Madame Nguyen Thi-Binh’s Biography

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Vietnamese women have traditionally been fiercely whole-hearted participants of revolutionary efforts against the French colonization, the South Vietnamese Regular Army, and the American military. The Vietnamese Women’s Union firmly believed that the liberation of women goes hand-in-hand with the liberation of the country. The biography below details the early life, career, contributions, and historical significance of Madame Nguyen Thi-Binh, one of many notable female revolutionaries.

(Notice: In Vietnamese and many other East Asian cultures, the surname precedes the given names)

Madame Nguyen Thi-Binh was born in Saigon on May 26, 1927 into a family of revolutionaries. Her grandfather was Phan Chau-Trinh, legendary Nationalist leader, and her father was a civil servant turned civil resistance worker after her mother’s death. The French effort to recoup Vietnam, primarily funded by the United States, marked the start of the Indochina War in 1946. In 1948, Nguyen Thi-Binh joined the Communist Party in defiance of colonial rule.[1]

With her strong educational background and fluency in French, Nguyen Thi-Binh became a teacher during her early career and led the first anti-‘foreign involvement in Vietnam’ demonstration in 1950.[2] Consequently, she was arrested and imprisoned by French authorities from 1951 to 1953. During her time in confinement, Nguyen Thi-Binh came across “hundreds and hundreds of women with [her] who did not even know why they were there. They asked, ‘What have we done?’ They did not know when they came but when they left, they knew. They left as patriots.”[3]

After Ho Chi Minh’s Viet-Minh army claimed their victory at the decisive Battle of Dien Bien Phu, the French rule came to an end and Nguyen Thi-Binh, along with her female comrades, was released from prison in 1954.[4] The country was divided into two: Ho Chi Minh’s Northern Vietnam and US-backed South Vietnam. The South Vietnam government later installed Ngo Dinh Diem as their president, and he was adverse to both the communist North and Viet-Minh’s
sympathizers in the South.\footnote{Nguyen Thi-Binh and her husband at the time worked for the underground opposition against president Diem.}

From 1963 to 1966, Nguyen Thi-Binh became a Council Member of the Union of Women for the Liberation of South Vietnam, which recruited peasant women to join the resistance force.\footnote{She then became a member of the National Liberation Front (NLF)’s Central Committee.} Before official peace talks at Paris, Nguyen Thi-Binh made many efforts to gather international support and spread awareness far and wide about the message of NLF and the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, visiting not only India, but also other parts of Africa and Europe. During the mid-1960s, Nguyen Thi-Binh never shied away from offering interviews to international press, and in the West, she became the representative and symbol of the NLF (Reporters warmly regarded her as “Madame Binh”). In 1968, Nguyen Thi-Binh was appointed Foreign Minister of the NLF’s Provisional Revolutionary Government of South Vietnam (PRG), an independent shadow government, and led its delegation to Paris to attend the Peace Conference.\footnote{Since its establishment in 1919 after World War I, the Paris Peace Conferences historically excluded women from its roundtable. However, Nguyen Thi-Binh, with her iron-clad convictions and fluency in French, refused to be overshadowed by the male-dominated dialogues and asserted her presence during the entire process of negotiation. Nguyen Thi-Binh was not hesitant to challenge the Kissinger-Le Duc Tho agreements in which she found inadequate, such as issues around prisoners-of-war. She strongly advocated for coupling the freedom of South Vietnamese political prisoners with the release of American prisoners of war. Nguyen Thi-Binh became the only woman to sign the Paris Peace Accord in 1973, ‘officially’ ending the Vietnam War.}

“Her statement at the talks have been as unswerving as her dark, expressionless eyes with while she has faced three United States negotiators, enunciating as she did yesterday, terms for a peace settlement.”\footnote{After the war ended, the Communist Party started to restructure its personnel within the government. Many members of the NLF were either annulled or given moot roles, and speculations were high around Madame Nguyen Thi-Binh being replaced by a male colleague. Furthermore, Nguyen Thi-Binh being such a charismatic and well-publicized character goes against Communist ideals of non-individuality. However, she continued to hold influential positions in Vietnamese politics. From 1982-1986, Nguyen Thi-Binh was appointed Minister of Education, the first female minister in Vietnam’s history. From 1987-1992, she was a member of the Central Committee of Vietnam’s Communist Party. Most notably, Congress elected Nguyen Thi-Binh to be the Vice President of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam two consecutive terms: 1992-1997 and 1977-2002.}

Throughout her life, Nguyen Thi-Binh is relentless in upholding the importance of Vietnam’s independence and autonomy. Her political life and contributions challenge the stereotypes of women being docile negotiators and passive participants in war and peace-making. Even after retiring, Madame Binh is actively involved in advocating for post-war reparations, specifically against Agent Orange and its remnants on Vietnamese soil
“Like many other countries, my country, Vietnam, has lived through long years of wars which have ravaged this already-poor land and left behind millions of orphans, widows, disabled and missing-in-action. Vietnamese women, as part of their nation have been tested by harsh trials and countless hardships. They have derived therefrom their exceptional endurance and tenacity, their ability to survive and to persist in their full identity through the storms of life, just like the Vietnamese bamboo tree, which is supple but unbreakable, which bends under the wind but does not break, and which afterwards, stand again as straight and proud as before.” (Nguyen Thi-Binh, 1995, at the United Nations 4th World Conference in Beijing, China)\[17\]


Sources:


