

GLOBAL CHANGE LEADERS CASE STUDY



Nguyen Thi Oanh

Launching Social Work in Vietnam

Jim Delaney

INTERNATIONAL CENTRE FOR WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP
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Nguyen Thi Oanh

Launching Social Work in Vietnam

Introduction

Nguyen Thi Oanh is best known in Vietnam as the founder of contemporary social work. Persevering through a time of great disruption and sorrow, she was central to the reconstruction of social work education and practice in southern Vietnam. She was among the first to pilot a new approach to social work, one that was based on the professionalization of the practice of social work through rigorous research, an understanding of science, as well as being founded on the principles of community empowerment and ownership. Among her many accomplishments, Madam Oanh was one of the founders of the Ho Chi Minh City Open University Department of Women's Studies and Social Work. During her life, she established many small organizations and institutions that supported and continue to support social development in southern Vietnam. But perhaps most importantly, Oanh's work was pivotal in bringing together a community of social workers and community development advocates, and maintaining their coherence during times of change. Combined with her ongoing work with the academic sector, this helped to establish social work as a profession in the country.

Vietnam and Social Work Education

There are few countries in Asia or in the world that have seen such tumultuous shifts as Vietnam over the past decades. While the Vietnam of today is among the fastest growing countries in the world and presented as a model of development, its path to prosperity has been paved in sorrow. Years of war with the French, and later America, civil strife, and ideological battles have had a profound influence on the institutions that provide services to the country's poor. The Vietnam War (known locally as the War of Liberation) ended in 1975, finally unifying the country with a single government under the leadership of the Communist Party of Vietnam. This period, and the American trade embargo that followed in the 1980s, saw Vietnam increasingly isolated from much of the world, as it pursued a path of socialist collectivization and nationalist reconstruction.

The challenge of reconstruction from war and isolation was particularly acute in the social services. Madam Oanh herself wrote that, "professional social work became non-existent after the revolution." (1997, pg. 26). During the turmoil of the late 1970s, most educated social workers and teachers from the National School of Social Work fled the country. Those who remained often went underground, afraid that they would be associated with the foreign ideas and institutions (many of them associated with the Catholic Church) that had played a strong role in building social work in the south of the country. Furthermore, in the euphoria of national liberation, many dismissed the very idea of social work and social work education. Surely, in a socialist society, no one would need social work, and the inequalities it addressed would soon fade away.

Building a socialist society has taken a path different from what the revolutionary leaders first envisioned. The American trade embargo of the 1980s, combined with unsuccessful economic policies, created a country that by the late 1980s was unable to feed itself. In the early 1990s, the Doi moi (or renovation) policy relaxed controls on private economic exchange and gradually opened Vietnam to the world. Today, in Vietnam's "market economy with socialist orientations" the strong role of market principles is acknowledged by the leadership of the Communist Party. The resulting economic growth of eight percent per year for the past decade has been among the highest in the world. But even with all of these successes, economic growth in the country has increased, rather than decreased, the need for social work. As the economy of Vietnam has grown, so has inequality (World Bank, 2003), and the need for social work as a profession and a sphere of practice.

The Founder of Social Work

In and around Ho Chi Minh City, social development professionals speak of Oanh as a major influence in their lives, and point to the range of organizations that she founded – at the university, in civil society, and on the street – as central to the city's social fabric. While Oanh's key achievements are in social work education, they cannot be understood in isolation to her practice as researcher, consultant and advisor to government and NGOs. But she was, above all, a teacher. To understand her path, and the way that she walked that path, requires only that we understand that learning and education were central to her life's work.

Madam Nguyen Thi Oanh was born in 1931 to a well-to-do family in southern Vietnam. She was educated in French schools and gained a reputation as a highly intelligent, though somewhat precocious, young girl. She passed away in 2009, following a long and eventful life that took her around the world to study, and teach social work and community development.

After having won a scholarship to attend university in the United States in the 1950s, Oanh admitted that her path to study social work was, in some ways, an accident. In her unofficial autobiography, she wrote that she "left Vietnam determined to become a diplomat, but a special meeting changed the course of my life." She later describes meeting a well-known member of the Catholic Scholarship Committee in the U.S. upon arrival, who upon hearing of her plans, explained to her that, "Vietnamese people will need you in Vietnam, not outside of the country. Why don't you study sociology, a new science that could help Vietnam's development?"(Oanh, 1997, pg. 14).

Oanh did decide to use her skills to aid in Vietnam's development, returning to the country following the completion of her studies in sociology in 1954. Her first job was at a hospital for displaced youth; she later worked as a volunteer with Catholic groups, helping refugees from the North re-settle following partition. But even with the focus on practical community work, she continued to maintain a connection to the world of education. In 1968, she was involved in creating the National School of Social work in Saigon with the assistance of the UNDP. Her early experiences with the school, and the people whom she met there from Vietnam and abroad, would be formative for her work in reconstructing social work education following the war.

Oanh's path was marked with opportunities to study and live overseas: first in Geneva, where she worked for one year and took courses in psychology and group organization, and then at the University of the Philippines, where she completed her Master's degree in Social Work in 1972 (one of the first to graduate with a degree from the newly-established community development program). In her unpublished biography, Oanh speaks of her transformative time in the Philippines. She had recently left Europe and returned to Southeast Asia, and realized just how important

it was to be home, or in this case, close to home. The smells and the textures of the Philippines resonated with her, as did the experiences of and problems faced by the country's poor. Furthermore, it was in the Philippines that she first became personally involved in activist and integrated approaches to community development. It was in many ways a discovery of new approaches to social development in an environment that was very familiar.

Privileged to be among the first Vietnamese to study social work at the graduate level, she was surprised to be told by many students and colleagues that what she was practicing with communities in Vietnam was not, in fact, social work. She became even more committed to overcoming academic debate and solving social problems, and upheld a lifelong commitment to bringing together different approaches rather than religiously holding on to one. For example, Oanh continued to balance a curiosity about international 'best practice' and spent much of her time learning about models of social work as practised elsewhere, including in North America and Europe and in other Asian countries. But this curiosity did not compromise her strong belief that outsiders could not and should not dictate what constituted social work in Vietnam. In the end, she struggled to find an approach that was premised on international practices but very much rooted in the realities and culture of her own nation.

Upon returning to Saigon from the Philippines in 1972, Oanh taught social work and the social sciences in a government school supported by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). This experience was difficult, as she was reminded of her distaste for officialdom, leading to her ultimate resignation to pursue other work. This experience foreshadowed future dealings with government. Oanh worked with government programs and networks of governance her entire life, as a teacher and as a consultant. She believed strongly in the role of the state and was critical of those who refused to support the new revolutionary government in the South for simple political or ideological reasons.

However, these engagements with government were always limited by her tendency to shy away from work environments that were highly bureaucratic. In fact, some of her past students and colleagues cite this as one of her great weaknesses as a leader; she was unable to work within large structures and, in so doing, failed to carve out a significant position for herself within a hierarchy. It is true that Oanh never became the rector of a major university, nor a senior official of a public or private body. But this, as will be shown below, was itself one of her major strengths as a leader, for she inspired and motivated people more through horizontal relationships based on affinity and trust than through hierarchical leadership structures.

Creating the Infrastructure for Social Work

The social work community that Oanh worked to create is national in scope, including government officials, university and college educators and staff of non-governmental and local organizations. But it was within her own home in Ho Chi Minh City that she had the most affinity and, in the end, the most influence. The network of social workers in Ho Chi Minh City is dispersed across numerous organizational homes, but several of Oanh's initiatives helped to bring them together. When sketching out the major communities and institutions that she founded, it is worth noting three in particular, each of which touched on different, yet overlapping, groups of individuals.

Oanh's most prominent and lasting contribution to Vietnamese society was the establishment, together with Thai Thi Ngoc Du, of the Department of Women's Studies and Sociology (later to become Social Work) at Ho Chi Minh City Open University in 1990. The year before, Oanh found-

ed the Social Development and Research Centre (SDRC), one of the first non-governmental social development research and practice organizations in post-war Vietnam. The SDRC has worked closely with international donors, non-governmental organizations and governments to further the cause of community development in southern Vietnam. Finally, she was involved in establishing numerous small institutions such as Mai Handicrafts, a social enterprise launched in 1992 to address issues of unemployment among Khmer youth, and the “Get Together Club” a group founded late in Oanh’s life to encourage increased discussion of important social issues in, and outside of, the social work profession. The Get Together Club (with only dozens of members) was perhaps the least recognized of her achievements, but one that many deem among her most important, for it offered a vehicle for the informal networking that was core to her approach. It was also the inspiration for a newly established “Mother and Child Club” that was formed to bring opportunities to a larger group of women interested in sharing experiences and learning social challenges and solutions.

Key Milestones

- 1974 – Opening of the Centre for Social Development.
- 1975–1980 – Turned to research, writing and reflection during a period of unemployment following the liberation of the South.
- 1980 – Attempted to open an Institute of Social Research without success.
- 1988 – Began to propose to develop a school of social work in Ho Chi Minh City, but this was not approved.
- 1989 – Founding of the Social Development and Research Centre (SDRC).
- 1990 – Opened the Ho Chi Minh City Open University Department of Women’s Studies and Sociology (with Thai Thi Ngoc Du) in 1990.

As an educator, one of Oanh’s most lasting achievements was the establishment of Vietnam’s first post-war academic department of social work. At the time the Department of Women’s Studies and Social Work was founded, the Ho Chi Minh City Open University was semi-private, and combined public education with a more flexible private model of delivery. As an ‘open’ university, it had the mandate to admit a wider range of students than the overburdened public universities, and to admit students on criteria other than simply the rigorous, government-managed entrance exams. In fact, the first courses offered by the department were part-time, and specifically tailored to meet the needs of young social workers that wanted to reflect on their practice and earn a qualification while working. Many social development professionals currently working in Ho Chi Minh City, for the government, for NGOs and for United Nations agencies such as United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF), speak fondly of those first classes in social work taken after working hours, and with a fascinating collection of young students drawn from different sectors and organizations. The new department certainly filled a niche in the city, which was at the time

experiencing astounding growth and new forms of poverty and exclusion associated with growing inequality and rampant rural-urban migration (Delaney, 2001).

During these initial years, the department also encountered a number of other challenges. Oanh was convinced that social work students and educators should be involved in practice through research and consulting. But the academic system of the early 1990s was based on a strict separation of research and teaching, whereby social science research was conducted in government research institutes (Oanh herself served as a member of the Southern Institute of Social Science for a period), while teaching was conducted in universities, with few lecturers involved in any form of research or practice. There was no official curriculum nor recognition of social work as a field of study, so Oanh chose instead to open a Department of Women's Studies and Sociology. While the title of the department was sociology, the focus of the teaching was very much on social work. Courses were often taught with one title and different content, ensuring that, while the lecturers followed regulations, the students were able to learn contemporary ideas that spoke to social work practice. The practice of forging small changes outside of official legal paths, known as 'fence-breaking' in Vietnamese, was in many ways the only option for Oanh and her colleagues. The fact that she began to teach social work without official approval, but in ways informally accepted by all, allowed her to pilot ideas and approaches that would be crucial to the later establishment of a formal, nation-wide curriculum.

One of the hallmarks of Oanh's approach was diversity. Rather than develop a large, monolithic organization (admittedly close to impossible in Vietnam for a private individual), she focused her attention on many small organizations. By networking with them, she brought together various individuals and groups, rather than large organizations, for a common cause. The approach to networking and networks was also evident in her commitment to the individuals with whom she worked. Her dogged attempts to help former students study overseas led her to work as one of the first advisors to the Ford Foundation's International Fellows Program in the 1990s. This allowed her to advance one of the main projects of her life: to provide learning opportunities for young people in the fields of social work and development. Her own transformative experiences abroad gave her the motivation to promote similar opportunities for future leaders. Indeed, many of her friends and colleagues point to this as her greatest achievement. One of her students counts as many as 50 people who studied social work or social development overseas on her recommendation, or through her introduction.

Challenges and Changes: The Growth of a Network

First and foremost, Oanh believed in the power of communities to solve their own problems with limited assistance from outsiders. This was the main difference between the social work she advocated and the approach that was practiced during these early years of unification. In the 1980s, with SDRC, she pioneered work in small-scale, participatory development projects, pursuing social development as a bottom-up process. In Ho Chi Minh City, while social development was supposed to involve communities, the practice was unquestionably top-down. Her work preceded, and envisioned, a revolution that was to occur in Vietnam a decade later, through the pursuit of 'grassroots democracy' and other forms of participatory planning. This commitment to the ability of people to work together to solve their own problems also stressed a rigorous approach to research and practice that was informed by social science and international research on social work. This

departed from what she and many of her collaborators saw as a dominant approach that valued charity in its own right without adequate foresight and reflection.

Oanh's many different projects were seemingly disconnected, but they were part of a whole. As she moved from one project to the next, she would take with her collections of past students, friends and other fellow travelers who shared her mission. She herself saw this movement as a group of individuals who came together from time to time to serve a common purpose. Writing about her first experiences bringing together this assemblage of social workers following Liberation in 1975, she explained that:

...we were around 30 social workers trying to reflect and involve ourselves with the people in their struggle for peace and liberation. After liberation each of us tried our best to integrate ourselves in new activities while continuing our reflection [and] work. (Oanh 1997, pg 53)

Later, when the country began to open up and new opportunities were available to become involved in social work, Oanh explained that the core of those working together to define social work as a profession came from those same "30 progressive social workers" (Oanh 1997, p. 53). That the same community of individuals was able to persevere was not only a testament to Oanh (she was, after all, a member of this community, not its leader), but also to the strength of their own bonds and commitment. This flexibility and commitment, based more on personal relationships than organizational structure, was very much a part of how Oanh exhibited leadership in all of her endeavours.

A significant challenge for Oanh was reconciling her own view of leadership and social change – that individuals and communities are at the centre of their own development – with her work in an intensely hierarchical society. Her own attempts to work within the government following reunification were not fruitful: she explained that she was "not made to be a civil servant" (Oanh 1997, pg. 46). Even if the role of civil servant was not for her, she valued the potential of government to transform society. She took many steps to reconcile her differences with those in positions of power. In 1992, she joined the 50-person Committee for Women and Families in Ho Chi Minh City, and retained close relationships with many people there to her death. Members of the committee speak of how Oanh had introduced them to progressive social work. It is telling that she was, and remains, respected, and indeed loved, by many government officials, even if her relationships with government institutions were strained.

As early as 1980, Oanh was invited to Hanoi to meet with members of the Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs to discuss social work training and practice before the war. She was careful to choose her words and concepts discreetly. Presenting herself as a psychologist and sociologist was much more appropriate than as a community development professional or social worker, and she knew that 'dispassionate' science, not advocacy, was more likely to win the hearts and minds of others.

Oanh's most lasting policy accomplishment was in influencing the development of the national social work education system, though her fingerprints can be seen all over social policy. In 2002, a national committee was formed to prepare a social work curriculum. She joined the committee and became a driving member for the integration of the lessons from her early experiments in Ho Chi Minh City. Oanh also represented many of those in the South who had been connected to earlier attempts to develop social work education. Those involved in the process relate how Oanh drew, not only on her contemporary knowledge, but also upon her rich experience with the Na-

tional School of Social Work in Saigon. In 2004, a framework for Social Work Education was released by the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET), formalizing lessons and curricula similar to those that Oanh and her colleagues had been teaching at the Open University for more than a decade. There are now 35 universities across Vietnam that teach social work, and the subject has become institutionalized through a national accreditation system.

The rapid growth of the system has brought its own challenges. Few teachers in the field have the dual focus on academic learning and professional practice that Oanh pursued and valued. She was a harsh critic of the system that she helped to create. Writing in the Youth (TuoiTre) newspaper in 2008, she argued that, “the system is very bad and lacks any competent teachers. Instead of social workers, we have psychologists and medical doctors teaching, who understand neither the theory of social work nor the practice.” Even in her own department at the Open University, Oanh’s vision of a professional, educated and experienced social work faculty is only now being realized. She was fortunate to see its beginnings, but had to hand off the fulfillment of that dream to others.

Oanh’s hope was to see the creation of a formal community or network of social workers. For much of her life, she worked informally, and through various networks, to make this happen. Today, there is a national association of social work based in Hanoi, with a membership spanning the country. The association, established in cooperation with the Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs (MOLISA), is the official representative group of social workers in Vietnam. The existence of this group, while a testament to her own work, has made it more, not less, difficult for the autonomous organization of social workers to argue for the necessity of independent networks or unions of social workers. Social workers in Ho Chi Minh City, for example, would have to be established as a sub-group. For social workers interested in specific aspects of the practice, gaining formal recognition can also be difficult. So while Oanh’s past students and colleagues have established an informal network of social workers in southern Vietnam, their dream of a formal association remains elusive.

Outcomes of Oanh’s work have affected her own practice of and beliefs in how social work and social work education should operate. First, the expansion of social work education has left universities without the professional social work teachers that she believed were so important to the sector. And, second, the development of a national association of social workers became centrally managed and, consequently, did not fully reflect the diversity of social work practice and practitioners.

Oanh continues to inspire those who have taken up her mantle. The social workers she trained in Ho Chi Minh City have flourished in their informal association, meeting regularly, and developing connections with international organizations such as the Coady International Institute where they learn about the use of Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) in social work. Like their mentor, they do not see themselves as working against an increasingly formal national system, but rather within and alongside it. Their principles of networking, learning and personal growth indeed speak very much to the impact of Oanh’s leadership.

On Leadership

One of her students and collaborators reflects on Oanh's leadership style. He states that Oanh, in all of her work, was strategic, making decisions based both on information and opportunity. She never wavered from her dream to reform social work education and practice, and that is what she succeeded in doing. In her practice of leadership, Oanh brought people together with opportunities to learn from, and with, each other. No individual can accomplish change in isolation, her student explained when considering Oanh's perspective on change: "it was only through building a network of social workers that her dream could be realized."

The focus on groups and networks, as with many of Oanh's beliefs, came as much from theory as practice. She often remarked that, during her time studying in Geneva, two of the most interesting courses were on the topics of organizational development and working in groups. These were central to her future work as a teacher, and she wrote a number of texts on the subject herself. However, it was her own work in establishing groups, from formal institutions to informal collections of like-minded individuals chatting in a "Get Together Club" that marked Oanh's own personal style of leadership. Indeed, her membership in the community of Ho Chi Minh City, in which she was involved throughout her life, gave her ideas such strength and resonance. She could very easily have remained outside the country following her American education, as did so many of her contemporaries. Oanh could also have attempted to climb the bureaucratic ladder through work with a government ministry or mass organization. But she remained a product of her roots in southern Vietnam, and refused to remove herself from the community that made her what she was. In the words of one of her collaborators, she was somebody who "walked the walk." This was as evident in her approach to leadership as it was in her teaching. For Oanh, community development was the most viable social work practice, and it was the natural extension of this practice to focus on developing a network of social professionals.

Oanh seldom strayed from her identity as an educator. Many of her former students, themselves now leaders of the Ho Chi Minh City social work community, tell of how she exacted high standards in her teaching, but taught by modelling these high standards herself. First, her approach was demanding and critical. She asked students to think through their own solutions to problems rather than draw upon preconceived responses, both in the classroom and outside it. She could have a fierce temper, particularly in government meetings, and it earned her enemies, but it also ensured that her views were heard, even when they were unpopular. This commitment to her beliefs may have kept her from entering a formal position in government or taking on a leadership position in a large organization.

At the same time, Oanh was unpretentious. In the words of one young social work researcher who has taken Oanh as a role model, she was able to "influence in a very common way" with "no glamour, no flashy degrees." Perhaps because of this closeness, people referred to Oanh by a Vietnamese term that means 'auntie', rather by another form of address that connotes a distant, respected 'grandmama'. As such, Oanh's authority stemmed not so much from her formal education, experience and age, but rather from relationships she established. While her leadership was based on teacher-student relationships, it was also explicitly horizontal rather than hierarchical. The warmth felt towards her, conveyed by students and colleagues, remains palpable, though it is difficult to explain to those who did not experience it first-hand. In fact, what is perhaps most telling about Oanh's achievements is that, though universally acknowledged, they were hard to pin down.

Second, Oanh's style of teaching practice was often based on modelling. Her younger colleagues tell of "following Oanh around," as she asked them to come with her to training sessions, meetings and other events to observe, and later to contribute to. But one of her students clarified that even though all had their opportunities to follow Oanh, "you were never allowed to simply copy. She would force you to think for yourself and find your own solutions to ways to work." After weeks and months of doing so "you would soon find yourself leading a meeting or workshop... you would be taking control."

It was a form of leadership that one colleague called "democratic leadership": the ability to bring out the best in others and focus on actualizing their strengths. This is not to say that Oanh was a pushover. As noted above, she was a fierce critic of those in power, just as she was critical of her friends and students when she felt that they were not living up to expectations. Her capacity for critical reflection made her many friends, but it was also unnerving to many, especially those in power.

Final Message

Nguyen Thi Oanh's impact on the social work community in Vietnam was, and continues to be, profound. She brought together a network of social workers and maintained their ties through times of rapid change. She believed strongly that no matter what Vietnam's ideological path, there was a need for an educated and experienced cadre of social workers and institutions to support them. In 2003, at the annual meeting for social science in Ho Chi Minh City she described the major lessons of her own life as "patience, dealing with suffering, and self-control." These were the qualities that allowed her to persevere through challenging times.

Oanh's goals may be only partially realized today, but they are well on their way to fulfillment. Given what we know about her as a person, we can imagine that she would be the first to understand how many of the challenges were outside of her control, and how her country and community follow a path that she could only influence in small ways. Near the end of her life, Oanh wrote in her memoirs (1997) that "The difficult things that I cannot answer are the following questions: Who am I? Where will I go? What will tomorrow bring?" These questions marked her ability to reflect on her work, and to think beyond herself, spawning her ethical leadership approach. While she could not answer her own questions, Oanh brought together many others in a common cause to influence a future that remains a work in progress.

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