

Mèo Mun, Anarchist Views from Vietnam

Mèo Mun, The Final Straw Radio

Mèo Mun is an anarchist collective working to make anarchist materials and ideas more accessible to a Vietnamese audience, together with providing an analysis of social struggles from a Vietnamese anarchist lens. Over the next hour you'll hear three collective members, Mai, Will and tùng share their critiques of leftist misrepresentations of the Vietnamese State as Socialist, lasting impacts of imperialism and war on populations of Vietnam, the centering US imaginaries of Vietnam, the struggles of working class people in general (and queer folks and sex workers in particular) in Vietnam, nationalism promoted by the government and other topics.

Retrieved from The Final Straw Radio.

Also available as a printable zine.

TFSR: Would you please introduce yourselves with any names, preferred gender pronouns, affiliations or political identities as make sense for this conversation? Can you tell us a little about... is it pronounced Mèo Mun?

Mai: Yes, it's pronounced Mèo Mun. I'm Mai, I use any/all pronouns. I don't particularly use any political label, but I adhere to many anarchist principles.

Will: My name is Will. I use they/them pronouns. I'm an anarcho-communist.

tùng: Hi, I am tùng. I use any/all pronouns, I am an anarchist against the state and capitalism.

TFSR: Thanks for being here!

So, I am excited to have this conversation with you, thanks for making time and effort to chat! As anarchists from Vietnam, could you give us some highlights of the history of libertarian anti-capitalist and anarchist ideas and movements in Vietnam and what the milieu looks like today? And what sorts of topics and engagement drive those groups?

Will: As a preface, we are quite cut off from our roots. Many of us had lived for decades until we even heard of the word that encompasses our ideas and ways of life. The elaborate and complex history of the struggle for liberation in 20th century Vietnam is painted with a single stroke: you were either a patriotic Stalinist or a reactionary traitor, a colonial, fascist collaborator. The Marxist-Leninists who now rule the country only came into power by systemically eradicating all the other oppositional currents, labeling them traitors, and so yeah, of course they'd like to have a clear black and white narrative, of course they'd like for there to be no nuances; they'd look kind of bad otherwise and that'd weaken their grip on power. So, documents about anarchism or general radicalism in Vietnam, that divert from the State's narrative are usually inaccessible in Vietnamese, either as hard copies, or scattered around obscure corners of the internet. That's why we are on our very own bumpy road to learn and reconnect with our roots.

Historically, anarchism in Vietnam never grew into a wide-spread political movement. However, the struggle against the state, particularly states of the most populous ethnic group—the Kinh / Viet—can be traced all the way back to feudal times. Ethnic minorities living in upland Vietnam have been resisting the Kinh / Viet state's expansionism for a very long time. James C. Scott remarks in the book *The Art of not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* that many aspects of their cultures and ways of living can be read as anti-state and anti-authoritarian, meaning that they have, in a way, long practiced the tradition of keeping the state at arm's length, out of their affairs. Their struggles continue until this very day, and we have much to learn from them. We must stress, though, that we should not retroactively apply the label "anarchist" to these groups and their practices, nor should we call what they do "anarchism." As Simoun Magsalin, our Filipino comrade, observes about the anarchist milieu in the archipelago: we should be critical of the anarchist equivalents of a "noble savage" trope, and the search for a "pure" indigeneity unspoiled by the State that decolonization can return to. In the same vein, we have before criticized the idea popular amongst many Marxist-Leninists, that homophobia in Vietnam is solely a product of Western colonialism, and pre-French colonial Vietnam was a haven for queer people. Oof.

Anarchists, as well as radicals influenced by anarchist principles, also participated in the struggle against colonialism and imperialism of the 20th century. For example, under the yoke of French colonialism, the radical Nguyễn An Ninh called for the youth of Vietnam to "reinvent itself and take control of its own destiny." He critiqued the Confucian family values of parental authority, gender inequality and traditional morality, encouraging people to "break with the past and free themselves from tyranny of all kinds." He fought side by side with other anarchists

and libertarian communists such as Trịnh Hưng Ngẫu and Ngô Văn (a former Trotskyist), in the labor movement. But as we've mentioned before, the Stalinists came into power by systematically eradicating all the radicals from oppositional currents like the anarchists, and indeed the Trotskyists who were brutally slaughtered. Ngô Văn, the former-Trotskyist-turned-council-communist who we mentioned earlier, went on to produce many materials critical of the authoritarian, counter-revolutionary nature of the Stalinists after fleeing their persecution to France.

Mai: As for the contemporary anarchist milieu in Vietnam, it is extremely vulnerable and atomised. We simply don't have contact with other groups, even though there might be quite a few out there. Those groups might wisely want to keep more to themselves rather than reaching out, since state repression is quite severe. This is a challenge for us, as one of our goals is to find a way for Viet anarchist groups to safely connect, communicate, and exchange experiences, if they so wish. Another reason is that our milieu has been chronically isolated from the milieus in other countries. There are many reasons for this lack of international interaction, such as language barriers and, again, state repression, but also a relative lack of support, solidarity and understanding from the Western left and anarchist community. We believe that anarchism, as a method of revolution, cannot be applied successfully by an isolated group, in other words, without international solidarity. The exchange of information and ideas, as well as the interlinking of our struggles are absolutely essential for the mutual strengthening of anarchist communities. And so, at the moment, building coalition with other milieus in South East Asia is one of the tasks that we prioritize. It's also why we really appreciate the opportunity you have given us here on the podcast today!

Having said that, we are aghast that in many leftist circles in the West, Vietnam is painted as this Socialist haven where people think and act like a hive-mind, and the only ones speaking against the state are reactionary traitors, or CIA agents. So-called anarchists are paying to be fed those lies; so-called anarchists are capitalizing on those lies. We've lost count of how many times we have been fed-jacketed without any evidence whatsoever, and the people exposing us to harassment and doxxing got away scott-free. This stems from how the struggles in Vietnam and other over-exploited countries have been ignored by the majority of Western leftists for decades, especially when we can't be used as ammunition in their own political discourse. This makes talking about our experience in Vietnam all the more dangerous, and it actively discourages anyone who might start speaking out.

As we touched on a bit before, organizing outside of the state framework in Vietnam, whether online or on the ground, is dangerous: the threats of police violence and incarceration are always looming over us and our loved ones. Many leftists seem to think of Vietnamese police as heroic defenders of the working class. It really shouldn't need to be stated, but no, they're not. Vietnamese police exists to protect the State and capitalist property in Vietnam. Police violence and deaths in custody in Vietnam are a well-documented reality. In Vietnam, the ruling party holds all executive, legislative and judiciary power. Cops don't even need a court subpoena to enter our houses. Commoners like us grow up being taught to stay away from cops and everyone is used to bribing them. As for the law, there is a clause against the making, storage and spreading of material for the purpose of opposing the state and you could be sentenced to 5 or 12 years, if you're caught.

Speaking from personal experience, many Viet anarchists seek out anarchism because we are marginalised in other ways on top of being exploited by capitalists as workers. Within Mèo Mun, many of our members are queer, disabled, and/or young. Some were radicalised while trying to organize rather unfruitfully within the liberal framework. Some have cited the horrible abuse they have suffered under the education and medical system. Some used to organize as Marxist-Leninists, simply because Marxism-Leninism is synonymous with Communism in Vietnam, but then can't reconcile their reality with such an ideology anymore. So queer liberation, youth liberation, as well as disability justice and care are some of the passions that keep us going.

And also, I think I forgot to introduce a bit about Mèo Mun as a collective. Would it be possible for me to do that now?

TFSR: Of course!

Mai: OkOk, so Mèo Mun is an anarchist collective working to make anarchist materials and ideas more accessible to a Vietnamese audience, together with providing an analysis of social struggles from a Vietnamese anarchist lens. Specifically, we do the work of archiving, translating, and disseminating anarchist texts, which can be found on the online Southeast Asian Anarchist library. There is also a very gradual translation of English Wikipedia pages related to anarchism into Vietnamese. You know, because Wikipedia tends to be the first place people come to for a basic understanding of new concepts. We try to reach a wider audience on social media as well, and we write and speak

to educate people on what our experiences in Vietnam are like. The anarchist milieu in Vietnam is very atomized, so one of our goals is to connect Viet anarchists together, and provide a safer space for them to express themselves and exchange ideas, without fear of state repression, or mass harassment from statist and nationalists. Naturally, we make an active effort to include Viet anarchists in the diaspora in our organizing.

Individually, our members also participate in feminist, queer liberation, youth liberation and prisoners solidarity organizing.

TFSR: Awesome, thank you so much for the really thoughtful answers you've been giving, very clear.

So, you've already spoken on the pervasiveness of the police state and mentioned capitalist property and some other things in Vietnam. I would love to hear your perspectives on the political and economic direction of the State of Vietnam. An essay of yours that caught my attention is entitled "The Broken Promises of Vietnam" in which you argue that the "Socialist Republic of Vietnam" is not actually socialist. You describe similar instances of neo-liberal national economic infrastructure development taking precedence over preserving ecosystems and leaving intact indigenous communities, let alone general public health. You also describe a government wielding a Nationalistic vision of citizens that excludes ethnic and sexual minorities and that allows for billionaires to rise while the working classes and peasants are displaced. Can you talk about this, about those broken promises and who are some communities most imperiled by the Nationalistic tenor of the CPV?

Will: So, in terms of politics, Vietnam is a crony Capitalist country. The success of a business depends entirely on how well they could navigate the unofficial channels of the state, on their relationships with the government or Party members and how much money they are willing to spend on bribery. Officially, Vietnam is dubbed a Socialist country, but the class stratification can be observed in our everyday life. We have a so-called "People's" billionaire, Phạm Nhật Vượng, who, allegedly, built his empire from shaking hands with government officials to hoard land at a dirt-cheap price. He owns a total of \$7.3 billion in assets, equivalent to the total assets of about 800,000 Vietnamese (on average). Very Socialist! Not to mention that Vietnam also has many other billionaires, enough to have a Shark Tank show right on national television. The very first promise, that the commoners who sacrificed everything for Vietnam's liberation would be directly in charge of it, was shattered the very moment the Vietnamese government came into being.

The current Secretary of the Communist Party also openly praises capitalism, spicing it up with some superficial lukewarm critiques of capital! He said, and I quote: "We acknowledge that Capitalism has never been as global as it is today and has achieved many great achievements, especially in the utilization and development of productive capabilities and scientific-technological progress." So, we're just supposed to ignore all the toils the working class has historically and currently endured under capitalist Vietnam, for a Communism that may never even come! The end justifies the inhumane means, apparently.

As for nationalism, we mentioned it in the article "The Broken Promises of Vietnam," but if you speak up and criticise the State, no matter how valid your points, how copious your evidences, you will be seen as going against the Vietnamese people, the Vietnamese nation, because the government has a vested interest in confusing party loyalty with the very natural and precious love that we have for our culture and fellow Vietnamese.

And as you know, nationalism sells the lie of a trans-class solidarity, that we Viet workers have more in common with Viet capitalists like Phạm Nhật Vượng, rather than with fellow workers from China, Cambodia, Myanmar, or indeed the US. While in reality, Vietnamese capitalists and government go hand in hand with capitalists the world over to brutally exploit Vietnam's cheap labor and natural resources. This can be observed in the outsourced manufacturing of electronic components and textile products to Vietnam, in the many Special Economic Zones that are mushrooming all over the country. There can't ever exist any meaningful solidarity between us, between the capitalists and the working class, and the people in power are understandably frightened that the workers in Vietnam would one day see through this gross lie.

Consequently, they are dead-set on stoking the nationalist flame in Vietnam. That's why career communists based in Vietnam spew absolute nonsense like "nationalism is crucial to communism in Vietnam." Actually, Vietnamese nationalism is crucial to Vietnamese capitalism and authoritarianism. And the indoctrination process starts young.

Let's examine the 5 commandments that Uncle Hồ, Hồ Chí Minh, taught Vietnamese youth:

1. Love your Fatherland, love your compatriots.
2. Learn well, work well.
3. Good unity, good discipline.
4. Good hygiene.
5. Be modest, honest, and brave.

These are hung in almost every classroom in Vietnam (usually with a photo of Uncle Hồ). Many students are forced to learn them by heart. What comes first in these teachings? “Love your Fatherland.” Your fatherland comes before your compatriots. Children, who have not yet understood the concept of a “Fatherland,” let alone fully grasping what loving a Nation-state implies, are taught to put their “Fatherland” before themselves, before their family and friends. The next commandment: “Learn well” and “Work well.” For whom? In our opinion, also for your Fatherland, which is to say, for the state and the capitalists.

If you dare to question any of that, you’d likely be branded a traitor, a reactionary, a fake Vietnamese. If you dare to be “lazy” and not “work well,” you are a burden on society (disabled veterans in Vietnam are literally called “invalids;” we have “The Ministry of labor – War Invalids and Social Affairs”). The purpose of Vietnam’s education system, in our opinion, is to shape students into obedient workers or cogs in its capitalist machine, similar in essence to any other capitalist education system.

Also, many well-known authors whose works are featured in Vietnamese textbooks also incessantly preach nationalism and the idolatry of political figures like Uncle Hồ, Lenin, and yes, Stalin. A 1993 poem by Tố Hữu, famed Vietnamese poet, reads:

“Oh, Stalin!
 Alas, do the earth and sky mourn Your departure
 If I’m to love my father, my mother, my husband
 and myself one, then I love You ten.”

So, “I love you three thousands, Stalin.” Ouch! That’s not very good...

Consuming products from Viet brands and Viet media is widely considered “patriotic.” Which makes non-consumption unpatriotic. How convenient for the market economy! Oh and, not only Viet media, but also foreign media which uses Vietnamese labor. In 2018, a Hollywood blockbuster was filmed in HaLong Bay, Vietnam. The film set was then utilized by the authority as a tourist attraction. The whole issue of how that movie depicts US soldiers in Vietnam and local people asides, as we read about and cheer for the ongoing IATSE strike, we can’t help but wonder if Vietnamese actors, extras and crew hired in film productions outsourced to Vietnam are compensated fairly and equally compared to their US counterparts. Fun fact: there hasn’t been a legal strike in more than 25 years in Vietnam. The General Confederation of labor, which is supposed to represent the interests of the workers, hasn’t been organizing strikes, and so all the strikes that did take place were illegal. It’s apparently unacceptable for the workers to organize and demand better conditions for themselves; a workers’ struggle is only legitimate in the eye of the state if the state can control its direction.

Mai: A field where nationalist sentiments are particularly intense is sport, mainly soccer. There was this photo of a person holding a portrait of Uncle Hồ at a soccer match, which went viral a while back. That photo was said to be the evidence that Viet people love Uncle Hồ. What was conveniently not mentioned is how the sport scene in Vietnam is one of the best showcases for how poisonous Vietnamese nationalism is.

Rampant on Vietnamese Social Media is the xenophobic attitude when our national football team have a match, especially with other Southeast Asian teams. If the referee makes a decision that’s unfavorable for the Vietnamese team, their Facebook or other social media accounts will be flooded with tons of vitriol and death threats. The same thing will happen to the opposing team’s players if they were deemed “too aggressive” or simply scored the decisive goal. It’s even worse with women teams, where there’ll be slews of misogynist, transphobic and degrading language. Many Viet sport fans like to joke that all Thai women are transgender women, with the heavy implication that they are not “real” women. To the nationalist sport fans, all the other teams are inferior, mixed-blooded, full of unnatural

citizens, and hence has an unfair advantage. To them, the Vietnamese team is simply the best; any losses are only due to these unfair advantages.

As you may also know, nationalism seeks to create an in-group, out-group mentality, and Vietnamese nationalism constantly and violently excludes Viet ethnic minorities. A stark example is how the education-indoctrination system strips them of their culture and language. There are 54 ethnic groups in Vietnam, with more than 100 Vietnamese dialects, yet there is only one official language taught in school and used in exams, the language of the dominant Viet Kinh group. This naturally puts people from other ethnic groups at a huge disadvantage. Many schools force their students to wear áo dài as uniform, regardless of their ethnicity, even though áo dài is a Kinh garment. Attempts to even out the ground for ethnic minorities face vicious backlash from Viet Kinh people, such as when the government tried to give bonus points in the national university entrance exam for ethnic minority students. Instead of getting rightfully angry at an education system which dehumanizes its students, forcing them to brutally compete with their peers for a chance to be exploited by capitalists, many Kinh people blamed and unleashed their wrath on ethnic minorities.

Those are our observations about the political and economic situation in Vietnam. Based on those symptoms, and dare we also draw some parallels with certain formerly “Communist” countries, we could tentatively share our guess on the direction of the Vietnamese state and its so-called Socialism-oriented market strategy, should it continue to fester unchallenged. However, we are not prophets speaking gospel, nor scientists playing with solid statistics here; we will not invoke some sacred words like “science” and “materialism” and from that claim absolute truth. What we will say is this: without mass mobilization and resistance of the working class, the Vietnamese state will strengthen its grip on the populace, through law, nationalism or hierarchical social conditioning. And capitalism, hand in hand with the state, will dig its claws further into the exploited classes, drawing out from them all they can offer. The working class of Vietnam will be further fragmented as capitalism consolidates its influence together with its exploitation, delegitimizing worker struggles against it. This would ingrain a sense of resignation and self-absorbed struggle in individual workers and prevent the building of solidarity amongst them.

TFSR: Some proponents of what’s called “Socialism” in Vietnam will argue that, in fact, the work that the Communist Party has brought forth has improved the quality of life of people in Vietnam. Have you heard of this claim, does that ring true in your experience that there has been development in the quality of individuals’ lives economically or educationally that could be attributed specifically either to so-called Socialism in Vietnam or through improvements from market society?

Mai: Why yes, we’ve heard this argument before, and our eyes roll every time. First, it is undeniably true that the quality of life has been raised. And so what? That doesn’t prove that the same couldn’t have been achieved under another political system; life everywhere has been improving. Where is the evidence to pin this development on the so-called Socialism of Vietnam? It’s a wishy-washy way to justify the authoritarianism of the Vietnamese state and deflect from valid criticisms.

Will: And to add on to that, a suitable analogy would probably be prisoners not having to work as much. Sure, it’s an improvement to before, that still doesn’t change the fact that they’re still prisoners, still robbed of freedom and forced to toil under the same old master. Same thing here. Great, now we have internet; we also have no union to defend us against exploitation by the capitalists. Great, we get fastfood; we also have a state that’s just free of any control mechanism and can do what it wants (that’s how’s hierarchies of power work!). Great, we have iphones, ipads and gucci. The workers manufacturing for those corporates certainly can’t afford iphones, ipads and the newest gucci bag! But, whatever. So, okay, nice, quality of life has gone up. We’re not gonna say that’s bad, that’d be kind of stupid. But at what cost, in what context? The growth of quality of life is a good thing, but you can’t just ignore everything else surrounding it. A pizza party is nice, but you know what is nicer? Being in charge of our own life, our fruit of labor, and not being exploited and robbed of freedom. Partially because it includes a pizza party in it.

Mai: This line of argument also exposes a double standard casually applied for us people in over-exploited countries by many leftists and anarchists. Would you say the same to, say, queer people in more prosperous countries. “Hey you can get married now, you can even adopt children now. Why don’t you praise and be grateful to your capitalist government?” I’m sure there are people saying this to marginalised groups in more prosperous countries, but any anarchists worth their dime would vehemently and rightfully refute it. Yet everyone seems to be fine when

this argument is casually thrown at people in so-called Third World countries. As if we're supposed to be grateful for more crumbs! No, we want a seat at the table. We want everyone to have a seat at the table!

TFSR: Yeah, and when you're referring to industrialists in Vietnam having an income level equal to, I think you said, 80,000 other people.. At what cost and how is that distributed?

Will: Yeah, also it's 800,000 people.

TFSR: Excuse me, factor of ten... Thanks for being willing to tackle that question

What might be visions of libertarian communist approaches to some of the questions of raising the quality of life for people in Vietnam? Is that the sort of framing that you would use for a positive anarchistic vision forward? It seems like, just to add on, I've heard that in some countries that are ostensibly Communist or Socialist that people who are critical of the government sometimes have an allergy to those terms, to a positive turn of those turns, because it's been shoved down their throats in such a negative way.

Will: Yeah, well...

Mai: Definitely, yeah [laughs]

Will: To me, it's about representation. The State, this grand old thing, imposed all of those things on them, so I mean what choice do they have?

First and foremost, it must be said before any libertarian communist or anarchist vision can be realised, the people in Vietnam have to recognise that there exists deep problems with the current political system, and that there are solutions to those problems. The sad reality is this: the majority of Vietnamese people are alienated from politics (as authoritarian states tend to do to the people they oppress). So, politics is something done to them, rather than by them.

The state has built up for itself a shining image of legitimacy. And so even though many will say that there are problems with Vietnam as a whole, they are unlikely to be able to pin that to the political system. Maybe they can say that corruption is a severe problem of Vietnamese society. Maybe they can connect it to individual politicians and their supposed moral failing. But they won't be able to say that corruption is only a symptom of the system and that, more specifically, hierarchies of power are simply incompatible with the interests of those at the bottom of the hierarchy, of the majority. Maybe they would even say that the one-party system is clearly not working, but mistake the illusion of choice of multi-party system for total liberation, for freedom. The root of the problems just eludes many.

There is also a sense of apathy and learnt helplessness that has been ingrained into the population, and so, as of now, the potential of political action and change is not great. This exacerbates the previous problem, in the sense that, even if a majority of people recognize the root of the problem, they do not think that they themselves and, only themselves, have the power solve it. Or they think that the alternatives would only be even worse: either U.S. capitalism/liberalism or the kind of "Communism" with severe scarcity and corruption before the Đổi Mới reform — which mind you many Vietnamese still remember and are understandably frightened of. This is what we mean when we say Vietnamese people are alienated in politics.

We also recognise that historically in Vietnam, the traditional labor movement has alienated many groups, such as ethnic minorities, sex workers, people of marginalized genders and sexuality, disabled people, unemployed people, criminalized people, and young people. Moving forwards, it is important to make our movements inclusive enough for the many fronts against various forms of oppressions, not just class struggles. Of course, the working class is the only class capable of toppling capitalism, but our definition of "work" and "workers" needs to change radically.

So... a vision—a hope even—is that, through putting their predicament under the capitalist society of Vietnam into perspective and laying bare the fact that no one but themselves have the power to change it all for the better, people will gradually be free of the mental limitations and have the want to take control of their lives instead of putting it at the mercy of "the powers that be." And when the recognition, the will and the want, happens, we trust that they will go only one short step further and come to adopt libertarian communist approaches for their struggles, even if they don't declare themselves to be affiliated with any specific ideology. Again though, we are not prophets and to prophesize on a strict revolutionary form is an unwise and pointless endeavor.

But if we can say one thing about our approaches and our visions for a better quality of life in the future, we may call attention to community building. Given what we mentioned earlier regarding the alienation of the worker and the fragmentation of the working class, there is merit in considering a parallel process: of healing the wounds of

alienation that capitalism left on all of us; and of educating each other on essential political knowledge, examples being food sovereignty, pre-figurative social organizing, and independent union building. And in an age where technology has become an integral part of our lives, it is short-sighted to overlook or undermine the importance of online organizing. The social relations produced and reproduced through online organizing is every bit as pre-figurative as the social relations of on-the-ground organizing. Certain aspects are different, sure, but the essence of it is the same: the building and maintaining of structures capable of facilitating our interactions as equals. Through our own organizing, we've also found online archiving and dissemination of anarchist materials to be critical in the context of our milieu in Vietnam, where severe censorship and state repression have proven to be highly effective in weeding out dissenting voices, and isolating those who would otherwise band together to collectively speak out against the state narrative.

And as to the framing... Yes! I think this is the framing that we will proceed with. Unlike the previous revolution in our history, ours won't be one where the people are pushed into a so-called revolution by some self-righteous vanguard party. That kind of revolution has proven itself to be undeniably disastrous. And we would love to not repeat that. The true revolution should be a continuous process, in which everyone can partake right here, right now, on their own volition.

TFSR: Would you speak about the situation in Vietnam for people of marginalized genders, queer folks in Vietnam as well as folks criminalized for sex work?

Mai: Sure. The situation for queer folks is not great, though getting better. Same-sex marriage was criminalized until 2015. Then, the law prohibiting same-sex marriage was abolished, but it is still not legalized. So, since marriage comes with certain privileges in our current society, many queer people in Vietnam are stigmatized and barred from the medical, financial and other material privileges that their non-queer counterparts couples enjoy. Marriage equality is the front in which liberal organizations working within the state framework seem to pour a lot of effort.

For transgender people, as far as we know, there isn't a single hospital in Vietnam that is allowed to perform gender-affirming surgeries for so-called "normal" people, only for people who were in an accident or have "birth defects." At the same time, non-consensual, non-medically necessary medical interventions are still performed on intersex children, as they are permitted by law.

Transgender people who wish to undergo gender-affirming surgery often have to go through an intermediate center, and the whole process (examination, papers and surgery) is usually done in Thailand. Hormone therapies are not easily accessible through mainstream methods, but through the black market. They really have to bet their lives if they want to use hormones. Not only that, because of low supply and having to do surgery abroad, the amount of money one needs to spend to undergo gender-affirming surgeries can be approximately \$20,000, even more if you account for long-term hormone treatments. To put this into perspective, the average yearly household income of a Vietnamese person is \$2,235, before food and rent/mortgage and such. And remember, the \$20,000 is only for the surgery. So, the cost is an absurdly high amount for the majority of Vietnamese people, who have to work hard just to put food on the table and keep a roof over their heads.

About sex work in Vietnam, we will speak not from personal experience, but from a place of legality and personal observation. Legally, sex work and even pornography are criminalized; sex workers used to face incarceration in so-called "rehabilitation centers" and still are charged with hefty fines if caught in raids, they are subjects of systemic stigmatization and discrimination as well, especially sex workers living with HIV. It was not until 2013 that detention center number 05 was shut down; it's the rehabilitation center in which sex workers and drug users were detained and regularly subjected to forced labor disguised as "career training." Supposedly, the closing of this detention center happened under the pressure from, as far as we know, an organization by and for sex workers in Vietnam called Vietnam Network for Sex Workers, amongst others. We could not find other sources to corroborate this, however, so we can't say for certain this is what happened. Although, we certainly hope so! We suspect the reason for the scare sources has to do with the media not wanting to acknowledge sex workers' existence since sex workers in Vietnam exist in this limbo wherein they're criminalized, stigmatized, but also hyper-visible.

As for major queer, feminist, and sex worker organizations outside of the State framework, we are not aware of any, unfortunately. Yes, organizations that do not directly associate with the government exist; NGOs are by no means illegal. But that doesn't mean they're outside of the State framework. To truly be outside of the State framework,

an organization must have the aim to work outside of that framework in the first place, hence giving a reason for organizing that doesn't involve the State and doesn't subject itself to the bounds the State establishes. There is no such thing as being accidentally outside of the State framework. And indeed, the organization we mentioned above express quite a bit of friendliness towards the state, which they view as well-intentioned but incompetent in execution with regards to programs for sex workers. We by no means wish to undermine or devalue their achievements; we applaud them for their efforts and are glad to know that there exists an organization standing for the interests of sex workers in Vietnam! But we cannot ignore the fact they achieved this only through the State framework, by cooperating and showing understanding to the machine which in the end perpetuates capitalism, and wish to see them exploited as workers. What they have accomplished is undeniably good, but in the long run, the state can never be a liberatory tool. Another thing is that a substantial part of their funding comes from liberal NGOs and NPOs. They themselves acknowledge that it is a challenge for them to organize without that funding, which will eventually go away. So once again, in spite of the good, we are obligated to point out that this form of organization cannot lead to the total liberation of the oppressed: an organization dependent on funding from liberal sources can never work to break free of the chains of the status quo, only the painstaking lengthening of those chains.

So we would say that the blindspots of the organizing by and for folks of marginalized genders, sexualities and sex workers in Vietnam is that there is no interlinking of struggles. The feminists can pinpoint the un0level playground between men and women, but many are oblivious to, say, class struggles, of ethnic minority women, of queer people and of sex workers. Indeed, feminism in Vietnam applauds the icon of a successful career woman, a girl-boss CEO who are not dependent on men. The same with queer people: many strive to assimilate into the cis-het society by broadcasting that they can be as "normal," as successful in their careers as non-queer people. And so the poor queers, the disabled queers, the queers who are not Kinh, and many more, are further marginalized and don't have a place within the queer community. On top of that, their organizing are dependent on the State framework, on funding from NGOs and NPOs: they need NGO and NPO money to campaign for the government to give them more rights. And in our opinion, that kind of organizing is not sustainable and will never lead to total liberation. There will always be people who are unlucky enough to be the scapegoat, who are at the bottom of the hierarchy and cast to the fringe of society.

TFSR: Speaking as someone from the so-called USA, which participated in much of the 35 years of war Vietnam experienced in the mid-20th century following centuries of colonial extractivism at the hands of the states of France, China, Japan and others, I wonder if you can talk about the legacy of colonialism and war are on the peoples and environment of Vietnam?

Mai: This is personal to us. In my family, leftovers are seriously frowned upon, even just a single grain of rice. I remember, this was when I was about 5 or 6, leaving the dining table after finishing the meal, and got called back to eat one single grain of rice left in my bowl. This is because there are family members who are still alive, who survived the Vietnamese famine of 1945, caused by Japanese and French colonialism, together with the US bombing the transport system. An estimated 2 million Vietnamese people starved to death. There is also the persisting catastrophe of Agent Orange. Personally, someone in my direct family was exposed, and we have to deal with various medical complications. Ironically, if you Google "Agent Orange," the top results are almost all about its effects on US veterans; few are about its lasting effects on Vietnamese people and our ecosystem.

If you'd like to learn more about the atrocities that the US army committed in Vietnam, we'd recommend you to first, well, talk to Vietnamese people. You can also read the "Winter Soldier Investigation," which consists of first-hand testimonies from GIs about the many daily My Lais that they themselves had committed or witnessed in Vietnam. You may notice that this investigation has the same name as a fictional character from a famous franchise widely regarded as pro-US military propaganda. Now, of course this could very well be a total coincidence, but even so, the incidental effect is quite real. It casts a shadow over the investigation mentioned above regardless. The way information about war crimes and its devastating aftermath on people outside of the US is obscured like that is just one in a million ways how US imperialism and cultural hegemony are harming us right this moment. And as far as we know, the documents from that [Winter Soldier] investigation hasn't even been translated into Vietnamese for the younger generation to access and read about what happened to our predecessors.

Another product of US-centrism, which manifests plentifully in anarchist and leftist circles: in political discourse, Vietnam, a country, a people with our own complex and diverse history, is constantly reduced to and talked about

solely in our relation to the US. Not the whole span of that relation either, but only 20 years of slaughter and ecocide. For example, on the website of the longest running anarchist magazine in the US called The Fifth Estate, they have a page about Vietnam that is described as: “VIETNAM The failed US war and resistance to it from an anarchist/anti-authoritarian perspective”

Vietnam is not just a “failed US war.” Refusing to view us as humans with our own complex history and ongoing struggles leads to dissidents like us Viet anarchists, who don’t solely paint Vietnam as the US’ helpless victim, being branded “fake Vietnamese, CIA pawns, agent provocateurs.” The irony here is palpable. If you stop for one second and just look at the whole span of Vietnam’s relation with the US, you’ll see how the Vietnamese capitalists have no qualms shaking hands with US capitalists in their quest to exploit Viet workers. The Vietnamese and the US militaries are being all pally now, with weapon trades and personnel training courses! The US framework of every political topic is also routinely forced upon us, to the point that a Viet person who doesn’t understand every nook and cranny of US politics and its lexicon won’t be able to participate in political discourse without risking being torn apart, figuratively. Meanwhile, many US leftists/anarchists will brazenly insert themselves and their narratives in almost every conversation about Vietnam that we try to have, without taking the time and effort to learn the Vietnamese context.

And this benefits no one but US imperialism and, ironically, the Vietnamese authoritarians and statist. They capitalize on the very real frustration of Viet people who know that their struggle is completely ignored and dismissed by the US and Western left. They’d constantly and only talk about how horribly awful the US is, reducing Vietnam to its helpless victim — a glorious, brave and united nation against a common foreign enemy. On top of that, because social media favors moralized content, they’d build their platform on moralized, hateful language and rhetoric. They target a clueless Western audience who prefer self-flagellation and tokenism, rather than carefully examining information, educating themselves and developing their own analysis. When faced with criticism, the statist will weaponize their identities to silence and even harass their political opponents, accusing any Vietnamese speaking differently of being fake Vietnamese. Statist and career communists capitalizing on disinformation about Vietnam have threatened us with state violence and we have no doubt they will report us to the authority the first chance they’ve got. Of course, US imperialism permeates many corners of this earth, but to view, for instance, a Kinh Viet person living in Vietnam as merely a “person of color” erases the privilege that their ethnicity affords them domestically, erases the reason for their loyalty to the Vietnamese nation-state. We humbly ask people to de-center the US and its bloody war from conversations about Vietnam — it is long overdue. Thank you.

tùng: To add on to that, after the war, information about Agent Orange was slow in reaching Viet people, and so a lot went on to have children without having been adequately informed and prepared. I personally knew a family whose first child is blind deaf with intellectual disability, due to their parents’ exposure to Agent Orange. Without any compensation from the US nor adequate disability care from the Vietnamese government, the Vietnamese victims of Agent Orange have to fend for themselves on their own, generation after generation. They receive about from \$5 to \$20/person/month, depending on the severity of their conditions and I think this money is not enough to survive on for a whole month.

And there are the millions of people who were displaced by the war, cut out from their cultural roots and families, forced to assimilate into a new society. Many lost their lives fleeing a war torn country with a shiny new state high on victory and hell bent on vengeance. The ones lucky enough to have reached their destinations and settled down know no ways of reconciling and reconnecting with their “đồng bào” — compatriots back in Vietnam. They can’t learn about the struggle in Vietnam without being manipulated and fed lies, thanks to state censorship and hateful nationalist sentiments.

TFSR: How can international listeners in the international community looking to be solidarity with struggles in so-called Vietnam and learn more & help? Are there any projects they can support or other sources of learning that you would suggest?

Will: There is a proverb in Vietnamese: “Nước xa không cứu được lửa gần,” which roughly translates to: “Water afar cannot put out a nearby fire.” So, the absolute best thing you can do for us, specifically, is to organize in your own community, and to educate yourself about the struggles in Vietnam, without unquestioningly absorbing disinformation like a sad sponge. It also helps if you rethink and refrain from projecting your own localized societal standards and frameworks onto situations in Vietnam, which usually have little in common. And this should be

obvious, but: don't use our struggles as mere ammunition in your struggles. When you go to do solidarity, you should not reduce us to media tokens and talking points.

As of now, Viet anarchists are outnumbered, our voices drowned out by pro-state propaganda. And so, every single person who refuses to fall for said propaganda is a win for us! You don't need to listen to us, to Mèo Mun specifically, of course—we don't claim to be the best source on every single topic related to the struggle in Vietnam, far from it—but please be very cautious of the disinformation from statist. Talk to as many Viet people as possible, and remember that we are not a hivemind and our experiences and opinions do vary! If you're a reader, there are many texts on the Southeast Asian Anarchist Library concerning Vietnam and its history. So, do read close if you're interested.

And if you're into direct action, please pay attention to the migrant worker scene in your community. The conditions of Vietnamese migrant workers, especially undocumented ones, are often abysmal and they are extremely vulnerable to exploitation. And I'd dare to say that many so-called-Global-South migrant workers are vulnerable to exploitation. We'd be very happy to know that someone is looking out for them.

TFSR: Is there anything I failed to ask about that you'd like to discuss?

Will: Not really, but I'd like to, on behalf of Mèo Mun, express our heart-felt thanks to Burst for reaching out to us, for your very thought-provoking and interesting questions, and for spending time with us today. We appreciate your giving us this platform, and though we try our best to cover what we experience in Vietnam, at the end of the day, our experience is just an experience. It is not universal and by no means can we claim to speak for every Viet person. We only hope that our speaking up gives you some tiny glimpses into our lives and struggles, which similar to any lives and struggles, are human, messy, and imperfect. So thank you for listening and seeing us!

Mai: Thank you!

TFSR: Thank you, all of you, for participating in this and also to the collective for collaboration in the answers. And I appreciate you taking the time doing this in English for the audience, I'm looking forward to this being a contribution towards more international understanding and solidarity. So, thank you!

Anti-Copyright



**SOUTHEAST ASIAN
ANARCHIST LIBRARY**

Mèo Mun, The Final Straw Radio
Mèo Mun, Anarchist Views from Vietnam

<https://thefinalstrawradio.noblogs.org/post/2021/11/13/meo-mun-anarchist-views-from-vietnam/>

sea.theanarchistlibrary.org