



**Đình Trữ Trần.** *Ship of Fate: Memoir of a Vietnamese Repatriate.* Trans. Hoài Bắc Trần and Jana K. Lipman. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2017. 224 pp. \$28.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-8248-7249-6.

**Reviewed by** Tuan Hoang (Pepperdine University)

**Published on** H-Asia (August, 2019)

**Commissioned by** Bradley C. Davis (Eastern Connecticut State University)

Since the end of the Vietnam War, Vietnamese in the diaspora have published many memoirs about their experiences during the war and its aftermath. The original publication of the memoir under review is notable for at least two reasons. Although the memoir concerns a well-known and controversial episode related to Vietnamese refugees, there was, to the best of my knowledge, little publicity among Vietnamese diasporic communities when it was published in 1994. Yet the memoir offers a rare insider's narrative about the desire of (and demand for) repatriation because its author, Trần Đình Trữ, was the captain of the ship *Việt Nam Thương Tín* (Commercial Vietnam) that brought nearly 1,550 refugees from Guam back to Vietnam.

Thanks to a capable translation from Bac Hoai Tran, an instructor of Vietnamese at University of California, Berkeley, and Jana K. Lipman, a historian at Tulane University, this edition offers perhaps the best available source in English about the Vietnamese experience of the events that led to and followed the repatriation. Lipman introduces and summarizes the memoir, and contextualizes it to the Vietnam War. Her research in the National Archives and Records Administration in Washington, DC, also yields a dozen photographs taken in 1975 that pepper the pages of the main narrative.

The memoir does have at least two limitations. Besides basic bits of information and except for the last two weeks of the Vietnam War, it says little about Trần Đình Trữ's life during the war or his marriage and family. Since the memoirist repeatedly insists that his decision to return to Vietnam solely had to do with missing his wife and children, more information about his private life in South Vietnam might help to shed greater light on the context of his difficult and fateful decision. Another issue is self-justification. Like most memoirs on the Vietnam War, it seeks to portray the memoirist in the best light possible. This is not to gainsay Trữ's articulation of agency concerning his decision to return to Vietnam. He takes full responsibility for the decision and expresses regret about the mistake that he made. But he also describes himself as a complete outsider to the many demonstrations and protests by would-be repatriates and, instead, presents himself as "a life preserver" (p. 86) for the camp members due to his experience in the navy of the Republic of Vietnam.

The memoir also includes some lengthy conversations that appear to have been transcribed from a recording even though there was no evidence of any actual recording. Trữ's long imprisonment after his return to Vietnam probably gave him an opportunity to replay those conversations over and again in his mind. All the same, this re-

viewer recommends that readers approach at least some portions of the memoir, especially conversations, with a grain of salt.

Caution aside, the memoir offers many valuable details about the events and developments among the repatriates. One of the most important was factionalism. For example, the leaders and participants of protests against the US authorities were younger men, and the memoir portrays them as utterly agitated and over-emotive. Older men like Trư were far more cautious and generally distrustful of the protest leaders. Another development was the mixed cycle of news, rumors, and advice from US officials, UN officials, and letters from families of the would-be repatriates. While the protests and demonstrations point at an unchanged position, the reactions to news and advice showed a far more complicated state of mind among the repatriates.

Somewhat surprisingly, the US government and military, especially in the person of General James Herbert, the senior coordinator between the repatriates and the government, come off rather well. Trư found Herbert a forthright person and praised the US government for going out of its way to repair the ship and prepare Trư and the Vietnamese crew for the voyage home. That said, Trư and some of the older repatriates also believed that some of the protest leaders were agents of the CIA. During the 1970s and 1980s, attribution of alleged conspiracy with the CIA was common among Vietnamese refugees. Even though Lipman's archival research has found no evidence of CIA involvement, this example indicates the level of distrust among noncommunist Vietnamese towards the tendency of the United States to act unilaterally in the open *and* in secret.

In the end, this memoir provides one of the most vivid illustrations of the shock and loss experienced by noncommunist and anticommunist Vietnamese during and after the fall of Saigon.[1] The decision to return looks puzzling in hindsight,

but it is more understandable when situated to the context described in this memoir.

#### Note

[1]. For a summary and analysis of other examples, see Tuan Hoang, "From Reeducation Camps to Little Saigons: Historicizing Vietnamese Diasporic Anticommunism," *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 11, no. 2 (2016): 43-95, especially 59-66.

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

**Citation:** Tuan Hoang. Review of Trần, Đình Trụ. *Ship of Fate: Memoir of a Vietnamese Repatriate*. H-Asia, H-Net Reviews. August, 2019.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=53693>



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