

FIZZLE IN THE LAKE

by ngo vinh long

Fire in the Lake: The Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam, by Frances FitzGerald, Little, Brown and Company, \$12.50.

Fire in the Lake has become an instant hit with liberal America. It has all the conspicuous requisites of a big best-seller. First, it has a "correct" political position: it is antiwar. Still, the antiwar sentiments are only peripheral to the theme of the book and the same sentiments have been more skillfully evoked in many other places. The second, and the main, reason for the popularity of the book lies in its cocksure analysis of the Vietnamese mentality and culture. And yet, few critics of the book have so far raised any question as to whether it is appropriate to explain the Vietnam situation exclusively in terms of mentality and culture. And if it is indeed appropriate, then whether the premises and the facts used for developing such an analysis are properly stated in this book. The consensus view of *Fire in the Lake* seems to be that, because the book is antiwar, and because it "makes a lot of sense," therefore the approach must be sound. As is the case with most consensus views, this judgment should be carefully scrutinized.

We learn at the start of this book that it is a *cultural misunderstanding* that has set Vietnam and the United States on conflicting courses:

In going into Vietnam the United States was not only transporting itself into a different epoch of history; it was entering a world qualitatively different from its own. Culturally as geographically Vietnam lies half a world from the United States. . . . To find the common ground that existed

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between them, both Americans and Vietnamese would have to re-create the whole world of the other, the whole intellectual landscape.

This being the case, the author sets out to analyze the Vietnamese "state of mind." Fortunately, the Vietnamese state of mind is quite simple to grasp. It is basically Chinese, because both the Vietnamese and the Chinese are Confucian. To understand the Vietnamese, then, we need only refer to the right Confucian text: "In the *I Ching*, the ancient Chinese Book of Changes, lie all the clues to the basic design of the Sino-Vietnamese world."

It would be nice if things were as simple as Frances FitzGerald would like the reader to believe. But even in China they have not always gone by the book, the Book of Changes included. Debates and interpretations of the *I Ching* have been as varied in China as have been arguments over the Bible in Christian countries. Furthermore, the *I Ching* was only a book of divination and only one of the many Confucian Classics. Not all Chinese were Confucians. There were the Mo-ists, Legalists, Logicians, Taoists, Buddhists and hosts of variations on these.

As for the Vietnamese, the historian Le Van Sieu says,

The Vietnamese people could not find in the dry and rational Confucianism of the Chinese any source of spiritual consolation for their wretched situation. For those whose loved ones were indiscriminately killed, Confucian philosophy could not explain to them the savage and cruel acts committed by those who called themselves sons and nephews of the saint.

The Vietnamese resisted Confucianism. True, they did borrow selectively from China and other countries, if only to be in a position to "use the old man's cane to beat him on his own back." (Gay ong dap lung on) But, in general, Confucianism clashed with the more relaxed traditional customs and beliefs of the Vietnamese, as well as with Buddhism, which flourished more widely in Vietnam. Even Joseph Buttinger, who works only with Western language sources, had to conclude in his book *The Smaller Dragon* (note the comparison to China as the "greater dragon") that "Chinese culture had

not penetrated into the masses of the Vietnamese." Alexander Woodside shows in his book *Vietnam and the Chinese Model* that even the Vietnamese ruling class in the early part of the 19th century, a period in which Chinese institutions were imported *en masse*, was quite different from the Chinese.

But never mind. Frances FitzGerald needs no more than the *I Ching* to show that the Vietnamese world is a "spherical Confucian universe," a "closed circle." In fact, we learn it is the overlap of closed concentric circles:

For traditional Vietnamese the sense of limitation and enclosure was as much a part of individual life as of the life of the nation. . . . As the family provided the model for village and state, there was only one type of organization. Taken together, the three formed a crystalline world, geometrically congruent at every level.

What emerges from this Cartesian game is a sweeping theory of Vietnamese society that explains everything past, present and future. Since Vietnam is a Confucian world of closed circles, it is not a "pluralistic world." FitzGerald writes,

In the traditional Vietnamese family—a family whose customs survived even into the twentieth century—the father held absolute authority over his wife (or wives) and children . . . The emperor held a similar power over the great family of the empire . . . The Vietnamese were not interested in pluralism, they were interested in unanimity.

And because they were not interested in pluralism, they did not believe in intellectual freedom:

Intellectual freedom, of course, implies intellectual diversity. Westerners tend to take that diversity for granted, for the Western child, even of the narrowest background, grows up with a wide variety of authorities—parents, teachers, clergy, professional men, artists, scientists, and a host of other experts. The traditional Vietnamese child, however, grew up into a monolithic world composed of the family and its extensions in the state. For him there was no alternative to the authority of the father

and no question of specialized knowledge.

So says Frances FitzGerald, without citing a single source to support all her generalizations. But even a person with the narrowest background on either China or Vietnam should know that the Confucian concept of "king, teacher and father" teaches one to respect teacher over father. That every village contained all the authorities mentioned above, with the possible exception of the "scientists" as the word is now defined. That a Vietnamese child was taught precisely to respect "specialized knowledge." (For he was flooded with adages such as "A hundred clever persons are not the equal of one with skill" (*Tram hay khong bang tay quen*); "A mastery of a single profession is a life of glory" (*Nhat nghe tinh nhat than vinh*); and literally hundreds of folk tales and stories to the same effect.) That knowledge was to be gained primarily away from home: "A day on the road is a bushel of wisdom learned" (*Di mot dang, hoc mot sang khon*). And that "A child who excels his father shows that his family has good fortune" (*Con hon cha la nha co phuoc*).

In fact, by stressing the absolute authority of the Vietnamese father, FitzGerald contradicts the only source that she uses to generalize on the "traditional Vietnamese family." Phan Thi Dac, the author of that sourcebook, points out that the Vietnamese father usually sought to persuade his children in case of disagreement, but seldom imposed his will on them. It was not at all rare that he would back down. In general, he would be happy to turn all his affairs, as well as the future of his younger children, over to his elder sons. In doing so he would be praised by his neighbors for being blessed with young children who could manage the affairs of the grown-ups.

The Vietnamese mother was also a principle source of authority in the family. She was the "General of the Interior" (*Noi tuong*). The father asked for her opinions in most matters. An old adage advised that "husbands and wives who are the equals can dry up the Eastern Sea" (*Dong vo dong chong tat bien dong*

cung can). And Vietnamese husbands were proud to say, "The wife comes first and the king of heaven second" (*Nhat vo nhi troi*).

So absolute was the authority of the Vietnamese father, FitzGerald writes, that "it was traditionally the father (the adults) who in times of famine or other disaster had claim to the first available food—even if it meant leaving the children to starve." This might have happened in Vietnam at isolated moments, but according to the historian Le Van Sieu:

... The Vietnamese have prized their children above all precious things in life. They prize their children to such a degree that in their

The effect of the parents' doing on the children is believed by the Vietnamese to be a real, everpresent thing ... This belief is not like the belief of reincarnation for the individual in Buddhism. Neither is it the product of Confucianism.

Leading a virtuous life in Vietnam means to care for the weak and the helpless. For this reason, as Phan Thi Dac points out in the book from which FitzGerald draws very selectively, the youngest children and the aged grandparents are always given the best food available.

But it is necessary for Ms. FitzGerald to insist on the absolute authority of the "traditional Viet-



devotion to them they do not mind death. All behavior is then directed toward the kind of benevolence and kindness that will result in leaving behind virtue (Duc) for their children.

When a child is born, the first thing people do is check to see whether there is a toe or a finger lacking or in excess. Any abnormality would not be an indication of embarrassment for the child but for the parents because it means that they must have led a greedy or cruel life or something of the sort. If the child grows up and follows an evil path so that he is imprisoned or killed, his parents will not blame it on him but say "our family has been unvirtuous"

namese father." For it is from this premise that she makes all sorts of deductions to answer a vast array of questions concerning Vietnam.

First, "Unlike the Westerner, the Vietnamese child is brought up not to follow certain principles, but to accept the authority of certain people." This is so because the authority of the father is absolute and because the "Confucian texts defined no general principles." Also, the Chinese ideograms

used by the Vietnamese until the mid-nineteenth century ... were without abstraction ... The ideograms for such abstract notions as "fear" or "pleasure" were composed of pictures of concrete events (the picture of a man, a house, and

so on) and to the highly literate these events were always visible within the larger world.

In making these assertions Fitzgerald does not take into account the five Confucian principles of benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and trustworthiness which formed the basic core of Confucian education and practice. Nor does she take into account the fact that only a very small segment of the Vietnamese population at any period in time used the Chinese writing. Nor the distinction to be made between pictograms and ideograms: not only are the radicals in the Chinese characters highly abstract to begin with (two

Hence Frances Fitzgerald's explanation of the American failure in Vietnam as well as her account of the success of the Viet Minh and the National Liberation Front: the Americans have "occupied themselves almost exclusively with the development of policies and programs," while the "Viet Minh and the Viet Cong presented to the Vietnamese of the twentieth century" the picture of "a leader who, in his absolute rectitude, his puritanical discipline, would lead the community back to the strength and vigor of its youth."

While leaders have been quite important during the course of the Vietnamese revolution, Fitzgerald greatly

made the new proprietors see the advantage of maintaining an NLF presence somewhere in the neighborhood, but it did not by itself convince them of the necessity of an NLF government, nor did it often persuade them to give up their hopes for a quiet, secure life and go out to fight for the NLF.

Also, since the Vietnamese don't think in the abstract they can hardly have been expected to respond to the NLF call for freedom, national independence, or nationalism. "Apart from racial or cultural opposition," Fitzgerald writes, "'nationalism' is, after all, a most difficult abstraction."

But how does Frances Fitzgerald account for the manner in which the Vietnamese peasants have nevertheless participated in the national struggles for hundreds of years, especially for the sake of national independence and freedom—these gross abstractions? There are two explanations for this, we learn. First of all, their commitment derives from the "Will of Heaven," a Confucian concept. This is *not* an abstraction. Because when the Will of Heaven manifests itself,

the element of personal leadership is of the highest importance, for the Vietnamese do not look upon government as the product of a doctrine, a political system that hangs somewhere over their heads, but as an entire way of life, a Tao, exemplified by the person of the ruler.

But how is this Tao, this entire way of life, exemplified by the ruler, if not through some kind of social or political program? We are not told.

This dubious "Will of Heaven" concept allows Frances Fitzgerald to explain away the Vietnamese revolution without having to consider the social, economic and political factors behind it. Because the Will of Heaven manifested itself, she claims, "In August 1945 the whole city of Hanoi turned about on itself within the space of a few days. . . . Ho Chi Minh's revolution in Hanoi succeeded mainly because there was nothing to oppose it." On the other hand, when the Will of Heaven was not yet clear, such as during the Diem period, the peasants chose the "middle way": "Caught between two competing regimes, the peasant did not assert his right to decide

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strokes mean ice, three mean water, four, fire, etc.), but a huge percentage of the Chinese vocabulary is comprised of words made by combining these radicals with meaningless phonetic symbols. Even the "highly literate" Chinese seldom sees "pictures of concrete events" in the Chinese ideograms.

Nevertheless, these facts don't prevent Fitzgerald from drawing the conclusion that the Vietnamese don't think in the abstract (roll over, Levi-Strauss!). Acceptance of the authority of certain people and inability (or unwillingness) to think in the abstract mean that "the Vietnamese traditionally understood politics not in terms of programs or larger social forces, but in terms of the individual."

underrates the importance of the difference between the programs of the NLF and those of the United States and the Saigon regime. In fact, the only NLF program that Fitzgerald considers successful was land reform: "it did give the peasants in a large part of the Delta a right to the crops they produced and a sense of their own bargaining power, their equality vis-à-vis the landlords." In other words, not only did the peasants get something concrete out of the land reform program, but they were elevated to the same status as that of the landlords. This especially helped, because, as we know, "the Vietnamese traditionally understood politics not in terms of programs or larger social forces." And so the land reform

POOR DEREK'S ALMANAC

by derek shearer

In a growing number of cities around the country—Boston, San Francisco, New York, Cleveland—*People's Yellow Pages* have been appearing. An alternative to Ma Bell's Yellow Pages, these directories list anti-war groups, free health clinics, ecology groups, carpentry collectives, tenants' organizations, legal aid communes, crafts cooperatives, alternative schools, day care centers, as well as individuals who have skills and information to share.

To help people interested in starting a People's Yellow Pages in their own city, the group which compiled the Boston edition has produced a pamphlet entitled *Getting Together A People's Yellow Pages: An Underground Underground Toward Social Changes*. The pamphlet lists directories of this sort which have appeared around the country. Copies cost 50 cents each. (Write: Vocations for Social Change, 353 Broadway, Cambridge, Mass. 02139. Telephone: (617) 661-1570.)

The National Organization of Vocations for Social Change serves as a clearinghouse for information on radical projects and lists work opportunities with alternative institutions. VSC publishes the monthly magazine *Work Force*, which contains listings of available jobs, articles on organizing, and a resource section to help people develop their own projects. VSC will send you a single copy of *Work Force* free, but they cannot afford a large free mailing list and so must charge \$10 for a year's subscription. Prisoners and GIs however will be put on the mailing list at no cost. (Write: Vocations for Social Change, Box 13, Canyon, California 94516. Telephone: (415) 376-7743.)

News of political work, including publications, films, slide shows, etc., should be addressed to Derek Shearer, RAMPARTS Magazine, 2054 University Ave., Berkeley, California 94704.

Citizens' groups in cities like Philadelphia and Atlanta have recently been fighting rate hike requests by private electric companies. It is an old story—how the utilities milk the public—well-documented by Senator Lee Metcalf and his legislative aide Vic Reinemer in their muckraking book *Overcharge* (McKay, 1967). Municipally-owned power companies (as opposed to private companies like Georgia Power or Pacific Gas and Electric) can produce lower cost electricity for consumers and at the same time raise revenue for a city's budget.

In Northern California, eleven cities have formed the Northern California Power Agency to purchase low-cost power from the Federal government. Mayor Gary Gillmor of Santa Clara, one of the Agency's member cities, has stated that over the last five years the residents of his town saved \$8 million on their power bills over what they would have had to pay at Pacific Gas and Electric rates. In Palo Alto, another Agency city, the municipal power agency last year brought the city \$3.7 million in revenues as compared to \$1.5 million in property taxes.

A similar argument—that public ownership of the phone company would make possible free local service—is outlined in the pamphlet *The Case Against AT&T* by Ed Greer and Michael Tanzer, published by the New American Movement. (For copies of the AT&T pamphlet and information on NAM's Economic Task Force, write: New American Movement, 2421 Franklin Avenue Southeast Minneapolis, Minnesota 55406.)

The last few years have seen a resurgence of cooperative enterprise in America. "Food conspiracies"—cooperative food purchasing groups—have sprung up in nearly every large city, particularly in areas where young people are concentrated. Cooperative bookstores, bakeries, and car repair shops have been launched, and in some university towns such as Ann Arbor new cooperative housing projects are underway.

Cooperative enterprise (in which profits are returned to members and consumers have control of management) has a long, though somewhat

checkered, history in the U.S., going back to Robert Owen's 19th century utopian community of New Harmony, Indiana, and agricultural co-ops like the Grange and the Farmers' Alliance. Suffering from a shortage of capital and a lack of technical know-how, few co-ops survive, and those that do often turn inward and become politically moribund.

People who see the new co-op movement as an agent of radical social change would do well to read a special report on the movement by Richard J. Margolis which appeared in the April 17, 1972, issue of *The New Leader*, a liberal biweekly. Titled "Coming Together—The Cooperative Way: Its Origins, Development and Prospects," copies of the special report cost 50 cents each, 100 copies for \$45. (Write: New Leader Reprint Dept., 212 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10010). Margolis' 35-page article, based on six months' field work, surveys the historical background of co-ops and considers the current state of co-ops in farming, food, health, and housing.

If you're interested in starting a co-op, or broadening the ties of an already existing co-op, you should be aware of the North American Student Cooperative Organization (NASCO). Founded in 1968, NASCO provides technical assistance to co-ops and keeps them in touch via its publications, including the monthly *Journal of the New Harbinger* (\$6 a year), which has featured special issues on such subjects as food co-ops and co-op financing; the monthly *News Bulletin* of the co-op movement (\$2 a year); the annual *Community Market Catalog* (\$1 a year), which keeps track of available co-op merchandise and describes various co-op stores; and the annual *Directory of Student and Community Co-ops* (\$1 a year).

(For these publications and further information on how to join NASCO, write: North American Student Cooperative Organization, 2546 Student Activities Bldg., Ann Arbor, Michigan 48104. Telephone: (313) 663-0889.)

Since this column began in October, I have begun receiving mail with suggestions and materials from readers. Elaine Reuben of Madison, Wisconsin,