France's successor. To many nationalist-minded Vietnamese, whose emotions were those of people just emerging from a hundred years of subjection to foreigners, Diem had forfeited all claims to loyalty." Chapter Seven, Page 65

"No one suspected my membership in the Front. I was simply an individual with serious concerns about the government, concerns that many shared with me." Chapter Eight, page 85

"Once Americans were involved in the fighting, chances for a negotiated settlement would vanish like a summer shower. Our planning, consequently, revolved around ways to keep this disaster permanently in the wings." Chapter Nine, page 91

"Incarceration gave up the opportunity to organize a common life, to cook and eat together, and to discuss exhaustively the issues that preoccupied us. In effect, the police had given us free room, board, and meeting place, allowing us to develop and strength our friendships and make plans for the future." Chapter Nine, Page 100

"South Vietnam had been turned into a crucible of suffering - a nation that was finding out, in its flesh, what it means to be a pawn in a world of great powers. It was a situation that cried out for involvement." Chapter Twelve, Page 133

"Another dietary supplement which I eventually learned to eat - if not with relish, then at least without gagging - was jungle moth. Often, as we sat around our oil lanterns at night, talking or going over plans, we would catch the big moths fluttering around the light. With eh wings off and barbecued quickly over a flame, it wasn't exactly a tasty morsel, but it wasn't that bad either." Chapter Fourteen, Page 158

"When it was over, no one had been hurt, but the entire delegation had sustained considerable damage to its dignity - uncontrollable trembling and we pants the all-too-obvious signs of inner convulsions. The visitors could have spared themselves their



feelings of embarrassment; each of their hosts was a veteran of the same symptoms." Chapter Fourteen, Page 170

"The South Vietnamese found themselves trapped between their loathing for the Thieu dictatorship and their fears of communism. Given these political realities, there was nowhere for most people to turn, so they paid outward allegiance to whoever held the whip hand. But had a negotiated settlement given political viability to a middle way, we were convinced that substantial popular support would surface." Chapter Sixteen, Page 192

"After unification the grim joke went around that the PRG was the goose that laid the golden egg, but that our Northern brothers had managed to kill the goose." Chapter twenty, Page 254

"Among all these, my own losses were nothing special. But this knowledge did not make them any less painful. Still, as I looked around the Miramar lobby, I was aware that there was hardly a person there whose joy was not mixed with sorrow or who did not see his own sacrifice as part of the immense suffering of the entire people, North and South. " Chapter Twenty-one, Page 263

"But though the policy of concord and reconciliation had been one of our most potent political weapons, we had not spelled it out in any detail prior to the capitulation of the Saigon government. This was one of the large tasks that had been caught short in the complete collapse of the regime fifty-five days into a campaign that we had anticipated would take two years." Chapter Twenty-two, Page 271

"Owing to the differences in the situation of the two zones in the country (North and South), the South must work out a program that, while in accord with the general program of the Fatherland Front, is suitable to its own situation. The South is carrying out the people's national democratic revolution, the North a socialist revolution." Chapter Twenty-three, Page 284



Topics for Discussion

Describe Tang's childhood. What is it about his childhood that prepares him for a role in the resistance?

How does Tang come to know Ho Chi Minh? What is the impact of this meeting? What is the role of Minh in the government?

What is it that finally makes Tang realize that the government he helped create is flawed? Describe this government and Tang's reaction to this eventual understanding.

Why does Tang take up residence in the jungle? Describe his life during this time.

What is it that Tang had hoped to see accomplished by the resistance? Do any of these things come to pass? How does Tang hope the new government will differ from the former? What is the reality of the government?

What happens to Tang during his arrest? Why is he moved to another prison?

What happens to Tang's brothers and many of his friends following the collapse of the Saigon government? What decision does Tang come to make soon after the new government comes into control? Do you believe this to be a reasonable action? Support your answer.