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The Power of Education

The Vietnam War is an important event that is hard to analyze and understand. Different countries, governments, and historical figures played an important role in the creation of this war that devastated nations, beliefs and individuals. The simple word of Vietnam War brings up images and thoughts about communism, bombs, death, destruction, suffering and so on, but the word education rarely comes up to discussion when analyzing this war. In this paper, I will explore the concepts of education and nation building as key to understand inequality and social control in Southeast Asia (before and) during the Vietnam War. I will also examine how education was used as a form of social control in Southeast Asia, especially in the Philippines and South Vietnam. I will explore more specifically how authors like Robert Sheer (Gettleman, et. al, 1995), Sister Chan Khong (2007), Renato Constantino (2000), Tran Luong (Appy, 2003), Marvin E. Gettleman, et. al. (1995), and Phan Lan Huong and Gerald W. Fry (2004) analyze education and nation building in Southeast Asia.

In order to analyze inequality and social control in the education system of nations in Southeast Asia, it is important to describe the situation in the state and its government to get a basic understanding of the country and its history. Vietnam declared its independence on September 2, 1945 (Gettleman, 1995). The Vietnamese declared their independence from France and used the same words that the United States expressed in its declaration of independence; “All men are created equal” (Gettleman, 1995, p. 26). This idea brings a good point about the power of education and nation building and shows how American ideals spread across the world throughout education which influences people and their ideologies or beliefs.

Following the Geneva Accords of 1954, Vietnam was divided into two zones, North and South Vietnam. Ngo Dinh Diem was elected president of South Vietnam thanks to the help of the U.S. government, which created a public campaign to show the image of Diem as a “miraculous savior” of Vietnam (Gettleman, et. al., 1995). Diem was the perfect man that the U.S. could find to follow their ideals. He was anti-communist, defender of the catholic faith and capitalist system (Gettleman, et. al., 1995). The U.S. portrayed Diem as a “miraculous savior” of South Vietnam who fought against the communists, but the reality was that he damaged the nation and destroyed the lives of many Vietnamese.

Robert Scheer describes the realities of life in South Vietnam under the Diem regime. He mentions how there was government corruption, inefficiency, authoritarianism, bloody anti-subversion campaigns, along with failure of U.S. designed and funded land reform and aid programs (Gettleman, et. al., 1995). Scheer explains how Diem’s government contribution to the idea of civic action was to unleash a reign of terror upon the countryside (Gettleman, et. al., 1995). Furthermore, he mentions how there were massive anti-Communist renunciation campaigns and thousands of people suspected of sympathizing with the Viet Minh were sent to re-education centers and those thought to be active Viet Cong agents were jailed or shot (Gettleman, et. al., 1995, p.140). These are just a few atrocities that occurred under the Diem regime in South Vietnam when he tried to build a suitable nation for the U.S., but more terror and unjust policies such as Law 10/59 occurred during his command.

Ngo Dinh Diem lacked legitimacy in South Vietnam because of the way he ruled the nation, supporting U.S. ideals instead of those of the Vietnamese (Gettleman, et. al., 1995). Diem government represented little in the indigenous society of Southern Vietnam and Law 10/59 is just another way to show how his government created policies to fight communism and control the nation while benefitting the U.S. Law 10/59, promulgated on May 6, 1959, was a foundation of the Anti-Communist Denunciation Campaign of the mid- and late- 1950s where tens of thousands of suspects were arrested and many of them executed (Gettleman, et. al., 1995). Article 1 on this law sentenced to death and confiscation of the whole or part of property whoever committed crimes of sabotage, or broke the security of the state or injured lives or property of the people (Gettleman, et. al., 1995). The U.S. not only influenced the policies of S. Vietnam but also used the education system to promote its ideals and fight communism.

Huong and Fry (2004) describe the influence of the U.S. in the education system in South Vietnam. They explain how the education program for Vietnam was developed with U.S. advice from 1955 to 1969, but from 1969 to 1971 was implemented in part and expanded to all of South Vietnam after 1972 with 2500 U.S. educational advisors present (Huong & Fry, 2004). With respect to the expansion of higher education, enrollments increased dramatically from only 5300 in 1957 to 64000 in 1973 (Green, 1973). Huong and Fry (2004) explain how the U.S. style programs were promoted suitable for a market economy, although they were partially implemented. After reunification (the fall of Saigon in 1975), Vietnamese education used the 12-year program (5 years of primary education, 4 years of intermediate education and 3 years of secondary education) to change the old programs. At the undergraduate and graduate levels, some U.S. programs are currently introduced and taught to Vietnamese students and English is the main foreign language in every school and university now, facilitating Vietnamese students to be able to develop contacts and association with the U.S. education and institutions (Huong & Fry, 2004).

Huong and Fry (2004) also explain how the U.S. involvement in South Vietnam, led to major changes in the education system. Huong and Fry (2004) mention how the U.S. had two basic goals, one obvious and one secret, with respect to its education program in South Vietnam. The first obvious goal was to reform the education system to provide greater access and practical training to facilitate Vietnamese economic development (Huong & Fry, 2004). This will contribute to “winning the hearts and minds of the people,” and was a strategy to win the cold war (Huong. & Fry, 2004, p. 206). Moreover, the U.S. gave many scholarships to South Vietnamese to study in institutions of higher education in the U.S. and promoted the expansion of universities and the development of a new community college system (Huong & Fry, 2004). Unfortunately, the disorder of the war and expenditures in military and security activities affected the implementation of these programs and their goals.

The secret goal used in reforming the education system was to assist the South Vietnamese regime, including its army and police, in fighting communism and resistance to the U.S. financed government (Huong & Fry, 2004). Huong and Fry (2004) mention how the U.S. was providing strong support to a clearly unpopular and corrupt regime and engaging in disturbing hypocrisy in the nation. It is notable how the U.S. used education in South Vietnam to help Vietnamese education, fight communism and maintain social order, but at the same time there were policies that prevented poor students from going to school and showed the existing inequality in the education system.

Even before its independence, South Vietnam during the French colonialism had unequal opportunities in the education system. Ngo (1973) explains how under the French educational system, only rich landlords, magistrates, and government employees living in the cities could afford to send their children to superior primary schools. Sister Chan Khong (2007) also mentions that there were no nursery schools in Vietnam at that time, and public schools only accepted children at age of six, so, when she turned four, her parents sent her to a private elementary school one kilometer from her home. Khong was one of the lucky students that had a family that could afford paying for school and through her hard work and dedication she continued her learning and helped the poor through her social work activities.

In September 1958, Sister Chan Khong enrolled in the Faculty of Science at the University of Saigon and decided to major in biology (Khong, 2007). She found a poor area of Saigon only five blocks from the university and she helped the families that lived there (Khong, 2007). In this area, children didn’t go to school because they didn’t have birth certificates. Public schools were free in Vietnam but in order to enroll, a child had to show his or her birth certificate (Khong, 2007). Khong (2007) explain that in order to obtain a birth certificate, parents have to fill out an application and pay a penalty at the police station, where the officer would ask them a number of questions and then complete the file, and send it to the District Center, which would send it to the Central Court. Six months later, parents will be called into court; they will have to bring two witnesses who could confirm that their child was born on the day they said (Khong, 2007). For the poor this process was far too costly and difficult, and few slum residents even considered doing it (Khong, 2007). This long, inconvenient and expensive process was a way to maintain people in the slums uneducated and controllable, not to mention the politics related with trying to build a new school in small villages and the conditions in which the students that did go to school had to experience in order to learn.

Sister Chan Khong also explains how peasants of Thao Diem Village could not set up a school with government funds. Khong (2007) explains how when she met with the official in Saigon responsible for the district of the village, told her that it would not be possible for the government to build a schoolhouse for just seventy-seven children and that the minimum number needed to received government funding was 200. In addition, Khong (2007) expresses how when she joined a first grade class, the pupils were twelve and thirteen years old, and many brought their infant brothers and sisters to class with them. She explain how a student, Cu, tried to keep his younger brother on his lap so he would not crawl on the dirt floor, but his baby brother burst out crying and he had to carry him out of the classroom (Khong, 2007). A moment later a student cried out that a student’s baby sister shit on the floor and it smelled (Khong, 2007). It is evident how small villages and poor communities experienced inequality in the education system throughout policies and classroom experiences, which made learning more difficult for them. Not only people in South Vietnam experienced difficulties in the education system but also people from North Vietnam suffered and had difficulties in education during the war.

Christian G. Appy describes the experience of Tran Luong, who born in 1960, and lived in eight different peasant villages from 1966 to 1972. Like most Hanoi (capital of N. Vietnam) children during the American War (Vietnam War), he was evacuated to the countryside (Appy, 2003). Tran Luong explains that there was no real school, and that the older people just taught them informally at night underground by the light of a small oil lamp (Appy, 2003). A few times, for short periods, he went to school with other children, but they never gathered in large groups during the day because if they did bombs would start falling (Appy, 2003). North Vietnamese experiences were somewhat similar to those of South Vietnamese, both education systems were affected during the war but other nation from Southeast Asia like the Philippines had experienced this situation too a few decades before the Vietnam War/American War.

Renato Constantino describes how the U.S. used the education system of the Philippines and the English language to maintain social order and keep the Philippines as a passive colony while dividing the nation. Constantino (2000) mentions how in the education system, English separated Filipinos from their past, and later separated educated Filipinos from the masses of their countrymen by alienating each other because of the things they learned. He explains how new Filipinos learned of the lives of American heroes, American songs, dreamt of snow and Santa Claus and practically the history of their ancestors was taken away from them, while the “old” Filipinos preserved it (Constantino, 2000). In addition, Constantino (2000) relates how the use of their language is a controversial issue, caused by their colonial education, where more Filipinos are against than in favor and as a result, students are taught in their native language up to second grade only. This shows the important role that education plays in the shaping and creating of each individual and his/her culture, beliefs, and ideas.

Constantino (2000) writes, “Philippine history books have portrayed America as a benevolent nation who came only to save ‘us’ from Spain and to spread amongst ‘us’ liberty and democracy” (p.8). This idea shows how the U.S. through education and books taught the Filipinos just one perspective or what they wanted Filipinos to learn to keep them as good colonials while preserving inequality among them.

Education was used as a way of social control in Southeast Asia through policies, ideologies and the implementation of English to educate people. Sister Chan Khong and Law 10/59 show how policies prevented poor communities from going to school and maintained social order in the nation. Scheer (Gettleman, et. al., 1995), Huong and Fry (2004) describe the influence of U.S. ideologies towards Southeast Asia which tried to prevent communism, maintain social order and create ally nations. Constantino (2000) explained the used of English to maintain social order in the Philippines, while Tran Luong (Appy, 2003) and Khong (2007) showed the experiences of students in school and inequality matters.

Education is an important part of each individual, city, or country. It plays an important role in shaping beliefs, ideologies, and the way individuals see themselves and the world. As was shown in the last video of education in class, and discussed by Constantino (2000), English through education has the power to divide parents from sons and people from their culture and past. Education also has the power to control, unite and educate people about the mistakes made in the past that created wars that destroyed many individuals. Education has the power to teach nations and individuals about possible ways to live peacefully in the world and prevent more wars or conflicts between nations and as Constantino states, “Education must be seen not as an acquisition of information but as the making of man so that he may function most effectively and usefully within his own society” (p.8).

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