

PLACE AND IDENTITY: REPRESENTATIONS OF NORTH AND SOUTH VIETNAM IN MAI THẢO’S WRITINGS BETWEEN 1954 AND 1975

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ABSTRACT

*After the Geneva Accords in 1954, nearly one million people left North Vietnam for the South. They are primarily called *Bắc di cư*. There have been numerous studies on these North Vietnamese refugees, the majority of which are centred around examining them as anti-communists and devout Christians and elucidating the governmental policies and the socio-economic effects related to their southward migration. Nevertheless, limited scholarly attention has been paid to their contested emotional experiences and representations of their homeland in North Vietnam and the place of their arrival in the South. These under-researched aspects possibly denote their complex awareness of themselves while living in the South between 1954 and 1975, if we take into account the theory of the sense of place, which generally stresses the interconnection between place and identity. This article examines how North and South Vietnam are represented by Mai Thảo—a prominent Northern émigré writer in the Republic of Vietnam—in his works published between 1954 and 1975. The aim of this study is to indicate Mai Thảo’s complicated psychological experiences of the place of his origin and the place he took refuge after his migration in 1954 and, more generally, his consciousness and representation of his identity. I argue that in his works of the late 1950s, North and South Vietnam are mostly represented*

as politicised places from the vision of a proactively anti-communist Mai Thảo, whilst his depictions of North Vietnam as a lost paradise associated with beautiful recollections and a dystopian South during the 1960s and early 1970s highlight his self-consciousness as a diasporic subject.

Keywords: Place, identity, North Vietnamese refugees, Mai Thảo, anti-communism, diaspora

INTRODUCTION

On 20 July 1954, after weeks of intense discussions and negotiations, the delegates at the Geneva Conference on Indochina agreed to sign the accords, accepting the seventeenth parallel as the pro-tem demarcation line between the North and the South of Vietnam, which would be controlled by the Việt Minh (or the communist Democratic Republic of Vietnam) and the anti-communist State of Vietnam (and later the Republic of Vietnam, or South Vietnam), respectively (Cottrell 2004; Hansen 2009). The Geneva Accords also state that Vietnam would be reunified after general elections held throughout the country within two years,¹ and that during the period of 300 days prior to the implementation of the agreement, free movements between the two regions of Vietnam would be approved (Hansen 2009). By the end of this grace period, an estimation of nearly one million people left North Vietnam² to the South. They are primarily called *Bắc di cư* (Northern émigrés).

So far, numerous studies have been conducted on North Vietnamese refugees following the Geneva Accords. The majority of them are mostly centred around elucidating the religious and political purposes of the mass exodus. They also aim to demonstrate and analyse the ideological strategies, political propaganda, and communication campaigns proposed and conducted by both the Northern and Southern governments, and even by the United States (US), which either enacted, reinforced, interfered with, or prevented their decisions to migrate (see, for instance, Lê 2004; Hansen 2009; Nguyen 2012; Holcombe 2020; Tran N A 2022; Nguyen-Marshall 2023). Others deal primarily with either the resettlement policies and deployment schemes implemented by South Vietnamese government for Northern refugees, the American aid provided to these programmes, the consequences of their migration on the socio-economic life of native inhabitants in the South, or the significant role played by Northern Catholic refugees in the Republic of Vietnam during the period (see, for example, Schreadley 1992; Hansen 2009; Elkind 2014; Nguyen 2016; Picard 2023).

However, these scholars have paid little or no attention to the complicated mentality of the Northern émigrés, particularly their internal feelings towards their homeland in North Vietnam and the place of their arrival in the South. It is undeniable that the northern side of the seventeenth parallel is where these migrants were born and grew up, thus having at least a sense of familiarity and attachment to the place to some degree. They left North Vietnam, on purpose, primarily due to religious and political reasons (see, for example, Hansen 2009), but it is clear that this did not prevent them from viewing North Vietnam as their home or homeland, at least on rare occasions. Moreover, their migration within the boundaries of Vietnam—which was commonly seen during the time as a single nation, despite being politically separated—might also have confused their conceptions of home, homeland, and their visions of the North that they left behind, and the South they just entered. Additionally, numerous questions should be raised. How did their anti-communism structure their images of their motherland and the South that they had fled to? Did memories of the beloved but unreachable North Vietnam ever stir in their minds? And if so, how is their sense of exile presented in their writings? Did they feel truly at ease living in the South—a place that was seemingly both alien and culturally familiar to them at the same time? The significance of these queries lies not only in aiding our understanding of the *Bắc di cư*'s stance towards the two partitioned regions of Vietnam, but also in illuminating these migrants' intricate self-awareness during their residence in the South between 1954 and 1975, assuming we agree with the theory of the sense of place, which, in general, stresses the intimate interconnection between place and identity, or the idea that one's self or identity is deeply intertwined with “an awareness of one's place” (Casey 2001: 406).

This article attempts to address the aforementioned questions by examining the literary works of Mai Thảo—a prominent Northern émigré writer in the Republic of Vietnam—in the intention of contributing to the existing scholarship on *Bắc di cư*. Specifically, I explore the images of North and South Vietnam portrayed in Mai Thảo's writings between 1954 and 1975 to demonstrate his complicated psychological experiences of his place of origin and the place in which he sought refuge after his political migration in 1954, thereby revealing his self-awareness and articulation of his identity.

Mai Thảo, originally named Nguyễn Đăng Quý, was born on 8 June 1927 in Nam Định, a small province located to the south of the Red River Delta in Northern Vietnam, approximately 135 kilometres from Hà Nội. According to literary critic Thụy Khuê (2014), Mai Thảo's birthplace is the coastal town of Cồn, where he spent most of his childhood before moving

to Hà Nội. Mai Thảo studied at a local primary school in Côn and later a secondary school in downtown Nam Định before he went to Hà Nội for high school. With the outbreak of the First Indochina War in 1946, he evacuated back to his birthplace and served as a Việt Minh journalist, travelling to different Việt Minh's bases ranging from Việt Bắc to Interzones III and IV.³ But approximately five years later, he returned to Hà Nội due to his resentment against the political objectives of the communists. Along with his family, he migrated southward and settled in Sài Gòn right after the signing of the Geneva Accords. There, he worked mainly as a professional writer and a journalist until the end of the Vietnam War in April 1975. Between 1954 and 1975, he authored around ten collections of short stories and essays, and over forty roman-feuilletons, which were mostly commercially successful but considered less artistically valuable compared to his short writings (Bùi 1994; Võ 1999).

Mai Thảo held a special and prominent position in the literary landscape in the Republic of Vietnam between 1954 and 1975. One of the primary reasons for this was his influential role as the editor-in-chief of the three most prestigious and well-known literary magazines in South Vietnam during the time, namely *Creativity (Sáng Tạo)* (from 1956 to 1961), *Art (Nghệ Thuật)* (from 1965 to 1966), and *Literature (Văn)* (from 1973 to the fall of Sài Gòn in 1975). His literary reputation was, in fact, firmly established earlier with the publication of his first book, *The Night Bidding Farewell to Hà Nội (Đêm già từ Hà Nội)* in 1955. According to Mai Thảo, in his interview on the *Radio France Internationale (RFI)* with Thụy Khuê, this collection achieved resounding success and had a remarkable impact on the contemporary South Vietnamese literary life, even though he was a relatively unknown author at the time of its publication. Mai Thảo hypothesises that the book's title might have attracted the attention of several Northern émigrés who “were, to some extent, still mentally attached to Hà Nội” after the mass exodus (Thụy 1991). Critic Thụy Khuê (2014) further elucidates on the enormous reputation of the work:

After 1954, the South needed a faith, an ideal. Building a free society became a real and noble dream for those who left the North. The anti-communist spirit was innate for those who had confronted the communists. The two works, *The Night Bidding Farewell to Hà Nội* (1955) and *The Tender Grass of January (Tháng giêng cỏ non)* (1956), from which Mai Thảo emerged, resonated with the psychology and ideals of the Northern émigrés.

She even argues that Mai Thảo can be viewed as the “mental leader” (*lãnh tụ*) of Northern migrants (Thụy 2014). In other words, besides his literary eminence in South Vietnam, Mai Thảo was also popularly considered a spokesman for his *Bắc di cư* community as he expresses their sentiments and viewpoints through his literary works. The study of Mai Thảo’s migrant identity through the representation of place in his works is thus indispensable for gaining a better understanding of the complex mentality of Northern émigrés in the Republic of Vietnam after 1954, which, as stated above, is a largely unnoticed issue.

Many locales spanning both urban and rural areas in the territories on both sides of the seventeenth parallel, within different timeframes and socio-cultural contexts (from the late 1940s until the fall of Sài Gòn), are mentioned and depicted in Mai Thảo’s literary works during the period 1954–1975, through which his complex identities are partially revealed. In this article, I argue that in his writings of the late 1950s, North and South Vietnam are represented as politicised places based on Mai Thảo’s vision as a proactive anti-communist. However, in his works published during the 1960s and early 1970s, the writer frequently presents North Vietnam as a lost paradise associated with beautiful recollections of his early days, and a dystopian South that highlights his self-identification as a diasporic subject.

MAI THẢO’S WRITINGS IN THE LATE 1950S: POLITICISED PLACES AND ANTI-COMMUNIST IDEOLOGY

Mai Thảo’s most famous short story, “The Night Bidding Farewell to Hà Nội”, narrates the story of a young man named Phụng on the verge of leaving Hà Nội for the South after the signing of the Geneva Accords. His girlfriend, Thu, first hesitates to accompany him since her parents refuse to abandon their beloved city. However, she and her family end up deciding to journey southward (without any explanation), and the story concludes with Phụng and Thu’s departure from Hà Nội. Despite the rather simple plot, this short story has captivated a few generations of readers with its subtle delineation of Phụng’s nuanced sentiments and thoughts on the last night in Hà Nội prior to his political migration. The following excerpt is from the beginning of this short story:

Phượng looked down at the abyss.

Hà Nội was down there.

From where Phượng was standing, he looked across the street. Boulders of darkness had curdled into cubes. One by one, rows of roofs of Hà Nội faded away. Phượng looked up at those rows of old and ailing roofs; and in a blurred moment, he found them packed with numerous confidences and numerous heartaches. The silent confidences. The oppressed heartaches. Those of Hà Nội. And those of his as well.

Below those rows of curved and sunken roofs laden with seasonal leaves, there were moods and changes happening that he, on this side of the street, could not understand. Hà Nội was changing colour. Looking over from this side of the street, Phượng started to feel a whisk of shivering and a sense of disparity: he had already been standing on one side of the parallel, overlooking to the other. On that side, there were images of separation and disruption. On that side, there were images of barricades, barbed-wire fences, forbidden roads, and uninhabited areas. Phượng did not know why. (Mai 1955: 27)

It is clear from the quoted passage that Hà Nội, from Phượng's point of view, is a city profoundly engulfed in gloom and a sense of destruction. It is described as having already sunken down into the abyss, ironically contrasting to its former name, Thăng Long, meaning the soaring dragon, which was popularly used across hundreds of years in the mediaeval time and is even well-known today. The city is surrounded by solid blocks of darkness and filled with rows of "old and ailing roofs" and the grim spectacles of warfare. Meanwhile, Phượng is depicted to be standing in somewhere much higher to "look down" at the dark and deep ravine: although he has not left Hà Nội yet, and thus can still catch sight of it, he finds himself, without doubt, not only far detached from the city, but also superior to it and those who decide to continue their lives there. More importantly, the above quote shows that Phượng does not convey his thoughts solely about Hà Nội. It is significant that, while beholding Hà Nội on that special night, he believes that he is perhaps "standing on one side of the parallel, overlooking to the other". It, on the one hand, alludes and emphasises that Phượng is experiencing a deep sense of disparity with the city to which he is intimately related. But on the other hand, it also demonstrates the fact that, from Phượng's perspective, Hà Nội is not just Hà Nội in the moment, as he can, from this side of the parallel—the Southern side—observe the other side as a whole through his lens of the city. Hà Nội thus becomes

something representative for, or the diminished image of, the whole territory beyond the demarcation line. To put it in another way, Phụng’s tragic vision of Hà Nội is also his very view of the entire North as a place in decay.

But what is the main reason behind such a perception? Another quote from the last pages of “The Night Bidding Farewell to Hà Nội” can help answer this question:

Standing alone in the long night, facing a slumbering Hà Nội, Phụng thought of his fellow travellers who had crossed the Red River, abandoned Hà Nội, and left the North before him. They had traversed the parallel, continuing their struggle for freedom and for humankind on the other side of the country. Phụng knew that in the days to come, the era would connect people through a shared ideal of freedom. His mood that night mirrored that of a German mechanic or a labourer from North Korea, both relentlessly crossing latitudes in search of a direction, a horizon with air and light. (Mai 1955: 35–36)

In the passage above, Mai Thảo highlights that the lack of freedom is the main explanation as to why Hà Nội and North Vietnam can never be “a horizon with air and light”, while “the other side of the country”, or the South, will be a better place to realise the ideal of liberty. Moreover, by comparing Phụng’s situation to that of the (East) Germans and North Koreans—who historically lived under communist governments and underwent political evacuations in quest of freedom during the 1950s—the author makes it clear that Phụng’s dark and tragic view of Hà Nội and the North stems entirely from his political consciousness as a devoted anti-communist dissenter. Hence, from Phụng’s viewpoint, Hà Nội and even the entire North Vietnam are represented as a politicised place, a territory that is only conceived through its subjugation by the communists.

Phụng is obviously a fictional character, yet his thoughts reflect, to a certain degree, the major political stance of Mai Thảo during the late 1950s. In the first issue of *Creativity*, Mai Thảo, as the editor-in-chief and one of the founding members of the magazine, wrote an introductory essay, titled “Sài Gòn, the Cultural Capital of Vietnam”, (*Sài Gòn thủ đô văn hóa Việt Nam*) claiming that Sài Gòn (the capital of South Vietnam between 1955 and 1975) had already replaced Hà Nội⁴ to become the “cultural capital” (*thủ đô văn hóa*) of Vietnam. Moreover, “the cultural flame has already surpassed the parallel and is alight here, today”, or in Sài Gòn to be more precise, due to the fact that “Hà Nội has already given up its position and responsibility”, and the resulting “paralysis, damage, and collapse” that “have propelled the young

and strong vitality into Sài Gòn” (Mai 1956a: 2). Undoubtedly, the two cities are not mentioned arbitrarily, but as the central metropolises of North and South Vietnam. Between 1954 and 1975, they were the political, economic, and cultural centres that signify the two conflicting ideological regions of Vietnam. Mai Thảo’s emphasis on the debilitated condition of Hà Nội and the subsequent relocation of the national cultural capital from Hà Nội to Sài Gòn implies his firm belief in the darkness and degradation of North Vietnam as a whole, rather than of only a certain city.

In another essay by Mai Thảo, “Hà Nội in Depravity” (*Hà Nội sa đọa*), which is included in the collection *The Tender Grass of January*, the darkness of the city is attributed to the loss of liberty and the rising conflicts and terror:

The Hanoians who remain (i.e., in the North) are living in damnation, talking by sighing, by weeping, and dying while still breathing. In the closed eyes of those deceased, their tears have not dried up yet....No spring, and no New Year’s Eve either. There is no difference between life and death. The lost spring does not arrive in Hà Nội, in the sorrowful blocks where arenas were tidied to make way for constructing new ones. The transition from the end of this year to the beginning of the next has been counted by horrifying quantities of arenas, victims, and denunciations. The five capital gates stand as watchtowers, which day and night devour the prison escape plans of Hanoians who have a thirst for spring, for freedom, for finding a path to us....The night time curfew’s electronic lights are shining like terrifying spy eyes. The gaze of communist police agents torturing innocent people at night. The gaze of an official caught between the two denunciations. Hanoians hang their heads down, turning away, fearful of a nocturnal flame which might expose their rising resentment. (Mai 1956b: 128–129)

It is clear that the North Vietnamese people are depicted as living within invisible prison walls, constantly fearing surveillance, denunciation, and even being unable to express their own ideas and opinions. To put it in another way, Mai Thảo attributes the air of gloom and despondency in Hà Nội and the North to the oppressive political and social climate created by the government’s unsuitable policies and administration, rather than the natural essence of the place or the cultural and moral degradation of the Northern people. Hence, the two aforementioned nonfiction works demonstrate clearly how Mai Thảo’s representation of the North during this period implicitly expresses his political position or, to be more precise, his antagonism against the communist regime in the North.

The decadence of the communist North is strongly emphasised in Mai Thảo's writings of the late 1950s, especially via the stories of characters attempting to abandon the Việt Minh forces or to traverse the parallel to reach the South after the Geneva Conference. In his short story "The Wedding Night" (*Đêm tân hôn*) (also from Mai Thảo's 1956 collection *The Tender Grass of January*), the main character is Đường, a highly respected intellectual who works for the Việt Minh forces in the outskirts of Hà Nội after the outbreak of the First Indochina War in 1946. Yet, one day, he aspires to travel back to downtown Hà Nội, not only because his mother is seriously ill, but also since he longs to escape the communists and seek freedom (Mai 1956b), despite the strict prohibitions in place. He thus decides to concoct a wedding feast, whereupon he uses the ensuing chaos of the crowd as an opportunity to flee. Another example is the work "The Story of Sister Ngự" (*Câu chuyện của chị Ngự*), which is the last short story included in Mai Thảo's 1955 collection, *The Night Bidding Farewell to Hà Nội*. This short story depicts the risky sea journey of Ngự and her children to the South to escape her communist-controlled homeland. Remarkably, despite capturing her bewilderment and worries about her upcoming life in an unfamiliar place, Mai Thảo stresses in this short story that Ngự holds a strong belief that "the village of freedom built on uninhabited grasslands will surely have markets, schools and churches", that "it will end up possessing everything: human, life, and love" (Mai 1955: 172).

Nevertheless, despite their persistent efforts to escape from the gloomy North, the *Bắc di cư* characters in Mai Thảo's writings before 1960 do not harbour hatred for their ancestral land, but rather, they hold a deep adoration for it. They understand with clarity that the darkness and weakness of the North stem from the political situation of the place or, to be more specific, its subjugation under the communist rule. For this reason, while longing to leave for a new land of freedom, they still wish to return to North Vietnam to heal the territory and restore a non-communist North. The essay, "Joyful Roads", (*Đường vui*) (included in the 1955 collection *The Night Bidding Farewell to Hà Nội*) clearly demonstrates this idea. The following excerpt from this work portrays the happiness of those who are traversing the free roads of the South, all the while keeping in mind that eventually they will return to rebuild the North:

Reuniting during the days reconstructing the country and revamp the territory of freedom, we are gradually thrusting our exuberant vitality towards the seventeenth parallel. The route, following its pedestrians, goes forward to the future on energetic strides. We will recover. All.

We will breach the parallel. The interconnected national route will be opened from the South, the present homeland of the nation, and liberated people will cross the parallel, returning to heal the regions pervaded by darkness and overgrown with weeds on the other side. (Mai 1955: 87)

In “An Evening Crossing the Mekong” (*Một chiều qua Cửu Long*), an essay from his collection *The Night Bidding Farewell to Hà Nội*, the scenery of the vibrant early market on the Mekong also evokes Mai Thảo's memories of the Red River and, more notably, his desire to “reclaim the Red River” from those who exploit it (Mai 1955: 99). While the Mekong is the greatest river in Southern Vietnam, the Red River is the largest waterway in Northern Vietnam and has been widely conceptualised as a national river important to the Vietnamese people (Phung 2020), especially those in the North. The two largest deltas in Vietnam, namely the Red River Delta in the North and the Mekong Delta in the South, are also formed from these watercourses. The two rivers, therefore, possibly stand for the two regions located on both sides of the demarcation line. This longing for repossession of the Red River implies not only his intense affection for the place and desire to return, but also his enmity towards the communists whom he perceives as usurping the North.

Similarly, in his essay “Homeland in Memory” (*Quê hương trong trí nhớ*) published in *Creativity* in 1958, Mai Thảo expresses his sense of longing for Hà Nội, stressing that “the hometown city stands immovably in the acuity of memory” (Mai 1958: 21), regardless of the fact that it has transitioned into a “Hà Nội of desert, Hà Nội of graveyard”, and its atmosphere being “contaminated” by those who are seizing it (Mai 1958: 25). The writer wonders if the *Bắc di cư*'s southward migration is a betrayal to Hà Nội, their beloved motherland, but he eventually insists that those who usurp Hà Nội—the communists—“only seize the city, not Hà Nội as our homeland”, and that, more importantly, he and other Northern émigrés “will someday return to restore it” (Mai 1958: 24).

It is thus my additional argument that the vision of a devastated North articulated in Mai Thảo's works before 1960 does not imply that he completely estranged himself from the place. On the contrary, his sincere, profound, and long-lasting attachment to the territory beyond the seventeenth parallel is demonstrated more conspicuously through the imagery he employs. While he may have to leave the North in bitterness and grief, he has pictured the North as a place of degeneracy not to convey his exult over its defeat or satisfaction in successfully escaping, but rather to convey his perturbation for the fate of his cherished North which is devastated by his political opponents.

Simultaneously, it reflects his nostalgic hope to come back and help in the recovery of the North. This further substantiates the anti-communist politicisation of Hà Nội, in particular, and North Vietnam, in general, in Mai Thảo's writings during the late 1950s.

The portrayal of South Vietnam, referred to as the land below the seventeenth parallel, in Mai Thảo's works during this period also discloses his political stance as an anti-communist. The Southern territory—the capitalist Republic of Vietnam—is depicted in a completely contrasting manner to the North. Though alien to the refugees from North Vietnam, the South is viewed by Mai Thảo as a vivid, energetic, and particularly amiable place, where those *Bắc di cư* easily feel at ease and pin their hopes. In “New Home” (*Nhà mới*) (a short story drawn from the collection *The Night Bidding Farewell to Hà Nội*), Hóa—a Northern migrant and new inhabitant of Sài Gòn—on his first nights in a foreign city, cannot stand but thinking of Hà Nội, the city from which he just withdrew, with “affectionate thoughts” (Mai 1955: 57). Despite that, he quickly perceives a sense of connectedness with his new homeland. For him, “the parallel cannot separate people's hearts, nor can it blur the aspects of the life that have been collectively well-perceived”, and the “connectedness”, “adherence to each other”, and “interlaced hands” can thus be found everywhere, even in a strange and unfamiliar place like Sài Gòn (Mai 1955: 59). As a result of this reflection, Hóa temporarily ceases to immerse himself in nostalgia for his old Hà Nội and starts to observe Sài Gòn, finding it “a large city with a life pace in flower”, a city “filled with the murmurs of brooks” and “tenderly grassy roads” (Mai 1955: 61). Through Sài Gòn, he also envisions “the freedom of a tide crashing over the clear blue horizon” (Mai 1955: 61). Sài Gòn is therefore represented in Mai Thảo's works during the late 1950s as a lively place, an earthly paradise of liberty, serving as a contrasting counterpart image to the author's previous depiction of the North.

Apart from Sài Gòn, other provinces and areas in the South are similarly represented in Mai Thảo's writings before 1960. In his essay “An Evening Crossing the Mekong”, the author presents a panoramic view of an early morning market bustling on and along the Mekong River. At this time, the sun has not risen yet, and the market is thus enveloped in darkness. Yet from Mai Thảo's perspective, amidst that shadowy night, torches and lights on numerous boats illuminate the scene, making the river surface “to shimmer with flames” (Mai 1955: 95). The Southern market—unlike most places in the North which are covered with a heavy and silent darkness—is depicted as extremely bustling, festive, and vibrant even during the dark early morning

hours. The air is filled with the clamour of conversations among vendors and customers, and countless boats unloading fish, en masse, onto the riverbank.

To sum up, in Mai Thảo's writings in the late 1950s, the North is depicted as a region in decay, both in the countryside and the cities, both before and after 1954. Mai Thảo focuses on portraying the rural North under the control of Việt Minh forces during the First Indochina War to elucidate how terrifying the communists and their policies are. The entire North Vietnam, particularly Hà Nội, around the time of the Geneva Conference is described as a domain of limitations, terror, gloom, and ravages, completely opposite to the South, which is sacralised as a sanctuary of freedom and a place covered in vigorous vibrancy. Instead of showing his enmity towards the North as a physical space, geographical territory, or cultural region, Mai Thảo's expressions of the North manifest his fierce hostility towards the communists and his bitter understanding that his ideological opponents had already taken control over the place. His depiction of the South, which is antithetical to that of the North, highlights his political binarism. The North and the South represented in his writings during this period are thus both politicised places imagined from his stance as an enthusiastic anti-communist.

This political viewpoint may have originated from the author's historical experience and personal sentiments. However, it should also be contextualised against the backdrop of South Vietnam in the late 1950s, which was ruled under the government of President Ngô Đình Diệm. In the first chapter of her dissertation on contested nationalism in the First Republic of Vietnam, Nu-Anh Tran shows how the anti-communist discourse was created, disseminated, and even institutionalised during this period, by not only the Sài Gòn government, but also numerous émigré intellectuals (Tran 2013). In addition, to establish the magazine *Creativity*—which undoubtedly advocated anti-communism (as evidenced by Mai Thảo's essay "Sài Gòn, the Cultural Capital of Vietnam" mentioned earlier in this article)—Mai Thảo also received the monthly financial stipend from Graham Tucker, an officer in the US Information Service in the late 1950s (Nguyễn 2014). Considering these factors, Mai Thảo's anti-communist representations of North and South Vietnam might have been a propagandistic strategy against the Northern communist government. Regardless, the politicisation of the images of North and South Vietnam in Mai Thảo's works during this period is readily apparent.

MAI THẢO’S WRITINGS DURING THE 1960S AND EARLY 1970S: LOST PARADISES AND THE SENSE OF DIASPORA

The early 1960s marked the beginning of a new era in the history of the Republic of Vietnam. The Buddhist Crisis that erupted in May 1963 resulted not only in the death of President Ngô Đình Diệm in November of that year and the downfall of the First Republic of Vietnam, but also in a series of political upheavals that fundamentally transformed South Vietnamese society. In contrast to the relatively peaceful Republic of Vietnam prior to the 1960s, the following period witnessed various Buddhist peace movements, fierce conflicts and clashes among military officers and political factions, economic recessions, the continual formation and collapse of various governments, and, most importantly, the escalation of the Vietnam War whose disastrous consequences continue to resonate today (Nguyen 2020). Keith W. Taylor, despite his efforts to extol the achievements of the Second Republic of Vietnam in various fields, also admits that:

There is no question but that the Second Republic struggled with serious problems; most, if not all, of these problems were in some way related to the fading away of external assistance and the need to build internal strength to withstand the pressure of an enemy that retained the support of powerful patrons. (Taylor 2015: 8)

The majority of people in the Republic of Vietnam, especially in urban areas, experienced serious disappointment, depression, confusion, and fear as a result of the social chaos, which was realistically reflected in most newspapers, journals, and literary works published during this period (Võ 2014). Against the backdrop of this drastically changing socio-political society during the 1960s and early 1970s, Mai Thảo’s writings took a nostalgic turn, which chiefly derived from his profound disillusionment with the contemporary Republic of Vietnam that he once had great expectations for, and also from his sentimentality about his past in the North, which he had to abandon with little chance of returning to. Such a turn can be observed in the way Mai Thảo delineates North and South Vietnam, which differs significantly from his earlier works: both places are portrayed as lost paradises in Mai Thảo’s writings in the 1960s and early 1970s.

In these works, his preceding depiction of the North as a ruined place—which is based mainly on his insistence on the communists' usurpation and destruction of the terrain—is virtually replaced by an affluent, picturesque, and desirable North, a paradise of childhood and younger days that could never be regained.

An important example of this transformation is Mai Thảo's "The Ship on the Red River" (*Chuyến tàu trên sông Hồng*). This work can be viewed as a short story, since it is included in his 1969 "collection of short stories for/about childhood" (*tập truyện tuổi thơ*), also entitled *The Ship on the Red River*. Nevertheless, despite being a collection of works of fiction, this book, according to critic Huỳnh Phan Anh, presents "a world of memories" constructed by Mai Thảo's "loyalty to his own sentiments and remembrances" (Huỳnh 1972: 188–189). Thụy Khuê, in her acute critical essay on Mai Thảo (Thụy 2014), also repeatedly highlights that the majority of characters in Mai Thảo's works, particularly in *The Ship on the Red River*, are the very reflection of the author himself. In other words, this short story collection should be read as a blend of fiction and nonfiction, with its autobiographical characteristics always taken into consideration. The protagonist in "The Ship on the Red River", indeed, shares many similarities with the author. Like Mai Thảo, the little boy in the story is born and raised in a provincial town along the Red River, and also leaves his birthplace for Hà Nội from a very young age. Hence, the boy's sentiments, memories, and identity represented in this work can serve as a mirror to understand its author.

This short story, like many other works of fiction by Mai Thảo, has a very simple plot: prior to embarking on the journey to Hà Nội, a provincial boy gazes at the view of his birthplace, and reminisces about his early days in the beloved town. Readers are attracted to the boy's innocent, lovely, and touching memories, which are beautifully portrayed and subtly expressed. A large part of his memories revolves around the town's ordinary natural sceneries, which are familiar to Vietnamese people, especially those living in the countryside in Northern Vietnam. However, they are depicted very vividly and movingly, as exemplified in the following paragraph:

Outside of the pond bank, there were rafts of water spinach ranging themselves in the shade of fig and jackfruit trees, a row of taro with large burgundy leaves on the other bank, snakeheads swimming into shoals, climbing perches snapping at dead mosquitoes near the piers, gobies revealing their spotlessly white abdomens during tranquil sunny afternoons, sometimes dotted with splashes of fruits in the garden. And when he went out of the alley full of toothbrush trees on

blue misty dawns, he took a crossbow made from a rubber band and a fork of a guava tree, waiting for the red-whiskered bulbul perched on the chinaberry tree top every morning... (Mai 1969a: 11)

The quotation, which is made up of numerous clauses organised consecutively without a full stop, is even lengthier, as if an infinite panorama of an animated and colourful rural village by the Red River is displayed in front of the readers' eyes. Such a representation indicates the surge of fondness that the boy is feeling towards his beautiful homeland, to which he has been intimately attached.

Undoubtedly, the village is attractive to the boy not only by virtue of its natural landscape. In thinking of “the stormy days in his old hometown”, he cannot forget how childishly gleeful he was when getting “soaking wet in the rain catching congers, picking fallen fruits”, while his neighbours struggled to sustain their houses, and his mother “dragged him inside, forcing him to wear a shirt and wooden shoes” (Mai 1969a: 14). His affection for the place, therefore, stems mainly from his pleasant and unforgettable memories of the events and the people he encountered during his time in the village. Despite this, he must soon leave them all behind. The harsh understanding that the ship he embarks to Hà Nội will distance him from his beloved parents, friends, and cherished homeland is the very central reason that provokes his nostalgia.

In Mai Thảo's works of both fiction and nonfiction written during the 1960s and early 1970s, many other characters are similarly constructed as being preoccupied with delightful memories of their old cities or towns—all located in the Northern territory—subsequent to their departure. Some of these characters can never forget the suburban areas closely related to their childhood, like the above-mentioned protagonist in “The Ship on the Red River”. To provide another example, Tuyền, the ten-year-old child in the short story “Turning Ten” (*Lên mười*) (also drawn from the collection *The Ship on the Red River*), is on the verge of tears as he must bid farewell to his close friend Hậu and the places where they spent their adolescence together in joy and happiness, such as “the heath behind the brickyard covered with couch grass” and “the classroom on rainy days” (Mai 1969a: 90).

Another instance is Mai Thảo's nonfiction piece, “Postcard” (*Bưu thiếp*) [included in the well-known 1970 book *Improvisational Essays (Tùy bút)*], which presents the writer's profound recollections of Xuân Cầu village (now located in Hưng Yên province, about 25 kilometres southeast of Hà Nội). Xuân Cầu is the maternal homeland of Kiêm, a close friend of Mai Thảo. In the essay, twenty years has passed since the last time he had a chance to

accompany Kiêm to that village. However, because of his strong impression of Xuân Cầu's graceful landscape and the tranquil life of its residents, the whole essay "Postcard" focuses on his intense rapture over its beauty and liveliness in spring, as well as his profound nostalgia for the place. Mai Thảo thus begins his essay with an artistic portrayal of the village's soil: "The soil there was like human skin, rippling like silk mixed with velveteen. The soil there was like a flowerbed, fulgent like velveteen blended with brocades" (Mai 1970: 12). When discussing about his endless love for books and reading in another essay titled "Rosey Books" (*Sách hồng*), Mai Thảo, while in Sài Gòn, recalls an indelible afternoon on an embankment on the Red River, also in Hưng Yên province, where he, as a youngster, read a whole collection of poetry for the first time. The locale serves not merely as a setting for his reading, but also as an essential factor stimulating his passion for books and literature, as he puts it: "Remember, forever and ever, that afternoon. The book confused me. I was left confused between the waves of the Red River and those in my soul, between the grass beneath my body and the green pasture of the book" (Mai 1970: 61).

Hà Nội is also depicted as a city of nostalgia in Mai Thảo's works during this period. His nonfiction essay "Nocturnal Rain" (*Mưa đêm*), also drawn from the 1970 collection *Improvisational Essays*, serves as a good example. The nocturnal rains in Sài Gòn remind Mai Thảo of the romantic and vivid rainy days he experienced in Hà Nội in the past, evoking his intense nostalgia for a city that he was intimately attached to during his adolescence, but could not return to:

My recollections of rains in Hà Nội have fallen, passed through, and lingered, for countless times. Moderate rainfalls during the water pouring seasons. Drizzles ceaselessly murmuring. Afternoon rains concealing themselves behind the darkness, only to unfold in the shining of streetlights. Resting on brims. On rainy nights, every door to the soul absorbed all the raindrops into thousands of hair follicles, yet a net of rain remained when the morning came. Hà Nội's rains from an era of romance, droplets falling down one by one into the cup of coffee. They don't fall on the rooftop but on my heart. (Mai 1970: 129)

A fundamental change in Mai Thảo's image of the South can also be observed during this period, especially in his works of nonfiction. Instead of a lively and active South Vietnam, often described as a paradise of liberty full of lofty ideals, firm beliefs, and glorious hopes in the late 1950s, it has been

transformed into a dystopia plagued by various problems due to the Vietnam war. It is historically true that in the 1960s and early 1970s, the Vietnam War (which escalated since 1964 when the US became more directly engaged) stood out as the most pressing challenge that both South Vietnam and Vietnamese people in general had to confront. The Tet Offensive in early 1968 demonstrates the extremely dangerous situation that South Vietnam had to face as it not only shook “the confidence of South Vietnamese people in their government”, but also “seemed to shake the government out of the lethargy that had gripped it for more than a decade” (Dougan and Weiss 1983: 118–119); as a result, a number of strict policies, including the martial law, were declared and implemented nationwide in February of the same year. Sài Gòn after the event, as portrayed in Mai Thảo’s works from the 1960s onwards, is thus totally different from its preceding self, when there are neither artillery strikes at nights nor sentries stationed at intersections, as he puts it in “After Midnight” (*Sau không giờ*)—an essay included in *Improvisational Essays*—which delineates a tragic and gloomy Sài Gòn after the Tet Offensive:

From the very afternoons, when the daylight still dazzled, the burdensome, gloomy, and dark doors of over-twelve-hour curfew were already closed. In January and February of that year, the citizens enjoyed their springtime indoors. From the window, I could only see the full moon on the Lantern Festival as a sorrowful jade slab. Five o’clock in the evening. The shops in the Old Market zone were already all closed, locks secured, iron nets pulled down, guns positioned. Barbed wires strung out everywhere. Six o’clock. Deserted roads, grave-like pavements. The curfew cast a blatant darkness over the days. (Mai 1969b: 19)

Living in a city engulfed by turbulence and turmoil because of the war, a majority of Sài Gòn citizens, as described in Mai Thảo’s writings of this period, are depicted as insecure and uncertain about their coming future. In an essay titled “Sickly Bars” (*Quán bệnh*) (also drawn from Mai Thảo’s *Improvisational Essays*), the writer delineates with a critical tone a peculiar atmosphere in numerous discotheques in the city during the war time, where young people, instead of cheerfully dancing and chatting with each other, succumb to deep melancholy:

Every evening, as the sky gradually turns purple above skyscrapers, gunshots reverberate from afar and flares light up the city outskirts, thousands of us young people arrive at those discotheques, continuing our haunted sleep. This society is hostile. This era is full of insufficiencies.

The present feels unfamiliar, and the future appears grim....And they arrive there, sitting in those lounges and discotheques as if they are their last shelters, viewing the melancholic, mournful songs as their voices, lost in contemplation of nothing. (Mai 1970: 108)

As portrayed in a number of his novels during the 1960s, such as *The Hair of the Past* (*Mái tóc dĩ vãng*) (1963) and *When the Rainy Season Comes* (*Khi mùa mưa tới*) (1964), this sense of despair and weariness drives many South Vietnamese young people, particularly the youth in Sài Gòn, towards a life of indulgence and even depravity. According to critic Bùi Vĩnh Phúc, love is usually considered “the ultimate ideal of life” in these works of fiction because “people had to cling to something to live” in the war-torn society, and also because they needed a belief that life still had something worth protecting amidst a period where “countless mental and moral values were deteriorating” (Bùi 1994: 27).

In summary, the image of South Vietnam in Mai Thảo's writings during the 1960s and early 1970s metamorphoses into a ruined utopia. Within this time frame, the writer's hopes and dreams in the previous period for a glorious land of liberty and liberality were bankrupted, especially when the devastating war became increasingly brutal, plunging the whole South Vietnamese society into disastrous tragedies. In the past, he had decided to abandon his cherished homeland in the North, migrating southward with the utmost purpose of actualising his desire for freedom. This desire, in other words, can be understood as an essential element that formed his strong attachment to the South. It is therefore plausible to assume that the collapse of this ambition, as demonstrated above, resulted in Mai Thảo's mental alienation from the South Vietnamese society where he was residing during the 1960s and early 1970s; hence his nostalgia and yearning for his tranquil and charming North—the place associated with pleasant and beautiful memories—remained in vain.

Mai Thảo's essay “Grafting” (*Ghép cành*) demonstrates his sense of non-belonging to South Vietnam during this period. This work was first published in 1969 in the eighth and ninth issues of the weekly newspaper *Departure* (*Khởi Hành*), originally entitled “Fifteen Year” (*Mười lăm năm*), and later reprinted in Mai Thảo's 1970 *Improvisational Essays*, with its title changed to “Grafting”. By and large, this work represents the author's looking back on his fifteen years of living in the South since his migration in 1954. As highlighted by Mai Thảo (1970) in this nonfiction, his first years in South Vietnam was imbued with his desire for immediate and complete harmony between himself and his brand-new residence. He thus compares himself to an “unrooted branch” grafted onto “the tree” of South Vietnam (Mai 1970:

180). Through this analogy, he comes to the painful realisation that while the graft is already stable, the spiritual relation between the grafted branch and the great tree of life does not “reach the greatness of a perfect harmony” (Mai 1970: 181). The situation, for the writer, can be compared to a couple who “do not deeply love each other” but still get married, resulting in “each person having their own world”, despite living together “peacefully and lovingly” (Mai 1970: 180–181). It is because, as explained by the writer (Mai 1970), he—as the metaphorised grafted branch—is still essentially attached to the territory beyond the seventeenth parallel, and it is not easy at all to adapt right away to his new life in the South, which is still an unfamiliar place to him.

In the 1958 essay “Homeland in Memory” that has been mentioned earlier in this article, Mai Thảo also depicts himself as a “tree with broken roots” upon arriving in Sài Gòn in 1954 (Mai 1958: 22). However, he optimistically claims that the tree would quickly “develop new roots” in the new soil, integrating with the new land without difficulty thanks to their fresh perception of homeland, and that they can find their Hà Nội—a metonymy for Northern refugees’ homeland in the North—in Sài Gòn or anywhere else (Mai 1958: 22–23). Nonetheless, as shown in the earlier paragraphs, his preceding optimism about an effortless integration with the alien South after exile ended up as merely an illusion since the early 1960s. In the essay “Grafting”, Mai Thảo indicates how arduous it has been for him to feel a sense of belonging to the Southern territory. He admits that the different climatic features of the South, compared to that of his homeland, present “a great natural hindrance to the branch that has just been grafted” (Mai Thảo 1970: 175–176). His essay also shows that, in the early years following the 1954 migration, he had continually travelled to multiple regions, provinces, and destinations in South Vietnam in an urgent attempt to comprehend his new place of residence. However, such an ambition only resulted in “indigestion” (Mai Thảo 1970: 178–179), or in other words, his inability to understand the South’s natural and cultural traits, and more profoundly, his failure to strengthen his connection with the place. In his works of the late 1950s, Mai Thảo considers South Vietnam the “new home” (also the title of his above-mentioned short story), spreading the belief that émigrés from the North, like him, can sense a belonging in their brand-new residence almost without any difficulty. Nevertheless, the writer’s alienation to and unease with the Southern territory, as stated in the essay “Grafting” and other writings after 1960, signify that he no longer views the South as “home”, if we follow Porteous’s definition of “home” as a space that provides us with “territorial satisfaction” in terms of “identity, security, and stimulation” (Porteous 1976: 383).

Apparently, in his writings published between 1960 and the early 1970s, Mai Thảo depicts the South as a place of disappointment, uncertainty, and disaffection. This reflects his non-belongingness and detachment from the South, as well as his repeated recollections of the good old days in the North and deep aspiration to return to his motherland on the other side of the demarcation line. As shown throughout the article, Mai Thảo's affection for his cherished North Vietnam has almost never faded away since his southward migration in 1954. His anti-communist stance might have also stayed unchanged since then (and even for the rest of his life when he eventually fled to the US after the fall of Sài Gòn). However, his representations of North and South Vietnam since the 1960s clearly show that he no longer emphasised the political aspects of these places or his ideological opposition to the North as much as he did in the late 1950s. Instead, Mai Thảo underwent a re-evaluation of his identity during this time by recognising himself as part of the diaspora.⁵

The situation of Mai Thảo during the 1960s and the late 1970s bears many similarities to the definition of a diaspora by Safran (1991). Although his migration occurred solely within Vietnamese territory, the political division between the two regions (North and South), and his inability to return to the North after the migration, placed him in the tragic situation of being deracinated from his origin. More notably, similar to what Safran defines as a diaspora, Mai Thảo found it extremely challenging to establish a sense of belonging to South Vietnam in this period—his place of arrival after the 1954 exodus. Last but not least, the recollections of the North as a gorgeous paradise appear with high frequency in Mai Thảo's writings during the time, which can read as his preoccupation with his homeland and attempt to relate himself to the place. These points clearly demonstrate his self-identification as a diasporic subject.

CONCLUSION

Following the theoretical suggestion of the close connection between place and identity, the article indicates how Mai Thảo's images of North and South Vietnam in his writings changed during the time 1954–1975, reflecting his varying and contested sense of self within the period. In his works of the late 1950s, the North is basically portrayed as a place of darkness, imprisonment, and subjugation, while the territory below the seventeenth parallel is positively delineated as a flourishing terrain of liberty and liveliness. These are thus politically imagined places through which Mai Thảo's anti-communist

identity becomes apparent. Nevertheless, in Mai Thảo's writings during the 1960s and the first half of the 1970s, amidst the substantial and negative changes in South Vietnamese society, the writer's portrayals of North and South Vietnam undergo a complete transformation as they are turned into lost paradises. The North is mainly depicted as a place in intimate connection with his cherished remembrances of his childhood and early days, evoking deep nostalgia for the beautiful past, but also a bitter understanding that he can never return to his beloved place. The South in his writings is represented as a territory of broken dreams and ideals, merely associated with despair, sombreness, and a sense of disconnectability. Mai Thảo's self-awareness as a diasporic subject is thereby clearly demonstrated: he hardly felt a sense of complete belonging while inhabiting the South, the destination of his political migration in 1954, but instead harboured an indefinite thirst for the North, his original motherland, albeit in vain.

In analysing the specific case of Mai Thảo, this article also shows that the study of the psychological depths of Northern migrants in South Vietnam in the period 1954–1975 requires more scholarly attention. They should be studied not solely as opponents of the communist-led North, but also as particular diasporic subjects who experienced ambivalent states of mind. At times, they, more or less, had to grapple with a deep sense of uprootedness, homelandlessness, sectionalism, and cultural discrimination while living in the South (see Picard 2023). At the same time, they might also have adhered to the belief—even if only imaginary—that after their exodus to the South, they would never have been truly geographically situated out of the boundaries of Vietnam. They still found themselves among their compatriots, part of the same “imagined community”,⁶ which led them to perceive that there was no displacement and that it was pointless to be preoccupied with the confusing concepts of homeland or exile. Such an understanding of the diaspora of the *Bắc di cư* between the Geneva Conference in 1954 and the fall of Sài Gòn in 1975, contributes on the one hand to a deeper and more complicated insight into their contested identity and emotional experiences and, on the other hand, to the formation of a distinct model of diaspora that has not been widely acknowledged.

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NOTES

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- ¹ Yet, it is explicit that the partition persisted for two more decades until the fall of South Vietnam in 1975.
- ² “North Vietnam” is habitually used to refer to the communist-led Democratic Republic of Vietnam, but it can also denote the territory beyond the seventeenth parallel of Vietnam controlled by that government during the period 1955–1975. In this article, “North Vietnam”, and sometimes “the North”, are mostly used with the latter meaning. Besides, it is important to note that both terms are not interchangeable with “Northern Vietnam”, which refers to one of the three geographical regions of Vietnam (namely, Northern, Central and Southern Vietnam). This way of understanding applies equivalently to the usage of the two terms “South Vietnam” and “the South” used in this article.
- ³ Interzone (*liên khu*) was an administrative-military unit (consisting of several provinces) formed by the Việt Minh since the initial period of the First Indochina War. Interzone III was located south of Hà Nội and encompassed the provinces of Hưng Yên, Hải Dương, Thái Bình, Kiến An, Quảng Yên, Hải Ninh, and Hải Phòng. Interzone IV was situated in the North Central Coast and included the provinces of Thanh Hóa, Nghệ An, Hà Tĩnh, Quảng Bình, Quảng Trị, and Thừa Thiên.
- ⁴ Hà Nội has been widely recognised as the official capital of Vietnam since 1945, and has, in fact, been consistently understood as the capital of the country, in terms of both political and cultural dimensions, throughout history (see Tran N H 2022).
- ⁵ The term “diaspora” in this article is mainly based on William Safran’s definition of the concept, which encompasses the following characteristics: “(1) they, or their ancestors, have been dispersed from a specific original ‘centre’ to two or more ‘peripheral’, or foreign, regions; (2) they retain a collective memory, vision, or myth about their original homeland—its physical location, history, and achievements; (3) they believe that they are not—and perhaps cannot be—fully accepted by their host society and therefore feel partly alienated and insulated from it; (4) they regard their ancestral homeland as their

true, ideal home and as the place to which they or their descendants would (or should) eventually return—when conditions are appropriate; (5) they believe that they should, collectively, be committed to the maintenance or restoration of their original homeland and to its safety and prosperity; and (6) they continue to relate, personally or vicariously, to that homeland in one way or another, and their ethnocommunal consciousness and solidarity are importantly defined by the existence of such a relationship” (Safran 1991: 83–84).

- ⁶ The construction of Vietnam as an “imagined community” can be traced back to the early twentieth century. See Anderson (2006: 127–131) and Kelley (2012).

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