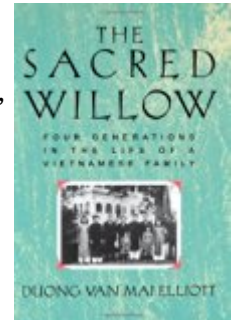


Duong Van Mai Elliott. *The Sacred Willow: Four Generations In The Life Of A Vietnamese Family*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999. xx + 506 pp. \$70.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-512434-7.



Reviewed by Donna M. Dean

Published on H-Minerva (April, 2000)

Mai Elliott's family provides a remarkable filter through which to view the history of Vietnam from the time of her great-grandfather, Duong Lam, in the nineteenth century, through the late 1980s. Unlike most works on Vietnam, her work does not focus on a perspective as seen through American or French eyes, but through the eyes of her Vietnamese family. Further, while her family does cover the complete range of political beliefs, they were, or are, all members of the highly educated middle class -- a group that is virtually unknown to most American readers.

Elliott's work is intensely personal, and because of that, is utterly engrossing. The reader experiences the perspectives of the participants from her family in a lively and yet analytical and unexpectedly objective way as the chaotic history of a continually wartorn country unfolds. Since her family was middle class, they tended to be in powerful positions in the various governments, and her father in particular possessed an uncanny knack for riding out extreme shifts in political winds until several years after the fall of Saigon. Although there were various vicissitudes of for-

tune from abject poverty and near-starvation to great wealth and influence, her immediate family would never lose its critical importance to the various governments because of the education and vital skills they possessed.

The story opens with the civil war raging at the end of the eighteenth Century, which would last over two hundred years. Elliott's ancestors moved further and further north in an effort to flee the wars, and they were determined to continue their traditions as scholars even though they were reduced to working and living in dire poverty. At that time, the mandarin class, who provided all the civil servants under the emperors, achieved their positions through universal examinations. Although great power and prestige came to mandarins, wealth did not. Pay was barely enough to sustain a mandarin's family above that of the peasant's income, but the honor was expected to suffice. Elliott's ancestor six generations in the past, Duc Thang, became the tree from which the family began to succeed in regaining power and prestige in the mandarin class through a mystical intervention. Duong Lam, Elliott's

great-grandfather, Duong Lam, became a mandarin and served under Emperor Tu Duc, the last emperor of Vietnam.

In 1867, France conquered the southern region of the country, and began its quest to overrun the northern area as well. This was the beginning of a waxing and waning of French imperialism that would not end until after the fall of Saigon after American troops pulled out in 1975. Even after all the Americans in various government positions had left, evacuated never to return, the French (and the Japanese) maintained the hopeless fantasy that we would return, rout the communists, and give them back the country they viewed as rightfully theirs. Elliott meticulously follows the fortunes of Vietnam through successive waves of brutal conquerors and an often harsh and unrelenting natural world. Drought, terrible flooding, crop failures and pestilence batter the Vietnamese while Japanese, French, Chinese and Viet Minh troops and governments add to the misery through unspeakable brutality and the continual demands of war. In the famine of 1944-45, two million Vietnamese died of starvation in Tonkin and north Annam. In desperation, some turned to cannibalism, forced to kill and eat even their own children in some cases. The French colonial government in power at the time made no effort to alleviate the horrors of the famine. Government such as this certainly did not hinder the growth of communism. The north, early dominated by the communist Viet Minh, never flagged in its attempts to unify the country under its dominion, and a charismatic leader, Ho Chi Minh, emerged. He would have a profound impact on the future of Vietnam.

Because of the unique positions her father held under all the various governments, never declaring an allegiance, and therefore never fully bringing the wrath of succeeding governments down upon himself, the Duong family survived. Members of the immediate and extended family occupied various positions along the political

spectrum, thus offering Elliott windows of opportunity to interview relatives still living and gain knowledge of all the perspectives within the middle class. Her father, of course, was always a "government man", whatever that government might have been, and in greater or lesser favor. One brother went to France to study, another eventually became a soldier in the South Vietnamese army. A sister, Thang, joined her husband in a deep and total commitment to the ideals of first communism, then socialism, and lived in the jungles of the north under the most extreme conditions for many years, training and fighting with the Viet Minh, later the Viet Cong. Other relatives were merchants, government functionaries, engineers, soldiers and Viet Cong, including several women.

Through Elliott's family, one sees intimately the stories of Vietnam. Thang would never deviate from her devotion to the ideals of communism and socialism, rationalizing even the most extreme actions of the victorious North Vietnamese as they solidified their takeover and instituted their reign.) The young Duong Van Mai eventually went to the United States where she studied for a career in diplomacy. There, she met and married David Elliott against the strong disapproval of her family. She later returned to Vietnam on several occasions with her husband as he did work on his doctorate.

While there, one of the jobs she held was as a translator interviewing Viet Cong prisoners in a study the Rand Corporation was conducting at the behest of the U. S. Government, which had belatedly realized that the war was not going well. The Americans had never expected the North Vietnamese and Viet Cong to fight so determinedly, while the south never seemed to be able to overcome them in spite of massive amounts of American aid and money pouring into the gaping maw of Saigon. In the beginning, the Viet Cong had no firepower to speak of, greatly inferior numbers, and a soldiery largely made up of illiterate peas-

ants and children. Yet, they held on tenaciously, fighting a "now you see them, now you don't" war that was extremely effective, and made use of men, women, boys and girls to the utmost advantage in fighting and moving supplies and equipment over hostile and dangerous terrain.

Although traditional Vietnamese culture would not have cast women in such roles, communism's ideals supported them in their equality in contributing, and the numbers of North Vietnamese compared to the seemingly endless supply of Southerners and Americans, as well as the other NATO troops present in smaller numbers, made it inevitable that every living being able to fight or contribute in any way did so. In the end, the American government acknowledged that it could no longer hope to convince its people that more American dollars and more American lives should be expended to prop up a Saigon government so openly and totally corrupt that its own people, accustomed though they were to corruption and favoritism, were obviously ready to remove and kill all concerned. Members of the Saigon government were even selling its huge stockpiles of American-supplied guns, ammo, planes and helos to the North Vietnamese, while its own troops were so ill-equipped they were only allowed a couple of bullets a day, paid so poorly they couldn't feed their families, and conscripted only from families too poor to buy their way out of service, as the richer peasants and middle class did.

One telling statement Elliott makes is "...the anti-communists appeared for what they were: a conglomeration of tightly knit families motivated solely by a hatred and fear of communism and held together only by the glue of American power. ... They never had a larger vision of what South Vietnam should be or why one should fight for it. My relatives were no different." Herein lies the crux of the matter: the middle class provided the biggest impetus for fighting communism, because communism was openly and notoriously opposed

to that class. There was no upper class as such, of course, as whatever foreign power in place at any given time reserved that status for its functionaries, so the middle class with its power, influence, riches (when there were any), prestige and influence were the "haves" over the "have nots" of peasants, whose lives of abject poverty and hardship only reflected varying degrees of misery.

This middle class was culturally devoted to its individual family structures to a degree the average American cannot begin to comprehend. This fact is beautifully stated in another of Elliott's analyses: the Americans were doomed from the start in their efforts to impose American-style democracy upon a country whose culture and values were so alien to American concepts that even military victory would not have worked. The sole interest the South Vietnamese middle class had in the American way of life was in the money and material goods which American presence made accessible, and the massive aid which was protecting them from the feared communists. The middle class was typically a primary target for communism, as it symbolized "the oppressor" in whatever country fell under the advance of the ideology. The Americans were even sending their own men to die, something few middle class sons had to do, as bribery easily insured freedom from conscription. The vast majority of South Vietnamese who would fight and die were peasant conscripts with absolutely no motivation to fight beyond trying to stay alive. Eventually, of course, the Americans did leave, and frantic Southerners desperately afraid of an expected bloodbath resorted to any means to get out.

The bloodbath did not occur, although the newly victorious Hanoi government soon began the characteristic "re-education camps" which soon included several of Elliott's relatives. Many internees would spend years in these camps, in varying degrees of hardship and deprivation. Even in the ideological "better world" of communist domination, of course, bribery, treachery, and

malfeasance still existed, and some fared better than others. Even loyal communists and socialists who had undergone extreme sacrifices for the furtherance of the ideals were sometimes caught up and punished for no reason. As in Eastern Europe, communism, then socialism, proved more attractive in the abstract than in the reality. Peasants soon realized expending enormous energy for the "common good" was less likely to result in an adequate living than expending the same amount of energy for one's own family and selling the excess on the open market, particularly since some individuals contributed far more effort and labor than others, and the expected decline in motivation and output soon manifested.

Gradually, families of lengthily interned people in the "re-education" camps made louder and louder protests, and the Hanoi government, anxious to create a good impression upon foreign capital as well as to keep the level of protests down somewhat was forced to modify at least some of its hard-core stances, and a free market soon made Saigon a flourishing center of commerce again. Relations with the U. S. softened, and investment money began to revitalize the war-torn country. Many, though not all, of Elliott's relatives emigrated; to France, Australia, Canada and the U. S. All have become successful, educated professionals, as have their children, continuing the old mandarin traditions. Duong Lam would expect no less.

Elliott does a magnificent job of following the historical threads of Vietnam, including that of American intervention from its earliest days. The major battles and shifting territorial lines of the war we know are recounted in some detail. (It is telling that we refer to it as the "Vietnam War," while the Vietnamese refer to it as the "American War." And so it was.) Her references are thorough and impressive. However, for this reviewer, the unique perspectives of the Vietnamese themselves, from all along the political spectrum, make this a particularly valuable resource. The cultural

aspects revealed in the book add immensely to an understanding of just how mistaken American involvement was from the beginning, as well as making it painfully clear that no Southern victory could ever have been achieved until the last Northern Vietnamese was dead, man, woman or child. And another of Elliott's poignantly accurate observations is that the sheer suffering we inflicted upon the people of that little country was probably far worse than what would have been experienced if the communists had simply been left to accomplish their aims in the first place, without the additional misery visited upon them by American intervention.

Copyright (c) 2000 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-minerva>

Citation: Donna M. Dean. Review of Elliott, Duong Van Mai. *The Sacred Willow: Four Generations In The Life Of A Vietnamese Family*. H-Minerva, H-Net Reviews. April, 2000.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=4017>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.