

## **“Thái Bình Means Peace”: (Re)positioning South Vietnamese Exchange Students’ Activism in the Asian American Movement**

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Vietnamese exchange students were influential in the U.S. movement against the American war in Vietnam but are often overlooked in movement histories. To account for this pattern of omission, the author analyzes the complex politics of mythicization that has animated the Asian American Third World Left, specifically focusing on the legacy of Nguyễn Thái Bình. Bình’s arrival in the United States in 1968 was part of a U.S. Agency for International Development scholarship program designed to induct Vietnamese students into building an American-backed South Vietnamese society. Instead, many of the students joined the antiwar movement and formed Vietnamese/American antiwar organizations. Bình was deported for his activism and killed after allegedly hijacking a flight to Saigon in 1972. The mystery surrounding his death, particularly the assumption that he was assassinated, continues to influence Asian American organizers and scholars. His legacy invites analysis about the role of resonant historical myths in the production of social movements.

*Keywords: antiwar movement, Vietnam War, Vietnamese exchange students, Vietnamese American Left, Asian American activism*

On July 2, 1972, Pan American Flight 841 departed from San Francisco for Saigon, transporting 133 American servicemen returning to Vietnam from leave. During a scheduled stop in Honolulu, Nguyễn Thái Bình<sup>1</sup> boarded the plane. Bình had traveled to the United States from South Vietnam in 1968, sponsored by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), but was being deported home on account of his antiwar activism. His scholarship had been revoked, as had those of the six other exchange students in his 1968 USAID cohort, by the same agency on request by the South Vietnamese government. Facing backlashes from the students and their supporters, USAID reinstated their scholarship, and extended their departure date until after the students had finished their studies. Among the deportees, Bình was the first to leave the United States. He landed as a corpse, with five bullets in his chest, thrown out onto the tarmac “for all the world to see” (Koerner, 2013, p. 185).

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout the article, I use Nguyễn Thái Bình’s name in the Vietnamese order, and he will be occasionally referred to by his first name, Bình. He is cited as B. T. Nguyen.

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The press reported that Bình had tried to hijack the plane as an "act of revenge" against America, and that he had been "slain" by the captain with the help of armed passengers ("Saigon police," 1972, p. 3). American media outlets published this version of the events, primarily citing the testimony of Pan Am pilot Eugene Vaughn. Vaughn claimed that Bình had held a stewardess hostage by using a 10-inch knife and had communicated his demands in notes written in his own blood, ordering the pilot to change the flight destination from Saigon to Hanoi and threatening to blow up the plane on arrival. Vaughn recounted attempting to negotiate with Bình and then successfully apprehending him after temporarily landing the plane on the outskirts of Tan Son Nhat airport. Pinning Bình to the ground, Vaughn ordered the flight marshal to shoot him five times on the back before tossing his body out onto the tarmac. A supposed bomb in Bình's hand turned out to be a lemon covered in foil.<sup>2</sup>

Few challenged the accuracy of this account. A *New York Times* article (Montgomery, 1972) focused on Bình's political activity and verified his guilt by presenting the "note stained with blood" (p. 1) as part of a pattern in the student's activism. The newspaper printed an image showing Bình at an antiwar rally carrying a banner with the words "blood debt" written in his own blood—a phrase he had sewn onto his graduation regalia and had used as the title of his commencement speech at the University of Washington a few days later on June 10, 1972. Bình had told his graduating class:

Today, to get a degree, many of you have been in debt of thousands of dollars for school. But for me, I have owed a debt of blood, bone, flesh of million Vietnamese since my safe time to study here costs the death, suffering on my people, destruction in my country Vietnam. . . . All of you have owed that blood debt too, since the American people must bear responsibility for the magnitude of war crimes being committed by the United States government against the people in Vietnam, as well as Indochina (B. T. Nguyen, 1972a, para. 1).

This indictment of the university prompted campus security to eject Bình from his own commencement and, on his death, this act of protest was routinely presented as evidence of his guilt. In the official public record, Nguyễn Thái Bình was a plane hijacker who received "a death penalty . . . without loopholes" at the hands of a hypervigilant pilot (Koerner, 2013, p. 185).

Meanwhile, although some of Bình's fellow antiwar organizers lamented his alleged hijacking as "ill-conceived" and "desperate" (Allen, 1976, p. 15), many more presumed that he had been assassinated and described his loss as "the death of a hero" (Lê, 1972, p. 30). Some described Bình's demise as the "death of peace," invoking the meaning of the young activist's name: Thái Bình means "peace" in Vietnamese (Kuba, 1972, p. 2). Commemorative protests and demonstrations were organized around the world, from New York to Saigon, Miami to the Bay Area.<sup>3</sup> In San Francisco, Bình's USAID 1968 cohort-mates teamed up with American activists to hold a marching funeral—a collaboration that soon led to the formation of the

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<sup>2</sup> The story of "bloody note and lemon bomb" was reported in "Air pirate" (1972) and Wood (1972). For the most recent publication of this story, see Koerner (2013).

<sup>3</sup> On the Miami demonstration, see FBI Vault, File: 100-449923 section 14b-112, MM 100-16028; for the funeral held by Vietnamese USAID students, see Franklin (1972).

Union of the Vietnamese in the United States, the only Vietnamese group in America to explicitly oppose the American war in Vietnam.

It would eventually come to light that no crime scene was ever established, nor any proper investigation undertaken, to confirm the details regarding Binh's death. Under the joint purview of the United States and South Vietnam, the case was promptly dismissed after four days. Witnesses were released to leave Saigon after only seven hours of questioning.<sup>4</sup> This case is an expression of the strategic systematic confusion that characterized America's intervention in Vietnam, from 1954 until the end of the war. This strategy is encapsulated in the only photographic record of the ordeal (Figure 1). In the image, Binh's body is not visible. Instead, two Vietnamese men are seen covering his corpse with white fabric, preparing to carry him off the tarmac.



**Figure 1. Two different versions of a United Press International photograph depicting Binh's body being covered and carried off the tarmac by Vietnamese authorities. Left: Original picture, reprinted from "Vietnamese hijacker" (1972). Right: Altered photo, reprinted from "Hijacker Killed in Saigon; Tried to Divert Jet to Hanoi," by Montgomery (1972, p. 3).**

This photo is an image of violent death with no perpetrator. Rather than provide the visual clarification customarily associated with photographic journalism, this image fostered the contradictory mythologization of Binh's death that would subsequently unfold in media coverage and memorials. Without reputable reports, stories of Binh's death characterize him either as a terrorist or a Third World hero for peace. For its telling opaqueness, this photograph has been cited in these competing narratives of Binh's death for more than five decades.

<sup>4</sup> On July 7, the U.S. Justice Department concluded after two days that the United States did not have jurisdiction over this incident, but "refused to explain how it would have proceeded" if it did have jurisdiction (Cowan, 1972, p. 9B).

Among Asian American leftists, Bình's death incites speculation and glorification. One retelling asserts:

On his return flight to Vietnam, [Bình] paused before disembarking from the plane. Holding a lemon wrapped in foil above his head, he said, "My only bomb is my human heart, and it's ready to explode." Believing the lemon to be a bomb, a passenger attacked Bình and killed him. (Fu, 2005, p. 57)

Here, various fragments from multiple accounts are fused together and circulate among Asian American activists. In this way, Bình's legacy calls attention to the entanglement of omission and myth that often animates Third World liberation struggles and is thus a useful case through which to study this dynamic.

In this article, I analyze how the political practices of omission and mythologizing have shaped Bình's legacy, particularly in the evocation of Asian American activism within the Third World Left. Rather than strive to correct an historical narrative with no conclusive evidence, how might scholars, activists, and students of the past instead attend to the important functions of resonant myth? Specifically, how can we respond to mythologization, particularly those enduringly resonant ones inherited from the "long 1960s," without succumbing to disavowal or romanticization? To begin answering these questions, and to understand the particular historical significance of Nguyễn Thái Bình, we must first return to the flashpoint of 1968.

### **Revisiting 1968's Third World Consciousness**

In *The Imagination of the New Left: A Global Analysis of 1968*, George N. Katsiaficas (1987) argued that the study of 1968 social movements "must begin" with Vietnamese people: "If anyone embodied the world-spirit of history in 1968, it was the people of Vietnam" (p. 29). The Vietnamese resistance, Katsiaficas (1987) argued, led to a dramatic overturn of American antiwar and race-based power movements at home (p. 33), and a "basis [of] unity" for the international movement (p. 34). From Katsiaficas' (1987) seminal work to Anne Mahler's recent book (2018), *From the Tricontinental to the Global South: Race, Radicalism, and Transnational Solidarity*, a growing body of scholarship analyzes how the politics of the American Left—understood to include the New Left, African American radicals/intellectuals, and what Laura Pulido (2006) calls the multiethnic "U.S. Third World Left"—extends out of the decolonial, anti-imperialist projects of an emerging Third World, particularly the Vietnamese communist insurgency. The U.S. Third World Left, a consciousness more than a well-organized movement, emerged among people of color for whom the U.S. war efforts in Vietnam compounded existing racism that entailed a disproportionate recruitment of impoverished, young men of color to fight the war—only to endure racism within the ranks. Simultaneously, Asian Americans' racial awakening resulted from witnessing the massacre of Asian bodies and from experiencing being the surrogate "gook" in military service. Drawing connections between the war in Vietnam and against the racialized poor in America, by 1968, Third World consciousness started to become a newfound identification amongst antiracist activists, which posits racialized Americans as a part of global peoples under U.S. domination.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> For an overview of the racial awakening within the Asian American movement, see Maeda (2009).

By extension, the student movement on the West Coast adopted this Third World identity the same year. At San Francisco State College (SFSC), a collective of student groups found Third World Liberation Front (TWLF)—deliberately referencing National Liberation Front, also known as the Viet Cong. Comprising Native American, Filipino, Black, Latino, Mexican American, and East Asian students, TWLF helped initiate and sustain one of the longest student strikes in U.S. history, pushing SFSC to open a Third World College, decolonize its European-centered history and curricula, and increase the numbers of students and professors of color. As a result, SFSC became the first college to establish a department of ethnic studies. The formation of race-based and movement-inspired fields of study—including African American studies, Asian American studies, women’s studies, and so on—is an established part of the 1968 scholarly narrative. Yet, this narrative typically characterizes the Vietnam War as an inspiration, failing to account for it as a constitutive material force—one that found expression in such organizational initiatives as the TWLF.<sup>6</sup> This tendency toward abstraction becomes troubling when considered alongside the racialized rhetoric that marked American activists’ orientation to Third World radicalism at the time.

Judy Tzu-Chun Wu (2013) argued that the popular accounts from many of the American activists who participated in exposure trips to Vietnam<sup>7</sup> have produced a kind of “radical orientalism” that romanticized Third World politics and Vietnamese insurgencies as inspirations for Americans at home. Additionally, Sylvia Chong (2012) observed how the Vietnam War visual archive of journalistic photography and videos constituted a gruesome “Vietnam,” an “oriental obscene” that “animates a variety of political narratives . . . [including] the political coalition building within the Asian American and black power movements” (p. 10). In these instances, Vietnam becomes a figurative *elsewhere* where radical revolution and extreme violence alike provide political lessons for American activists. These configurations would add on to racialized narratives that tend to obscure the Vietnamese political agencies: the Cold War narratives that mark Vietnam’s communist forces as mere Soviet puppets (Kahin, 1986), the socio-political texts that constructed Vietnamese refugees as national “problems” to be solved (Espiritu, 2014), the cultural texts that compose Vietnamese people as war’s muted, dismembered figures (M. B. Nguyen, 2018), or U.S. government documents that portray Vietnamese American soldiers as an ill-equipped “political liability” (Bui, 2018). In short, from radical orientalism to political omission, these discourses failed to recognize Vietnamese people as both political and traveling subjects.

In other words, even nuanced scholarship about Vietnam’s influence on American social movements often overlooks the significance of interactions between Vietnamese and American subjects within the United States and the transnationally politicized role of exchange students like Nguyễn Thái Bình. In an interview with Yen Le Espiritu, Glenn Omatsu, one of the leading scholar-activists in Asian American studies notes that the presence of Vietnamese exchange students in San Francisco during antiwar protest has allowed

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<sup>6</sup> The 1968 scholarly narrative is eminent especially in retrospective publications that commemorate the history of Asian American studies such as the anthology *Mountain Movers: Student Activism and the Emergence of Asian American Studies* (Jeung et al., 2019), and *Asian Americans: The Movement and the Moment* (Louie & Omatsu, 2001).

<sup>7</sup> Most of these trips were curated by the North Vietnamese government. For example, see Herbert Aptheker (1966), *Mission to Hanoi*. For an overview on exposure trips to Vietnam among women and activists of color, see Wu (2013).

Asian American protesters to perceive their movement as a truly transnational experience (Yen Le Espiritu, personal communication, August 17, 2021).<sup>8</sup> In the fleeting nature of activists' oral history, this mention does not quite make it into a larger historical discourse.

### ***USAID Students of 1968: A Radical Journey***

Two months after the Tet Offensive, 64 Vietnamese students arrived in an America at war. Hand-selected by the South Vietnamese government and USAID officials,<sup>9</sup> they represented a renewed effort by the U.S. government to train pro-American, modernized, and loyal subjects for South Vietnam. The students landed at Los Angeles International Airport on March 23, 1968, dispersed in groups of 10 to six universities. Unlike previous vocational or police training exchange programs, the Leadership Program brought top-tier high school students to four-year American colleges. Some of the assigned universities included University of California San Diego, San Francisco State University, University of California Berkeley, Northrop Institute of Technology, University of Washington, and University at Albany.



***Figure 2. USAID students group II arriving at the LAX airport in March 1968 (Tran, 2015).***

The Leadership Program officially began in 1967 and went on until 1970, continuing earlier exchange education projects between the United States and South Vietnam. By the time Leadership was enacted, the United States had trained more than 3,703 students at a cost estimated at \$18 million since 1957. By 1968, there were around 2,000 students in the United States. Bringing more than four cohorts to

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<sup>8</sup> The interview between Espiritu and Omatsu was conducted in 2007, in which Omatsu recounted the story of befriending a South Vietnamese exchange student named Ho Nguyen, credited as one of Omatsu's mentors from the early stages of his political development when he was at University of California, Santa Cruz. His discussion of Nguyen is also mentioned in Louie and Omatsu (2001, pp. 309–311).

<sup>9</sup> For a detailed discussion on this process, see N. Nguyen (2019).

study at the contracted colleges in California, USAID covered the students' airfares, tuition, and expenses up to \$6,000 a year (Welles, 1972). While the first cohort consisted of personnel from the Army of Republic of Vietnam, Nguyễn Thái Bình's cohort, which was the second one, went through a more intensive selection process by the Saigon Ministry of Education. Fellow participant Ngô Thanh Nhân shared that his cohort was specifically trained to be "familiarize[d] with American values, so that after the war ended, assuming that they'd win the war, they'd have a young generation of leaders who can explain U.S. policies to the Vietnamese people" (Ngô Thanh Nhân, personal communication, May 5, 2020). The students were assigned majors to assist with nation-building, such as engineering, finances, agriculture, and others. To return and serve the government or work at the American embassy was an obligation; many returned and occupied important positions in the South Vietnamese government until the fall of Saigon ("Who we are," n.d.).

The Leadership Program is but one example of the U.S. government's Cold War expansion, particularly through development and education. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, the State Department recruited universities to assist the government with the Cold War modernization and interventionism in Southeast Asia. In 1961, John F. Kennedy signed the Foreign Assistance Act and established the USAID, an independent federal government agency under the guidance of the secretary of state. This reorganization coincided with the increase in American foreign aid worldwide, arguably fueling its empire building abroad through cultural diplomacy entwined with military assistance. Scholars have acknowledged the role of USAID functionaries and operations in U.S. Cold War praxis and in current times as enhancing U.S. imperialist interventionism in Asia, Latin America, Africa (Hills, 2006), and the Muslim world post 9/11 (Mahmood, 2006). Studies of empire, Catherine Lutz (2006) argued, necessarily include foreign aid, international commerce, military operations, and strategy—all of which apply to the case of South Vietnam.<sup>10</sup>

South Vietnamese exchange students' presence in the United States, as such, was to enforce Cold War rhetoric. Participating students were required to pledge their anticommunism. Aside from heavy surveillance by peers and USAID personnel, they received psychological tests from time to time to ensure their continued commitment. During holidays, they would live with pro-war families to enforce their exposure to "American culture" (Ngô Thanh Nhân, personal communication, March 14, 2020). These pedagogical moves, I argue, aimed at producing a free, educated, and mobile group of transplants, whose visibility assisted in making invisible those targeted by methods of containment, punishment, and disappearance. Unlike the anonymous Vietnamese body awaiting freedom in a foreign land, this freed subject was accessible

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<sup>10</sup> USAID succeeded various aid agencies and oversaw South Vietnamese nation-building from its initial emergence in 1953 until 1974 through massive military and economic aid, training programs, and direct military assistance. Between 1962 and 1975, South Vietnam received the largest portion of USAID economic assistance. On the one hand, this development project relied heavily on university participation, recruiting and employing experts, advisors, and evaluators from American universities specifically to "design and carry out various kinds of . . . programs intended to create 'illusions of progress,'" (Allen, 1976, p. 2) while also hosting exchange students on their campuses. On the other hand, a majority of funding was funneled to train Saigon security forces and create a system of political repression to beat back student movements and antiwar activists in Saigon (Allen, 1976; Scigliano & Fox, 1965). In 1969, USAID came under fire for its noted association with the Michigan State University Group, and by extension, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).

to the American public—appearing as both witness to and evidence of liberation. Through these students, the United States manifested its credibility as the protector of the new world, and South Vietnam proved to the world it could keep up with the “right” end of history. The two nation-states collaborated to ultimately produce a conception of “freedom” that was antithetical to communist revolution’s self-determination.

This “freedom,” as Binh (1972a) would lament in his interrupted speech, was in truth measured in the “blood, bone, flesh of million Vietnamese . . . the death, suffering, destruction in my country.” He understood his own access to mobility and education as inseparable from the bloody war at home. However, this was not always Binh’s view. Initially, he had invested in studying fisheries to develop Vietnamese industries. Activist friends and acquaintances who organized with him remembered him as a gentle soul with deep love for his country, who mainly wrote and recited poems and sang songs at gatherings and rallies. By the time Binh parted ways with his campus life, his analysis had evolved considerably into anti-imperialist (Allen, 1976).

Although conceived as a site of containment and (re)education, the American university also served as a *contact zone*, a site of encounter where exchange students joined antiwar and antiracist groups. The antiracist movements of the “long 1960s” converted universities into sites of struggle, where students, scholars, and community members alike used campuses as strategic locations not only to demand institutional changes but also to devise and experiment with various strategies and tactics.<sup>11</sup> Surrounded by antiwar professors and leftist peers, the USAID students, despite having entered America under White benevolent guidance to learn about modernity, experienced their political awakening. From this contradictory social location, exchange students from Asia, and from Vietnam in particular, influenced the politics of a Third World consciousness. California’s vibrant racial justice movements drew students in—especially in Oakland, where the Black Panther Party invited the Vietnamese students to meetings and workshops, providing an environment where Vietnamese antiwar activists could learn from and contribute to broader antiracist critique (Ngô Thanh Nhân, personal communication, May 5, 2020).

Some exchange students took part in the movement by activating existing Vietnamese networks of student organizations and publications. Notably, those with individual scholarships and private sponsors had more autonomy to collaborate with other American activists but were equally under surveillance by the FBI. For example, Lê Anh Tú, who arrived in Philadelphia in 1960, worked with the American Friends Service Committee. Ngô Vĩnh Long, arriving in Boston in 1964, befriended famous antiwar scholars such as Howard

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<sup>11</sup> In the East Coast, antiwar professors and researchers exposed how universities were complicit with the state, providing support for the military in exchange for state funding, leading to a severe student revolt at Columbia University. Students and faculties protested the administration’s militarist and racist policies: Reserve Officers’ Training Corps drills, military and CIA recruiters on campus, classified military research in the labs, as well as the institution’s intended construction into a primarily Black neighborhood. In the West coast, heightened racial tensions and antiwar movement created momentum in the Chicano student walk-out in East Los Angeles and the TWLF at San Francisco State University in March 1968. The TWLF protested U.S. imperialism in Vietnam and at home on campus, demanding access to non-Eurocentric, decolonizing histories and equal admission for professors and students of color. At UC Berkeley, the term “Asian American” was coined with the emergence of Asian American Political Alliance in light of these mobilizations.



Zinn and Noam Chomsky, founded a number of organizations as well as publications to inform the public about the Vietnam War. He found the Vietnam Resources Center, a headquarter for antiwar Viet students, who were scattered around the country. Most notably, in 1968, Ngô Vĩnh Long cofounded the Committee of Concerned Asian Scholars and the *Bulletin of Concerned Asian Scholars* to intervene in the field of Asian studies whose predominantly white scholars remained silent about the violence of the Vietnam War. It was through this Committee that a potent antiwar network in the East Coast traveled (Allen, 1989). While East Coast student activities oriented primarily to the larger, predominantly White antiwar movement, the antiracist geopolitics of the West Coast shaped the antiwar radicalization of the USAID cohort. Exposure to the Black Panthers and Martin Luther King's assassination, as well as to overall critical students at SFSC, for example, left lasting impressions on the emerging South Vietnamese activists. Learning from others, in the earlier days, their activism involved organizing self-study sessions about the Vietnam War, French colonialism, and U.S. racism, and organizing cultural events with other racialized exchange students, before making and distributing political zines on campus. Later generations credit them with constituting a Vietnamese American Left in the United States—one that emphasizes on collaboration with cross-racial radicalism, contributing to the emergence of Third World politics (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2017).

### **Vietnamese Antiwar Activism: 1968–1972**

From 1968 to 1972, the USAID exchange students participated in the antiwar and other social movements at various levels of individual and small group appearances. In this period, Ngô Vĩnh Long appears alongside American scholar-activists during campus tours on his own. Lê Anh Tú found herself in a similar but gendered role, merely noted as "Vietnamese woman" in flyers and literature that discussed her antiwar activities.<sup>12</sup> It was not until after Binh's controversial death and the subsequent incarceration (Pestana, 1974) and deportation trials that the USAID students' presence became known as a group. In 1974, antiwar organizations—including the Indochina Peace Campaign, founded by Tom Hayden and Jane Fonda—had taken up the students' case as an important site to protest the war. There, the students also used their trials to make their antiwar arguments (Ngô Thanh Nhàn, personal communication, May 5, 2020).

In 1972, Vietnamese students (those sponsored by the USAID as well as others) across the United States joined forces to stage two big demonstrations that led to the deportation orders of the USAID students and, ultimately, to the murder of Nguyễn Thái Bình. The first involved the occupation of the Saigon consulate in New York on February 10, 1972, protesting of Nixon's "Plan for peace in Vietnam" released on January 25, 1972.<sup>13</sup> For the Vietnamese students, Nixon's plan prioritized the U.S. neocolonial relationship with South Vietnam over true peace. They explained, "Nixon's plan misleads the American people into believing that free and democratic elections will be possible in South Vietnam if Thieu resigns," noting that the rest of Thieu's American-backed army and police would be fully capable of rigging another election, as seen in

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<sup>12</sup> For example, in the flyer for the March Against the War Rally and Festival to Kezar Stadium in San Francisco, Lê Anh Tú was listed as "Vietnamese woman" in parentheses (March Against the War Rally, 1972).

<sup>13</sup> Nixon's speech vilified the 7-point peace proposed by Provisional Revolutionary Government of South Vietnam in 1971, a proposal to reach mutual peace that many American antiwar protesters rallied behind. The activists criticized Nixon's attempts to hide this proposal from the public in order to maintain military actives in Vietnam. Later, the Union of Vietnamese in the United States (UVUS) also supported this proposal.

1967 and 1971 (Ngô 1972, p. 2). The second was dubbed the "Vietnamese invasion" of Southern Illinois University (SIU) on April 26, 1972; this was a culmination of a two-year protest against SIU's taking money from USAID—perceived as assisting warfare in Vietnam (Keith, 2002; Mirsky, 1970; Morrell, 1970). All participants<sup>14</sup> in the first action were arrested, an outcome they had anticipated. The three-hour peaceful occupation, they later explained, showed the American public the internal logic of the U.S. involvement in Vietnam: "While we were charged with 'criminal trespassing' and prosecuted by American laws for simply occupying a piece of our own property, Americans who are occupying our country . . . are free to continue committing the same crimes" (Ngô, 1972, p. 2). They released press statements during and after the occupation, demanding the release of political prisoners by the Saigon regime and the dismantling of the Thieu regime, "the instrument of barbaric repression" (Ngô, 1972, p. 2) in Southeast Asia. When consulate authorities called the police to make arrests, this also served the activists' desired optics; the image mirrored how the Saigon regime relied on U.S. aid to repress its own people.

Immediately afterward, Saigon ordered USAID to cancel the students' scholarship. The students invoked freedom of speech, and under mounting public pressure, USAID reinstated their scholarships on the condition that they return to Vietnam upon graduating. Deportation threats did not deter the students. In April 1972, eight of the arrestees<sup>15</sup> traveled to SIU to stage a "Vietnamese invasion," an event organized by Ngô Vĩnh Long and his friend SIU professor Douglas Allen to protest SIU's renewed participation in the "U.S. neocolonial designs for Indochina" (Allen, 1989, p. 113). The students participated at great personal risks, as immigration officials had visited and warned them not to attend.

Nguyễn Thái Bình was present at both actions, which occurred only months before his deportation and death. A report on April 25, 1972, which detailed Bình's activities from February 1972 to April 1972, revealed that he had been surveilled by both the university and Immigration Services (B. T. Nguyen, 1972b). After obtaining a copy of the typed report, Bình added in the newest action "SIU Invasion" by hand. Two months later, he was dragged off stage for delivering his "blood debt" commencement speech. A few weeks after that, he was killed.

### ***A Bloody Note and a Lemon Bomb***

Before leaving the United States, Nguyễn Thái Bình sent out two letters: One condemning President Nixon's investment in the tyrannical South Vietnamese regime, and the other addressed to "all the peace-loving people of the world" (B. T. Nguyen, 1972c). While major newspapers published the account of Bình's "hijacking crime," Bình's letters were reprinted in activists' clandestine newsletters, flyers, and zines, sharing widely his tragic, premonitory declaration: "My only bomb is my human heart" (B. T. Nguyen, 1972c). Some of the clandestine newspapers and newsletters include *New York Asian Coalition Newsletter*, *Liberation News*

<sup>14</sup> List of participants: Tran Khanh Tuyet, Lê Anh Tú, Nguyen Hoi Chan, Doan Hong Hai, Ngô Vĩnh Long, Nguyen Thi Ngoc Thoa, Nguyen Huu An, Nguyễn Thái Bình, Tran Vu Dung, Vu Ngoc Con, Nguyen Tang Huyen.

<sup>15</sup> Eight of the arrestees included Lê Anh Tú, Nguyen Huu An, Nguyễn Thái Bình, Tran Khanh Tuyet, Doan Hong Hai, Tran Vu Dung, Ngô Vĩnh Long, and Vu Ngoc Con. Other participants included David Truong, Vu Quang Viet, Do Hoang Khanh, and Nguyen Trieu Phu. See Allen (1976).

*Service, Gidra, Forward, The Pentagon Paper, News & Letter*, among others. As such, this phrase enters the collective memory along with the “bloody note” and “lemon bomb” motifs.

At the time, groups among the Third World Left remembered Binh’s death as evidence of his militant heroism. For their part, Binh’s Vietnamese friends deemed his death an “assassination,” the “heroic sacrifice” of a “revolutionary fighter” (Lê, 1972, p. 30), and his memory became an inspiration for activists, who turned their attention to consolidating the power of their antiwar activism by forming new political organizations. With the Black Panthers’ help, on July 16, 1972, the Vietnamese students held a marching funeral for Binh at Glide Memorial Methodist Church in San Francisco that attracted more than 800 people, joined by several groups, notably Vietnamese Veterans Against the War, Asian Coalition Against the War, Young Workers Liberation League, Guardian & J-Town Collective, East Bay Women for Peace, Ramparts, Committee in Solidarity with S. Vietnamese Students (The Union of Vietnamese in the United States, 1972). This march was the founding action of the UVUS in the United States, a forceful organization that did not dissolve until 1993, during the normalization of U.S.-Vietnamese state relations (see Figure 3).



**Figure 3. On July 16, 1972, the Vietnamese students held a marching funeral for Binh in Glide Memorial Methodist Church in San Francisco (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2017, p. 2).**

Meanwhile, Asian American activists in Los Angeles honored Binh’s death in their protests. At the annual Nisei Week Parade in Los Angeles in August 1972, a network of Japanese American organizers consisting of the Asian Sisters and the Yellow Brotherhood responded to a nationwide call against U.S. and Japanese imperialism in Asia. Joining them were two newly formed brigades, the Thái Bình Brigade and another named after a Vietnamese guerilla fighter who had been executed in Vietnam in 1964, the Văn Trỗi Anti-Imperialist Youth Brigade (Fu, 2005; Ishizuka, 2016). Together, they marched in military formation and channeled a Black Panther aesthetic, chanting about “picking up guns” and coordinating spectacular acts of protest that included flag burning, setting off firecrackers, and dropping banners. At the climax, protesters dropped a large banner from a third-floor balcony that read, “One Battle, Many Fronts. Support the Victorious Struggle of the Vietnamese People,” then set off firecrackers, chanting “Thái Bình, Live like him, Dare to Struggle, Dare to Win!” (“Statement from,” 1972, pp. 5–6). In this celebratory protest, Binh

was likened to Trỗi in his death to signify a militarized Vietnamese heroic martyrdom, one that allowed a particular articulation of Asian American activist militancy.

The memory of Bình, as of this writing, is a combination of conflicting accounts and hearsay, a result of activists and organizers' common exchange of oral history. Recall Fu's (2005) account, earlier in this article, where Bình was said to hold a lemon wrapped in foil while declaring "My only bomb is my human heart" (B. T. Nguyen, 1972c) before being killed by a passenger. In *Asian Americans: The Movement and the Moment* (Louie & Omatsu, 2001), an anthology celebrating the history of Asian American activism, Tram Quang Nguyen was asked to write about Vietnamese American activism. She was struggling to find this history. Her account of Bình is also a composite of multiple events and mythic retellings, where Bình "walked onstage for his diploma and took off his black graduation gown to reveal a demand to stop the war and free Vietnam, written in his blood" (T. Q. Nguyen, 2001, p. 288). Hers was the only scholarly account of Vietnamese antiwar activism until 2017, when more work on Vietnamese American activism started to be published (Dao, 2020; N. Nguyen, 2019; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2017). This scarcity methodologically impacted the way non-Vietnamese scholarship reproduced inaccurate information about Vietnamese antiwar activism (see, for example, Pulido, 2006).

At the time of Tram Quang Nguyen's (2001) writing, the most prevailing accounts on Vietnamese American politics focused on the surge of refugee anticommunism disrupting the emergence of Vietnamese diasporic leftism. In 1975, 120,000 refugees escaped Vietnam and resettled in the United States. This initial wave of Vietnamese refugees was staunchly anticommunist, as were many of the refugees who arrived later, especially the 165,718 former Army of the Republic of Viet Nam (ARVN) soldiers and camp prisoners arriving as a part of President George H. W. Bush's Humanitarian Operation in 1990. These movements brought multiple surges of anticommunist organizing and violent attacks (Y. T. Nguyen, 2018) that both diminished the nascent Vietnamese diasporic radicalism and tempered the "overly romantic view" of Asian American radicals who were invested in the political homogeneity of Vietnamese radicalism (Maeda, 2009, p. xi). At the same time, Asian American studies scholars after 1975 shifted the focus of their analysis of the emergence of Asian American political consciousness, generally moving away from the influence of the Vietnam War and Vietnamese revolutionary symbols and toward the role of U.S. social movements in legitimizing Asian American identity (Ono, 2005). In more recent publications and anthologies that celebrate the history of the field itself, Vietnamese revolutionaries are rarely addressed as the major forces behind the field's very existence (Jeung et al., 2019).

This uncoupling between "Asian American radical movement" and the eminent role of Nguyễn Thái Bình in particular or Vietnamese activists in the United States in general thus points to a larger issue of memory within leftist history: Vietnamese political actors, and to a larger extent, Vietnamese people, sit uncomfortably at the margin of conversations about the Vietnam War, its legacy, meaning, and aftermath—even among those that look at them as radical inspiration. For example, in *Serve the People: Making Asian America in the Long Sixties*, Ishizuka and Chang (2016) acknowledge Nguyễn Thái Bình's legacy and how Asian Americans were "deeply inspired by this Vietnamese martyr . . . [and] the relentless determination of the Vietnamese people" (p. 202). And yet, this same expression showcases how Asian American studies scholars and activists still have not found a place for Vietnamese American activists within their imagination of America's Asians. Curiously, Vietnamese figures like Lê Anh Tú and Ngô Vĩnh Long are known on the East Coast, where their works are circulated and cited, yet receive little to no

attention in works about leftist activism on the West Coast, signaling a regional politics at work in the memory of 1968 and its constitutive movements.

Under these conditions, carefully revisiting Binh's legacy is a strategy not only for clarifying the significance of his generation in the elaboration of Asian American political consciousness, but also for drawing out and studying intellectual habits of mythic romanticization. As the "spirit of '68" grows more distant, Binh's story can be a rich and instructive site for analysis—one that places Vietnamese lives firmly at the center of the conversation about the Vietnam War, not as hashed out tropes of Northern communist enemies, Southern allies, or anonymous "freedom loving people," but as political actors with agency and *legacies*. This approach has only recently become prominent in relevant scholarship, and with it comes the responsibility to interrogate the patterns of historical memory that have shaped the field itself.

### Conclusion

In 2018, Vietnamese archives released declassified reports refuting several claims made by pilot Eugene Vaughn, including the most sensational allegation of Binh communicating through a bloody note (Quoc Minh, 2018). In Vietnam, Binh has had streets, schools, and organizations named after him. To this day, when guests come by, Binh's mother still shows the private archive of her forever-24-year-old son, his songs and poems, daily journals musing on romance and a future family, and pictures of him playing soccer with friends. To what extent can these quiet memories make it into a collective memory of Binh as an icon for the struggle for self-determination and peace? Will it be a revolution without martyrs?

At the time of this publication, others have noted the antiwar activism of Binh and the 1968 cohort, rightfully framing them as benefitting from and contributing to the radical tradition of cross-racial solidarity and Asian American activism (Tran, 2020). This article, while acknowledging such framing, also highlights the complex processes of historical memory in which Binh's death enabled the anchoring myth of militarized Vietnamese heroic matrydom in (Asian) American social movements during the Vietnam War. I focus more on the difficult remembrance of this legacy, hoping to convey that mythicized memory is *not* a problem for empirical correction. Instead, such memory, if interrogated, points to the value and persistence of myths themselves—frozen in tension-laden images but unleashed in moments of remembering, such as the photograph of Binh's body on the Tan Son Nhat tarmac, or the recounting of such event. To that end, this article peels away the residual "barely there," digs at fragmented memories and what is imagined as having taken place, and invites readers to bear witness to the power of memory, myth, and systematic forgetting.

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