

Vương Hồng Sển

(王鴻盛, Wang Hongsheng, 1902–96)

Memoirist, antique collector, and scholar, Vietnam

Vương Hồng Sển is best known as a memoirist, collector of Chinese antiques, self-taught scholar, and author of the most popular history of Saigon published in the twentieth century. Born in the Deep South of Vietnam and raised in the town of Sóc Trăng, he was the only survivor of eight children (all boys) of a Khmer–Chinese mother and a Chinese–Vietnamese father. His name, Sển, was transcribed from the Chinese–dialect pronunciation of the word *Thanh* or *Thịnh* (盛) rather than from Vietnamese. His paternal ancestors came from Fujian, and moved first to Cambodia, then to Vietnam. By the generation of his grandfather, the family had been involved in the leadership of the local chapter of the Heaven-and-Earth Society (*Thiên Địa Hội*, 天地会). Vương attended the local primary school, and then went to Saigon’s oldest high school, the Collège Chasseloup–Laubat, which was later renamed Lycée Jean–Jacques Rousseau and, subsequently, Lê Quý Đôn High School.

While at school and elsewhere in Saigon, he came to know the journalist and revolutionary, Nguyễn An Ninh, and several subsequently prominent political figures, including the non–communist, Hồ Văn Ngà, and the Trotskyists, Phan Văn Hùm and Trần Văn Thạch. He was not interested in revolution, however, but in reading, antiques, and classical theatre. In fact, he later blamed his love of reading as a contributing factor to the dissolution of his short-lived first marriage. His second marriage lasted nineteen years, but also ended in divorce and with no children. Even though Vương was never legally wedded again, he lived for most of the remainder of his life

with Nguyễn Kim Chung (stage name, Năm Sa Đéc), a performer of *cải lương*, the southern classical folk musical theatre that is commonly translated as “reformed theatre” in English.

After graduating from Chasseloup–Laubat, Vương joined the colonial bureaucracy at the secretarial rank in the Deep South. He worked in payroll and tax collection, but aspired to higher positions. Working towards this goal, he passed the “general knowledge” section of the colonial examination, then attempted the “specialization” section eight times, but failed each one. In addition to his divorces, these academic setbacks led him to name one of his memoirs, *More Than Half of a Failed Life* (*Hơn nửa Đời hư*) self-deprecatingly. Yet these failures also led him to concentrate on writing and collecting Chinese antique porcelain. Vương’s various recollections suggested that he was a smart collector, who managed to acquire rare Ming porcelain with a small amount of money during the economic downturn of the early 1930s. The hobby helped land him the directorship at the National Museum in Saigon in 1948. He was forced into early retirement in 1964, probably for political reasons associated with the death of the first president of the Republic of Vietnam, Ngô Đình Diệm, the year earlier. However Vương remained very active in the cultural life of Saigon, and continued to collect his antiques and write on the subject well into the last decade of his life.

Besides being well known as a collector, Vương’s reputation has been synonymous with the book, *Saigon in the Old Days* (*Sài Gòn Năm Xưa*), first published in 1960 and still the single, best known title about the city. (A less consequential sequel was published in Vietnam and the United States in the 1990s.) Reflecting the nationalist sensibilities among non–communist intellectuals at the time, the book began unapologetically with the “Southward Movement” (*Nam tiến*) conducted by the Vietnamese state in the

early modern era that eventually overtook land from the Champa and Khmer kingdoms. Sển's interpretation, however, was anything, but narrowly nationalistic. The book focused on the early Nguyễn Dynasty (1802–1945) and the colonial era, and described Saigon as the result of multiple transnational influences: Khmer, Vietnamese, Chinese, and French. It paid attention, for example, to the various linguistic origins of important sites in the area.

It also highlighted the cultural and economic contributions from a variety of sources: Vietnamese mandarins and men of letters, French missionaries, ethnic Chinese merchants, and Vietnamese women.

Besides the transnational outlook, *Saigon in the Old Days* reflected strong contemporary interest in the local history of the southern half of Vietnam. The 1960s in particular saw a number of lasting works in this genre from the Saigon presses. They include *The Land of Bình Định* (*Non nước Bình Định*) by the poet Quách Tấn, *The Old Capitol Hue* (*Cố đô Huế*) by government official Thái Văn Kiểm, the series, *The Vietnamese country* (*Giang sơn Việt Nam*), on the central provinces, by Nguyễn Đình Tư, and the series *Past and Present* (*Xưa và Nay*), on the southern cities, by Huanh Minh. Similar to these works, Vương's book concentrated on geography and cultural developments. Like them, it aimed to persuade readers that the ties of the southern cities and provinces to the Vietnamese nation were just as deep as those of the north.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Vương revised *Saigon in the Old Days* and published several other important books. Besides producing a son, his union with Nguyễn Kim Chung helped bring about *Memoir of Fifty Years of Loving Music* (1968) on the subject of reformed theatre. Similar to most of Vương's books, this memoir-cum-history is somewhat clumsily organized. Its sources, however, are rich: his recollections of performances seen in

Saigon and other southern cities and towns; lyrics and programme descriptions of a number of *cải lương* plays, and writings by others that are usually quoted at length. This combination and the characteristically intimate style of his writing helped make the book one of the most popular on the subject.

The memoir was followed by the series, *Special Journal on Admiration for the Past* (*Hiếu Cổ Đặc San*). The series consisted of nine volumes, but three were lost to flooding, and only the first six were published between 1970 and 1972. The first two volumes discuss, respectively, countryside hobbies and various entertainment such as, falconry and cockfighting, and reading classical Chinese fiction. The remaining volumes are concerned with the subject of Chinese antiques. Two of them collected Vương's published and new essays that characteristically combine scholarship with personal experience to convey, among other things, the rich influence of Chinese arts on Vietnamese culture. The books are also richly sourced in French and Chinese materials. The other two volumes are translations of a guide on Chinese antiques by the French author, Daisy Lion-Goldschmidt; and the eighteenth-century Chinese classic, *Pottery Records of Jingdezhen*, respectively. The first translation provides a useful introduction to the variety of Chinese porcelain and pottery, and the second explains the production process and important terminology related to the most famous pottery-producing region in Chinese history. In some ways, Vương's translations reflect twentieth-century western interest in Chinese antiques. Although fluent in Chinese, for instance, he translated the latter from the French version rather than the Chinese original. Similar to his other major publications, they were not circulated in the decade following the Vietnam War, but have appeared in reprints since the early 1990s. Before his death, he donated his antique collection to the Vietnamese state



for the purpose of preservation and public enjoyment.

Major publications by Vương Hồng Sển include *Hội Ký 50 Năm Mê Hát* (Memoir of Fifty Years of Loving Music) (Saigon: Phạm Quang Khai, 1968); *Hơn Nửa Đời Hư* (More than Half of a Failed life) (Ho Chi Minh City: NXB Thanh Pho Ho Chi Minh, 1992); *Nửa Đời Còn Lại* (The Remaining Half of a Life) (Westminster, CA: Van Nghe, 1996); *Sài Gòn Năm Xưa* (Saigon in the Old Days) (Saigon: Tu Do, 1960; 2nd ed., Saigon: Khai Tri, 1968); and *Hiếu Cổ Đặc San* (*Special Journal on Admiration for the Past*), 6 vols. (Saigon: Vương Hồng Sển, 1970–72).

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