

# История и культура

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## SYMBOLIZING (IN)DEPENDENCE: VIETNAM, INTERCOSMOS, AND THE STRATEGIC AMBIGUITY OF LATE SOCIALIST RITUAL

**Abstract.** This paper uses Pham Tuan’s journey into space in July 1980 as part of the Soviet-led Intercosmos 37 mission to explore how Vietnamese represented themselves and their relationship to the USSR during the late Cold War period. It is based on the news coverage, speeches, and imagery that documented the mission and commemorated its success in issues of the Vietnamese People’s Army daily newspaper (Báo Quân Đội Nhân Dân) and the photo archives of the Vietnam News Agency (Thông Tấn Xã Việt Nam). These sources reveal how Vietnamese put the symbolic ambiguity of Intercosmos to strategic use. On the one hand, their participation in the rituals of a kind of socialist “communion” confirmed their membership in a Soviet-led community. On the other hand, however, Vietnamese asserted a unique and independent role within that community.

**Keywords:** Vietnam, USSR, Cold War, international relations, Intercosmos, space exploration.

### Introduction

On July 23, 1980, the Vietnamese pilot Pham Tuan became the first Asian and the first citizen of a developing nation to fly in space when he participated in the 7-day, 20-hour, and 42-minute Soyuz 37 mission to the Salyut space station. Tuan’s historic spaceflight took place as part of the Soviet-led Intercosmos program that saw 14 citizens of allied and friendly nations undertake missions in space beginning in 1978. The Salyut and its successor Mir programs contributed to major advances in fields such as physics, space biology and medicine, and remote sensing. Contributions of certain socialist allies — such as the German Democratic Republic who supplied the programs’ advanced optical sensing equipment — were an important part of this success. At the same time, missions reflected the priorities of the participating nations. In Vietnam’s case, this included the first-ever surveys of Vietnamese territory from space, producing data important for the nation’s postwar recovery and development. Yet practically speaking, there was little reason for “research cosmonauts” like Pham Tuan to take part: they did nothing their Soviet counterparts couldn’t already do.

Nevertheless, the ritual went on, launch after launch, ally after ally, for a decade. From training in Star City to launch from Baikonur to the triumphant return to their home country, the ceremony of socialist space solidarity unfolded with precision<sup>1</sup>. Rituals like these, which included eve-

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<sup>1</sup> Spaceflight in general is well-known for being highly ritualized. The utility of some rituals, like multiple safety checks, is clear; for others, like astronauts’ pre-launch poker game, or cosmonauts tradition of watching the film “White Sun of the Desert”, it’s less so.

rything from sporting events to international exhibitions to student exchanges, provide an important way into the cultural and symbolic dimensions of a conflict more often framed in terms of ideology, security, or international relations. They also provide a way to understand the “Cold War” from new perspectives, shifting our vision of the conflict from supposed centers like Moscow or Washington to places like Hanoi or Havana.

This paper uses Pham Tuan’s spaceflight to explore how Vietnamese represented themselves and their relationship to the USSR during the late-Cold War period. It is based on the news coverage, official speeches, and imagery that documented the mission and commemorated its success in issues of the Vietnamese People’s Army daily newspaper (*Báo Quân Đội Nhân Dân*) and the photo archives of the Vietnam News Agency (*Thông Tấn Xã Việt Nam*). These sources reveal how Vietnamese put the symbolic ambiguity of Intercosmos to good use. On the one hand, their participation in the rituals of a kind of socialist “communion” confirmed their membership in a Soviet-led community. On the other hand, however, Vietnamese asserted a unique and independent role within that community.

### Literature review

Until recently, Cold War rhetoric reinforced by latent Orientalism often contributed to an understanding of states like the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) and its successor the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV) as, at best, dependent, and at worst “puppets” or “proxies” of Cold War “superpowers.” More recently, however, scholars have sought to recover the agency and initiative of local actors. In the case of the DRV, Lien-Hang T. Nguyen has revealed the contested decision-making processes behind “Hanoi’s War” [Nguyen 2012]. In the sphere of economics, Vladimir Mazyrin and Adam Fforde have argued that Vietnamese policymakers knowingly risked censure from the CPSU as they experimented with economic policy and gradually departed from socialist economic models in the 1980s [Mazyrin, Fforde 2018: 123—124]. And shifting the focus to international relations, Balazs Szalontai has used the archives of the Eastern bloc foreign policy working group, *Interkit*, to explore the complex interdependence that characterized the Vietnamese-Soviet relationship in this period and the determination of Vietnamese to preserve the DRV/SRV’s independence and promote its interests [Szalontai 2017: 385—403]. This paper is based on the premise that we can read this sort of (in)dependence not only in wartime strategy, economic policy, or international relations, but also in theatre, ritual, and symbol. Read in this light, Intercosmos is transformed from a late-Cold War curiosity to an ideal tool for promoting a socialist solidarity that encompassed equal parts dependence and independence, and was based as much on shared ideals as divergent goals.

### Cosmic theatre

Theatre and symbol have been inherent in space exploration from the beginning. Soviet and American space programs were powerful tools for asserting the superiority of their respective nations and ideologies. The Soviets took an early lead in this public relations race, and a string of space firsts demonstrated the achievements of Soviet science and industry to the world. To take the most obvious example, Sputnik 1, the first artificial satellite, launched in 1957 — with its easily captured radio signal, a trajectory that took it across the American night sky, and a carefully polished alloy skin that made it visible to earthbound observers — was clearly intended as a sign for audiences around the world.

While Americans may have reacted to early Soviet successes with a mixture of amazement at the dawning of a new age, dismay at the apparent inadequacies of their own space program, and fear at the threat of a future Soviet ICBM force, for the people of the USSR events like the launch of Sputnik or Yuri Gagarin's journey into space held different meanings. The historian of science Loren Graham, present at Gagarin's triumphal Red Square reception in April 1961, writes that the day marked "the apogee in Soviet citizens' belief that they held the key to the future of civilization. The celebrations on the street were genuine and heartfelt. Soviet science was, they were sure, the best in the world, and Soviet rockets succeeded where American ones failed" [Graham 2006: 18—19]. More personally, his journey held out the promise that they, or at least their children, might one day also escape the struggles and privations of life in the USSR of 1961 and be transported to another, more perfect world.

As this passage makes clear, space programs did more than just demonstrate the achievements of a nation's science and the might of its industry. They inspired people to dream and to do. The men and women who travelled in space were a crucial part of realizing this effect. Just as early astronauts were made to embody "All-American" values, cosmonauts' public image was carefully controlled to ensure they embodied — or at least seemed to embody — the virtues of the Soviet "New Man" in all aspects of their professional and private lives [Hersch 2012; Gerovitch 2015]. Upon their return to earth, early space explorers like Gagarin and Valentina Tereshkova were subjected to exhausting programs of public appearances at home and abroad. These brave yet friendly young men and women, simultaneously exemplary and ordinary, helped shift international opinion regarding the USSR and the Eastern Bloc. The historian of the Soviet space program Slava Gerovitch writes how "Gagarin's natural charisma, geniality, and openness began to shape a new image of the Soviet man abroad. The old imagery — the menacing-looking dictator Stalin, the dogmatic Party bureaucrat, and the stern Soviet soldier — was replaced by this cheerful and charming young man" [Gerovitch 2015: 139].

By July 1980, however, much had changed. After initially lagging behind the Soviets, the Americans were the first to reach the moon in 1969. Nevertheless, the termination of their own moon program in 1974 — only acknowledged in the 1990s — allowed the Soviets to shift resources to the building of manned space stations. In 1977, they launched the Salyut 6 space station, the first capable of simultaneous docking by two spacecraft as well as resupply by uncrewed freighters [Portree 1995]. These technologies made it the first space station effectively capable of continuous habitation. The contrast with the American Skylab space station, damaged on launch in 1973 and which fell to earth spectacularly in 1979, was clear. Soviet propagandists made the most of the opportunity: on July 19, 1980, the long-duration crew of Salyut 6, Leonid Popov and Valery Ryumin, took part in another great Cold War ritual when their greetings were beamed to the assembled athletes and spectators at the opening ceremonies of the Summer Olympics via a live television link. With carefully choreographed events like these, the USSR demonstrated to the world that their space program had not been eclipsed: the Americans may have explored the moon, but the Soviets would colonize space.

Along with this shift from exploration to colonization came important shifts in narrative. Rather than brave explorers going ever higher and farther, cosmonauts were transformed in selfless scientists, enduring hardships and facing risks on the final frontier in order to advance scientific knowledge for all humanity. And they could bring their friends along as well. In 1978, Vladimír Remek of Czechoslovakia became the first non-Soviet in space when he spent eight days aboard the Salyut 6 space station. In this way, Intercosmos flights did more than reassert the primacy of Soviet science and technology. They also underlined an ideological commitment to internationalism and a socialist solidarity that embraced both the developed and developing world. Most important, they were intended to reward — or even shore up — the support of key allies.

## Shared visions

This is clearly the context in which Central Committee General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev placed Pham Tuan's mission. In his speech at the August 26, 1980 ceremony that saw the Vietnamese cosmonaut awarded the title of Hero of the Soviet Union, Brezhnev stressed regularity, normalcy, and the multilateral nature of the Intercosmos program. For him, "the visits to the USSR's orbital station by the research cosmonauts of the Socialist nations have already become a regular occurrence. The representatives of Czechoslovakia, Poland, the German People's Republic, Bulgaria, Hungary have all worked productively in orbit together with Soviet cosmonauts. All of us are now especially pleased to know that now they have been joined by a representative from Vietnam" [Liên Xô: 27.08.1980].

Yet the regularity of Intercosmos disguised only partially the way Phạm Tuân's mission differed from the others. After years of charting a course between the two poles of the Sino-Soviet split, in 1978 the breakdown of relations with China had finally compelled Vietnamese communists to choose a side. The Vietnamese space mission — preparations for which began immediately after the signing of the Treaty of Peace and Friendship in November 1978 — was confirmation of this major strategic shift for all involved. When he gave the analog of Brezhnev's speech in Hanoi two days later, National Assembly President Truong Chinh placed this shift in a longer history of Vietnamese-Soviet unity. For him, the mission symbolized the "battle-tested solidarity of the two parties, the two states, the two peoples of the two nations of Vietnam and the Soviet Union forever united whether on the earth or in space, always arm-in-arm in the task of building socialism and communism, in the battle against American-led imperialism and the battle against the gang of Chinese expansionists and hegemonists along with all the other reactionary forces, in order to safeguard the global socialist system and peace and friendship among all peoples" [Trường Chinh: 29.08.1980].

Alone among the Intercosmos participants, for Vietnamese the promised payoff of socialism had been deferred for three long decades of war. Thus, for Truong Chinh, Pham Tuan's mission represented more than a simple recognition of a new strategic partnership. It also represented the Soviet obligation to realize the task of building socialism, not simply in an abstract, global sense, but in the here and now of 1980s Vietnam. The mission "illustrates once again the preeminent character of the socialist system, the mighty power of the Soviet economy and its advanced science and technology, the cornerstone of the world revolutionary movement." More important, it was "an eloquent expression of the great and effective assistance in the spirit of international proletarianism of the Soviet Union for Vietnam in the task of building socialism" [Trường Chinh: 29.08.1980]. Much like an earlier generation of Soviet citizens for whom early space firsts had accompanied other, more tangible developments like the construction of Khrushchevka flats, the expansion of the national electrical grid, and increased availability of consumer goods, for Vietnamese in 1980 Pham Tuan's spaceflight was meant to symbolize the way rapid economic and social development was imminent, thanks to a combination of Soviet aid and Vietnamese hard work.

Few rituals were better suited to represent the achievements of Soviet science and technology and the forthcoming payoff of "Vietnamese-Soviet friendship." News coverage featured images of the Salyut 6 space station, the massive Soyuz-U on the launchpad, and the giant screens and banks of computers at mission control in Star City. Photos of Pham Tuan in training symbolized how Vietnamese would master these advanced technologies with the help of their Soviet brothers: Tuan accepting, with apparent joy, a stack of study materials on the theory of spaceflight from his Soviet tutor, or confidently carrying out checks on a mockup of the space station under the watchful eye of the experienced cosmonaut Viktor Gorbatko. As Tuan explained to a reporter, "Before, I was just a farmer's child, born in a thatched hut, tending the buffalos and growing rice; now I've taken on an extremely difficult and complicated mission. Victor Gorbatko told me, 'No problem at all,

Tuan. I also had to start from A, B, C: together, we'll be able to do it all.' Not much later, he himself made it known that the Soviet-Vietnamese flight crew had grasped the entire program and that there were no more difficult problems" [Thế giới: 27.07.1980].

But while the emphasis might differ, in many ways Pham Tuan's mission performed similar sorts of symbolic work for Brezhnev and Truong Chinh, Soviets and Vietnamese. Vietnam has taken its place in a socialist community where the USSR plays a pre-eminent role. The achievements of Soviet science and technology have been acknowledged. Scientific research has been carried out for the benefit of all. And hardworking Vietnamese younger brothers were learning fast thanks to the care and attention of their Soviet elders. Given their circumstances, Chinh and the Vietnamese could be forgiven for placing more emphasis on the strategic and material benefits of the relationship.

### Independent trajectories

Yet Intercosmos could do other symbolic work, less easily encompassed in Soviet visions. One was to assert other kinds of socialist community not exclusively oriented towards Moscow. On July 27, *Quân đội nhân dân* published the first of two articles summarizing international reaction to the Soyuz 37 mission. The order of nations is significant, beginning with Cuba and Laos before proceeding to the USSR, Mongolia, the GDR, Hungary, India, and France. By placing Cuba first, the article underlined Vietnam's status as a member of a revolutionary vanguard of just two nations who had successfully resisted American imperialism<sup>1</sup>. It also harkened to an important "South-South" connection that encompassed not only strong Cuban support for the DRV/SRV through war and reconstruction, but also internationalist institutions like the Organization of Solidarity with the People of Asia, Africa and Latin America. And by including India and France, the article made it clear that despite reliance on Soviet aid and technical assistance, Vietnam remained an independent, non-aligned state (nước không liên kết) enjoying the support and sympathy of nations around the world. As Cuban television explained to the people, "Vietnam, a nation which has already endured decades of struggle against American imperialism, today is the first non-aligned country in the world to fly in space. A worthy representative of the people of President Ho Chi Minh, heroes a thousand times over, has ascended into space" [Thế giới: 27.07.1980].

Another theme to emerge from Vietnamese coverage of Soyuz 37 was Indochinese solidarity. In the case of Laos, the same article reported that the success of Pham Tuan and Viktor Gorbalko's mission had been "especially joyful news." The General Secretary of the Foreign Ministry described the "infinitely excited rejoicing [of the people] upon hearing of this historic achievement of political, economic, and scientific significance. He emphasized that this is a victory for the spirit of solidarity and the complete cooperation between the Soviet Union and Vietnam specifically, between the Soviet Union and the brotherhood of socialist nations more generally. At the same time, it is a great encouragement for all citizens of Laos, steadfastly building and defending the fatherland. This is also a victory for Laos, for all nations of Indochina, for all nations of Asia, and all the nations of the third world" [Thế giới: 27.07.1980]. Two days later, Truong Chinh would echo the sentiments of the Lao Foreign Secretary when he described how "Proud of this great success, we citizens of Vietnam, shoulder to shoulder with the citizens of Laos and the citizens of Cambodia, will further strengthen solidarity and total cooperation with the great Soviet Union and all the other fraternal socialist nations, and strengthen friendly solidarity with all progressive peoples in the shared struggle for peace, national independence, and democracy and social progress in Indochina, Southeast Asia, and the world" [Trường Chinh: 29.08.1980]. If Intercosmos could encode Soviet primacy wit-

<sup>1</sup> It also set the stage for the next Intercosmos mission, which would see Cuban Arnaldo Tamayo Méndez fly in September.

hin the global socialist community, then Phạm Tuân's mission could do similar work for the Vietnamese in Indochina.

Ultimately, it was the triumph of Vietnamese communists over American imperialism that allowed them to claim this role. And Phạm Tuân embodied that triumph perfectly. The decorated fighter pilot was one of only two people in history credited with having downed an American B-52 "Stratofortress"<sup>1</sup>. Coverage of his spaceflight continually referred to his wartime record, but one article in particular stands out. In it, the author related how before the fateful combat, Tuân had told his comrades how, "We're not foolhardy men, but if required we can use our planes as missiles," that is, as part of a suicidal attempt to down American bombers. The article explained how "by making this determination, Tuân brought peace to his spirit. This is how he was able to sleep soundly. And this is how he had the strength of mind, the sense of calm, and the fearlessness to engage the enemy" [Từ trận thắng: 27.07.1980].

By highlighting Tuân's wartime record and his determination to complete his mission no matter the cost, the article did more than confirm his status as an exemplary hero and morally suitable representative of the Vietnamese people. It also reminded audiences of the sacrifices Vietnamese had made during the long years of war and their readiness to make the ultimate sacrifice for the fatherland. While Viktor Gorbatko may have been the older, more experienced cosmonaut, Tuân and millions of Vietnamese had been the vanguard of the struggle against US-led imperialism in ways few Soviet citizens ever would. If they were now dependent on Soviet aid and technical assistance, they certainly deserved it. And their wartime record was proof that the aid, once given, would be put to good use for the Vietnamese people as much as for the global socialist community.

One of the most explicit expressions of this confidence in the nation's world-historical role occurs in a propaganda poster commemorating Phạm Tuân's mission. In it, two smiling cosmonauts in spacesuits fill the foreground. Behind them, an elliptical projection of the earth's surface is festooned with flags proclaiming "peace" in various languages and girded with factories emitting the pollution of industrial progress. If not for the curious patterns covering the base of their helmets, it might be possible to dismiss the fact that both cosmonauts, one wearing a helmet marked "Việt Nam" and the other "СССР," share the same yellow-hued skin. But Vietnamese would immediately recognize the decorative patterns as those of the bronze-age Đông Sơn culture conventionally represented as the origin of the nation [Lê Thiệp 2001]. At a stroke, the mission has been transformed from a Soviet one to Vietnamese. This remarkable assertion of ownership speaks of pride in the nation's past and confidence in its ability to build a better future — not to mention an Indochinese sphere of interest — on its own terms.

## Conclusion

On January 17, 1980, the famed revolutionary poet and Politburo member Tô Hữu composed "Poem for a spring bough" (Bài thơ Một nhánh xuân). The poem, written to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the Vietnamese Communist Party, was composed in the knowledge of Phạm Tuân's impending mission. It contained the following lines, still well-known in Vietnam today: "Rubber sandals on our feet/But boarding spacecraft" ("Chân dép lốp/Mà lên tàu vũ trụ"). The lines evoked the sandals made from recycled tire treads famously worn by soldiers in the Resistance War against America, linking their recent victory over a technologically superior enemy with today's task of realizing the Party's vision of rapid industrialization, economic and social development, and participation in a community of advanced socialist nations. Left implicit was the fact the spacecraft would be engineered, built, and piloted by their Soviet friends.

<sup>1</sup> The US Air Force disputes this claim, holding that the aircraft was downed by a surface-to-air missile.

Like the Intercosmos mission it anticipated, the poem could sustain multiple meanings, some more explicit than others. Which ones inspired and which ones did not was up to individual members of the audience. At the time, To Huu's exhortation to "imagine soaring in their dreams" ("Mà cứ tưởng bay trong mơ ước") must have resonated with many Vietnamese, but the destination they dreamed of wasn't in space, or even a future Vietnam, but rather a refugee camp across the sea, or perhaps a factory in Dresden. But other Vietnamese, and even some of their Soviet comrades, would have been inspired to imagine how Pham Tuan's spaceflight — and Soviet assistance — might link Vietnam's immense wartime sacrifice to a glorious, independent, and socialist future.

Intercosmos may have been a form of late-Cold War theatre, but it was useful theatre. On the one hand, it was a rite of socialist "communion" drawing on a shared symbolic vocabulary of solidarity, internationalism, exemplary new men and women, the achievements of Soviet science and industry, and the benevolent hierarchy that "friendship" with the USSR implied. To this common understanding of the ritual's meaning, however, Vietnamese added their own. For them, Pham Tuan's mission could suggest other communities and other, more equal kinds of friendship with nations like Cuba or France. It could confirm Vietnam's own hierarchical "friendship" in Indochina. Above all, it could remind audiences of the immense price its people had paid to defeat imperialism and the efforts they would now make to build socialism in Asia. The result, as depicted in Le Thiệp's poster, allowed Vietnamese to take symbolic ownership of Intercosmos 37, just as they would take ownership of their future. Far from being a curious footnote to larger issues of strategy or economy, the Intercosmos program was a productive socialist ritual whose utility for Soviets and Vietnamese alike flowed from its strategic ambiguity. And in turn, the Intercosmos 37 mission is an example of how Vietnamese in the late-Cold War used this ambiguity to represent symbolically their real (in)dependence.

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**СИМВОЛЫ (НЕ)ЗАВИСИМОСТИ:  
ВЬЕТНАМ, ИНТЕРКОСМОС  
И СТРАТЕГИЧЕСКАЯ НЕОПРЕДЕЛЁННОСТЬ  
РИТУАЛОВ ПОЗДНЕГО СОЦИАЛИЗМА**

**Аннотация.** Статья использует полёт Фам Туана в космос в июле 1980 г. в рамках программы Intercosmos, осуществлённой Советским Союзом, для изучения представления вьетнамцев о самих себе и своих отношениях с СССР в конечный период холодной войны. Статья основана на освещении новостей, выступлений и фотографий, посвящённых полёту и отразивших его успех, в выпусках ежедневной газеты Вьетнамской народной армии (Báo Quân Đội Nhân Dân) и фотоархива Вьетнамского агентства новостей (Thông Tấn Xã Việt Nam). Авторский анализ показывает, как вьетнамцы использовали символическую неопределённость Интеркосмоса для стратегических целей. С одной стороны, их участие в ритуалах своего рода социалистической «общности» подтверждало их принадлежность к советскому лагерю. С другой стороны, следует признать, что в этом сообществе вьетнамцы играли уникальную и независимую роль.

**Ключевые слова:** Вьетнам, СССР, холодная война, международные отношения, Интеркосмос, освоение космоса.

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