In late January 2020, Vietnam became aware that an outbreak of acute respiratory infections caused by a new strain of Coronavirus (nCoV or COVID-19) had broken out in Wuhan, with the number of infections and deaths increasing rapidly. Because Vietnam is a neighboring country, with a mutual border and extensive economic and social relations with China, both the government and the people feared the outbreak of disease in Vietnam.

Instead of leaving the people in a state of confusion, the Prime Minister of Vietnam, Nguyễn Xuân Phúc, quickly convened an official meeting on 27 January, 2020—the 3rd day of the traditional Tết Lunar New Year—to discuss and announce Vietnam’s policies against COVID-19 to the nation. Since then, the media has conveyed a strong government message to Vietnam’s citizens in the form of the slogan: **fighting the epidemic is like fighting the enemy (chống dịch như chống giặc)**. All the national television stations and newspapers broadcast this message along with photographs of the official government meetings. Since then, every national news
source has continuously devoted numerous pages and airtime to providing information about the government’s plan and response.

The entire political system joined in the fight against COVID-19. Leaders of local governments, production units and businesses were responsible for directing, controlling and communicating the epidemic prevention regulations to residents within their areas of supervision. Television and newspapers regularly updated their news with the latest COVID-19 prevention measures being promulgated by the national government, as well as by leaders in each locality. Interestingly, the Vietnamese public (which tends to be skeptical when reading the news) made a habit during the pandemic of carefully tracking and paying attention to news coming from official state media. Furthermore, public notice boards with epidemic prevention instructions were posted in front of the People's Committee offices in the commune, ward, and neighborhoods levels, as well as in production and business units employing a large number of people. Loudspeakers at the commune and ward People’s Committees have also been broadcasting daily announcements at 5am and 5pm, with information on the COVID-19 epidemic, including the recommendations of public health organizations and medical authorities.
Figure 1: District 5 People's Committee members meet to receive donations and redistribute to poor residents affected by COVID-19. Image provided by Pham Thanh Thoi.

At the local level in cities like Ho Chi Minh City, government leaders as well as “mass organizations” at the ward and neighborhood levels, have held daily meetings and have remained on duty at their offices in order to implement public health measures. Such measures have included sending people to visit each and every household in a neighborhood, handing out leaflets, and helping residents make medical declarations. The commune, ward, and neighborhood level units of the Youth Union, as well members of the Women’s, Veteran’s, and Elderly Associations, have been involved in managing residents in their area by making numerous visits and observations. Individuals at risk of infection, either through exposure to infected cases because they were returning from foreign countries experiencing the epidemic,
have voluntarily participated in 14-day centralized quarantining so that health officials could carry out epidemiological studies and tests.

Figure 2: Residents in Gò Vấp district going door-to-door to distribute public health information for the fight against COVID-19. Photo provided by Pham Thanh Thoi.

As the COVID-19 epidemic spread worldwide, Vietnam prepared to receive tens of thousands of people returning home from countries with the epidemic, and the Government implemented national social distancing measures for a 15-day period (April 1, 2020-April 15, 2020). Social distancing measures included the strict closure of borders, controlling the movement of vehicles, encouraging residents to stay at home, stopping meetings at offices and businesses, and closing schools and leisure areas, etc.
The government has sent a clear message that economic losses must be accepted in order to protect people's lives and health. Each locality was told to focus its resources to promptly provide economic and material support to disadvantaged groups in society, especially the poor and struggling laborers, following a slogan that was repeated regularly by government leaders: *leave no one behind* ("không để ai bị bỏ lại phía sau").

The government’s intervention policy and the public’s positive support have yielded positive results. Social distancing has flattened the curve of the disease. As of early May 2020, there have been no deaths in Vietnam from COVID-19 infection. The total number of infected people has peaked at 270 (including 47 foreigners), and among those, there have been 219 recoveries. Many cities, commercial shops, tourist destinations, beaches, and parks have been reopened and welcome millions of people traveling and playing. There are many reasons to rejoice, the country conquered (chiến thắng) COVID-19 on the occasion of the state's grand celebration of the 45th anniversary of the reunification of Vietnam (April 30, 1975 to April 30, 2020).

On social media sites like facebook, many individuals have compared the experience of fighting COVID-19 to the time of April 30th, 1975, but this comparison has not formally been made in state media, despite the use of measures that equate the fight against COVID-19 to a state of war.
Figure 3: "The Youth of Ho Chi Minh City are Determined to Prevent and Fight the COVID-19 Pandemic, and to Prevent and Fight Crimes and Social Evils" Mobilization Poster produced by the Ho Chi Minh City Youth Union. Provided by Pham Thanh Thoi.

Ho Chi Minh City – the Frontline in the fight against the COVID-19 epidemic

More than 10 Million people live, study, and work in Ho Chi Minh City. The city is a dynamic economic center with the most globally connected character of Vietnam. Before 2020, Ho Chi Minh City’s international airport at Tân Sơn Nhất was always over capacity because of the number of international and domestic flights. Accounting for air travel alone, thousands of passengers travel daily between Ho Chi Minh City and major cities in countries like the US, China, South Korea, Italy, Spain, England, Germany, France, Japan, Singapore and so on. In 2019, the city’s total contribution of revenue to the state budget reached VND 409,923 billion (over USD 17 billion / year), accounting for 27.2% of Vietnam’s total national budget revenue. Thus, while Vietnam is a developing country with a low average income, Ho Chi Minh City is still globally connected, and is heavily dependent on foreign direct investment (FDI), especially from raw materials imported from the world. The city cannot avoid the impacts when a global
crisis takes place, and when the pandemic spread around the world, people feared what might happen as thousands of residents returned to the city from places abroad. People prepared as if Ho Chi Minh City would soon become a frontline in the fight against the epidemic in Vietnam.

Traditional values support national policy

Whenever a disaster strikes, Ho Chi Minh City residents’ greatest fear is the fear of death! Through wars and natural disasters, many generations of Vietnamese people have observed or faced unexpected deaths. Because of that, the Vietnamese people have developed a simple and optimistic view of life, which has been repeated often during COVID-19: “còn người là còn cửa” (“As long as there are people, there will be things”). This phrase means that goods are less important than human life. When people face a crisis, they must work first to stay alive, because as long as there are people there will always be opportunities to create wealth (and more goods). But when human life disappears, then any remaining monetary assets will no longer mean anything. Traditional values are full of humanistic feelings, always reminding everyone in Vietnam that when they face a crisis they must react quickly and act with courage to protect the lives of themselves and the community before it’s too late.

After the Prime Minister issued the call to fight the pandemic, instructions were sent to all ministries, and to the People's Committees of provinces and cities nationwide. Accordingly, the Ho Chi Minh City government then organized meetings of wards official and issued its own instruction documents to guide wards and communes in the implementation of epidemic prevention plans at the local levels, all the way down to each neighborhood and residential area, including apartment buildings. Ho Chi Minh City residents quite rapidly received the government's national message and policy for fighting the epidemic, and responded with a sense of mental readiness, as if they had prepared for this scenario in advance. Across many of the
city’s streets, residents began to limit the size and scale of economic activities and mobility on their own accord.

Mr. Nguyễn Cử, a 56-year-old souvenir shop owner on Đống Khởi street, in HCMC’s District 1, closed his shop and stopped all commercial transactions. Accepting the economic losses, he said: “Watching the news on social media (through Facebook), I did not agree with the policy of “herd immunity” that several countries followed during the COVID-19 pandemic. If Coronavirus was allowed to freely spread in communities and the government had no preventative policies, then many people would die. Any policy that does not protect people’s lives is an inhuman policy. I strongly support the policy of the Vietnamese government, and accept the need to sacrifice economic gains in order to protect the people’s lives.” (Interviewed on 16 March 2020)

Before writing this article, I spoke with a number of city residents from different professions and economic backgrounds. Their opinions appeared to support the leadership of public agencies, which was considered to be responsible and resolute (“có trách nhiệm và sự cuộc quyết”), in the course of the fight against the COVID-19 epidemic. Ms. Nguyễn Hồng Nhung, a 45-year-old Vietnamese history lecturer in Ho Chi Minh City said: “For more than 20 years in Ho Chi Minh City, whenever there is a crisis related to human life, I have seen the people of Ho Chi Minh City actively listen to the recommendations and act according to strategies the government has implemented to fight the epidemic. People have quickly implemented previous public safety measures, such as regulations from wearing helmets when riding motorbikes, or, more recently, the ban on drinking liquor and beer when driving to reduce traffic fatalities. COVID-19 is a dangerous disease. It can come and kill people like foreign invaders. So people are now very confident in the government's strategy for fighting the epidemic” (Interviewed on April 20, 2020).
Ho Chi Minh City has mobilized many social resources to treat and cure dozens of infected people and has organized quarantine for over 10,000 people suspected of infection in order to monitor their epidemiological status for a 14-day period. Faced with the difficult task of organizing, managing and serving those suspected of being infected (especially those returning from foreign countries impacted by the pandemic), many soldiers, doctors and volunteers joined in to serve the quarantine areas, unifying with a spirit of sacrifice for the community (“tình thần hy sinh vi cộng đồng”). Images were shared to all city residents depicting the difficult life of the doctors and soldiers working night and day in the hospitals and centralized quarantine areas. There were some memorable catchphrases, like: “We go to work for you, please stay home for us” (“chúng tôi đi làm vì bạn, xin bạn ở nhà vì chúng tôi (vi chúng ta)”. Meanwhile, across all wards and districts in Ho Chi Minh City, from early March onwards, centralized areas were arranged to coordinate the free distribution of necessities such as rice, noodles, vegetables, masks, and antibacterial sanitizer to residents. This organization required a great deal of human resources and many residents from different parts of the city coordinated with the government, police, and army in order to implement the measures.

Over the past 3 months, observations from many places across the city show that residents have joined hands with the community to fight epidemics. Many people volunteered to participate in organizations and in spreading the message, and there have been both material and spiritual contributions to the city's doctors, the army, the police and civil servants. Volunteers brought money, rice, noodles, and essential food to the city's ward and commune offices for free redistribution to those in need due to the impact of the COVID-19 epidemic. Many people participated directly with the soldiers and the Youth Union to cook meals to provide nutritious meals for doctors and nurses at the hospital, and for the isolated people in the centralized
quarantine areas. The goal was to provide daily meals for the poor, lottery ticket sellers, and manual laborer across the city. Despite living in the nation's largest metropolis, city residents have not sought to serve private, selfish or individual interests. When encountering danger and disaster, people seem to have thought of living according to traditional values. They strongly criticize the values that emphasize individual freedom that can cause injustice and undermine the common good of the community.

Figure 4: Ward 7, Go Vap District People's Committee organized the distribution of rice to poor residents impacted by COVID-19. Photo provided by Pham Thanh Thoi. In the neighborhoods, people quickly implemented government recommendations and trusted the policies for fighting the epidemic. On social networks, people have very quickly composed and shared songs, verses, and speeches with messages calling people to join hands with the whole country to fight the COVID-19 epidemic, such as: “staying home is loving your country” (ở nhà là yêu nước); “Lan’s is my name, ambling ain’t my game” (“tên tôi là Lan, tôi không đi lang
thang!”); “My name is Giàu, I don’t go to Vũng Tàu” (“tên tôi là Giàu, tôi không đi Vũng Tàu”), etc.

While carrying out social distancing, residents limited their own desires and needs. The choice to not go out unnecessarily and to not gather in crowds is a choice many feel expresses a volunteer spirit. Unlike many countries, it was not necessary in Ho Chi Minh City for the police force or military to come make arrests or issue fines in the days of social isolation. Many families and people prepared themselves by buying food in order to limit their movement. A lot of fun exercises and activities were shared online on social networks so everyone could feel that: “it’s still fun at home (“ở nhà vẫn vui”!”

Actions that were not carried out in the public interest were naturally condemned. City people did not go to the park. They wore masks and washed their hands when in public. They were also willing to close production and business facilities, and to avoid crowded places, including parks or spiritual and religious activities, when encouraged or required by state agencies. Many people accepted that they would lose their jobs and income and did not gather in groups to go out eating and drinking or attend parties and crowded wedding celebrations. They were also willing to hand over personal data to health control agencies without any objections or reactions. Almost all residents responded to a link the Ministry of Health sent to residents by phone, which allowed them to log in to and fill out an electronic health information form that would share health information with the Ministry of Health.
Whenever images appeared of crowds gathering, they would be quickly and severely criticized by the community. During this period, whenever someone went out without a mask they would be stared at and people would say they are living an uncivilized lifestyle. For example, in Phú Mỹ Hưng, a modern and civilized urban area with many parks and breezy streets (and also lots of security cameras and guards following people), it’s common for residents to exercise every morning among acquaintances (mostly walking, play badminton). However, during the period of social isolation (from April 1 to April 15), a clip posted on the online newspaper VNExpress.net captured some images of people walking in groups and hanging out to catch cool breezes at the Starlight Bridge, located in the Half Moon Lake section of Phú Mỹ Hưng. Immediately, hundreds of people began to criticize them, with many comments like: "The people's awareness here is too poor", "Everyone should restrain themselves, for the sake of society; for the community and for yourself, its necessary to strictly follow social distancing. We’re not going to die if we stay in the house for a few days or weeks, but if there is an outbreak, many people will die. Will you and your loved ones be safe then?" “Maybe you have a bit more civility within
you, you are just living selfishly in the community, and might try living a little bit less for just
yourself!”

Sharing and creating during the disaster

Vietnamese people traditionally cherish fairness and like to contribute things of value for a
common purpose whenever a disaster strikes. City residents have worked in conjunction with the
government's model for fighting the epidemic, so that no one is left behind. The "rice ATM"
model first appeared in Ho Chi Minh City, providing a system enabling people to make free rice
donations to the poor, and has spread to many cities across the country. This is an automatic rice
distributor, into which wealthier people can contribute rice. With the rice ATM model, every day
the city distributes hundreds of tons of rice to poor and low-income families. Creating models
like the "rice ATM" and the "Zero Đồng Supermarket" (which allows people to “buy” essential
food without paying a single Vietnamese Đồng), city residents have gathered more resources to
share and contribute to the success of the Vietnamese government’s social distancing policies
which are designed to prevent COVID-19. In addition, a group of young people joined together
to sew thousands of cloth masks to distribute free of charge to small traders working in markets,
as well as motorbike drivers, taxi drivers, and sanitation workers, all to fight COVID-19. At the
headquarters of Ho Chi Minh City Youth Union volunteers busily sewed cloth masks, dividing
up the stages of cutting threads, sewing, and vaccuming, creating an assembly line that looked
like a garment factory.
In short, with a tradition of community culture and a specific national governance model, Ho Chi Minh City has made a big difference in winning the COVID-19 pandemic. I agree with the opinion of Dr. Phạm Duy Nghĩa from the Fulbright University Vietnam, who said the following during an online conference held in April: “The COVID-19 disaster once again offers an insightful lesson on leadership and public administration: States may have different development paths but handling a crisis always requires that those in authority have responsibility towards the community, that the government has the capacity to act and the support and trust of the people.”

1 https://moh.gov.vn/hoat-dong-cua-lanh-dao-bo/-

2 Chiến thắng is a powerful word in Vietnamese implying a military victory.

3 This phrase became a slogan, akin to a social media hashtag, that inspired numerous social media posts and articles. For example, see https://thanhnien.vn/gioi-tre/o-nha-van-vui-1206305.html
