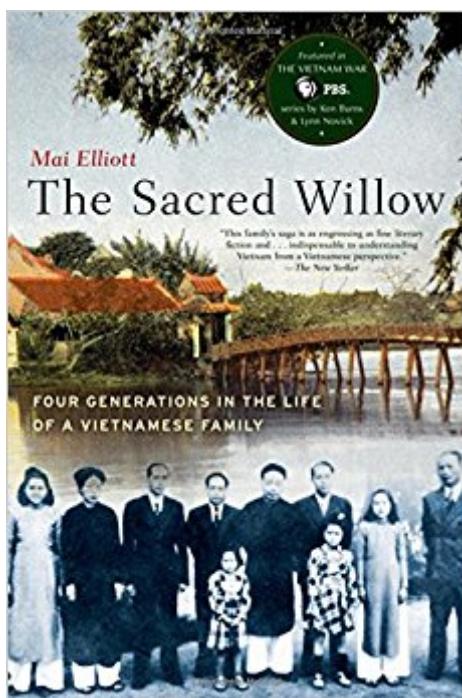


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# The Sacred Willow: Four Generations In The Life Of A Vietnamese Family



## Synopsis

A finalist for the Pulitzer Prize, Duong Van Mai Elliott's *The Sacred Willow* illuminates recent Vietnamese history by weaving together the stories of the lives of four generations of her family. Beginning with her great-grandfather, who rose from rural poverty to become an influential landowner, and continuing to the present, Mai Elliott traces her family's journey through an era of tumultuous change. She tells us of childhood hours in her grandmother's silk shop, and of hiding while French troops torched her village, watching while blossoms torn by fire from the trees flutter "like hundreds of butterflies" overhead. She makes clear the agonizing choices that split Vietnamese families: her eldest sister left her staunchly anti-communist home to join the Viet Minh, and spent months sleeping in jungle camps with her infant son, fearing air raids by day and tigers by night. And she follows several family members through the last, desperate hours of the fall of Saigon—including one nephew who tried to escape by grabbing the skid of a departing American helicopter. Based on family papers, dozens of interviews, and a wealth of other research, this is not only a memorable family saga but a record of how the Vietnamese themselves have experienced their times.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Most books about Vietnam focus on the French who colonized it or the Americans who sought to "save" it. This combination of memoir and family history shows the Vietnamese "as they saw themselves as the central players in their own history." The author's perspective is particularly enlightening because her relatives, though unquestionably better-educated and better-off than the

typical Vietnamese, made a variety of political and social choices over the course of the turbulent century she chronicles. Her great-grandfather was a mandarin and member of the imperial court; her father was a government official under French rule; her older sister married a Communist. Elliott herself enrolled in Georgetown's School of Foreign Service in 1960, married an American, and supported the U.S. crusade in Vietnam until her experiences interviewing Vietcong prisoners of war for a Rand Corporation study convinced her that the corrupt Saigon regime failed to offer a convincing alternative to Communism. Because she had family on both sides, Elliott's portrait of the war is subtler and less didactic than previous accounts by proponents of either ideology. Her prose is a bit formal and dense for the casual reader, but by telling her relatives' personal stories and explicating their culture's traditional values, her reflective narrative makes humanly complicated a history too often oversimplified. --Wendy Smith --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

In this deeply moving family saga, Elliott offers a microcosm of the history of modern Vietnam. Her great-grandfather passed the grueling tests through which unpropertied Vietnamese men tried to advance by entering the government as mandarins. More than half a century later, in 1947, when the author was six, her family fled their smoldering ancestral village while Ho Chi Minh's troops battled the French. After spending her childhood in Hanoi and her adolescence in Saigon, she studied at Georgetown University in the early 1960s. She and her future husband, David Elliott, moved to Saigon, marrying in 1964; there Elliott took a job with the Rand Corporation in a U.S. Defense Department-sponsored project, interviewing communist prisoners and defectors. Though her parents were staunchly anti-communist (her father served as governor in the puppet kingdom run by the French and later worked in South Vietnamese dictator Ngo Dinh Diem's regime), the author scorned Diem as well as the communists and, by 1969, called for an end to U.S. intervention. Family loyalties were divided: her eldest sister became a hard-core communist, while one of her brothers spent more than three years in Vietcong "reeducation" prison camps. Elliott writes with unsparing candor about forging a new identity, about her nation's destruction and its partial revival with the reintroduction of free-market mechanisms and, above all, about her family's harrowing passage through a long and difficult history. Author tour. Copyright 1999 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

I am Vietnamese and I moved to the US when I was 9 back in 1995. Having been born after the war and resettled at a young age, I have been trying to learn more about Vietnam and its history,

particularly the events that took place during the war. This book is a fascinating accounting of one family's history through the war with the French, the rise of the Viet Minh in the north, the fall of Saigon, and their resettlement in the US, Canada, France, and Australia. It was a very moving and poignant personal account and Mai is a good writer. Mai is not a historian and she doesn't claim to be one. This is just her family's accounting of events, but it does give a lot of insight into people on both sides of the war, and why the South might have lost. One of the best book purchases I have made!

This is an extraordinary book by an extraordinary woman. Of all the Vietnam narratives I've read, this is the first to give us a detailed picture of life in a Vietnamese mandarin family, a milieu which most of us who were there never knew existed. Moreover, this is a history of Vietnam seen from all sides because Mrs. Elliott's family members were involved in all the events that shaped the modern history of her native land from the French occupation to today's united Vietnam under communist rule. She spares no details and some of them must've been very painful for her to write about, especially the foibles of certain prominent family members whom she describes objectively and without emotion, and with all their warts. That kind of honesty is refreshing in a book like this and frankly makes her subjects' vulnerably human in spite of their extraordinary accomplishments. No mistake about it, the Duong family produced some extraordinary individuals but in Mrs. Elliott's narrative they put their robes on the same way everyone else does. Mrs. Elliott is also the author of the magisterial RAND IN SOUTHEAST ASIA. She was a RAND employee in the 1960s working as an interrogator and translator in the Vietcong Motivation and Morale Study commissioned by the Department of Defense. This effort produced hundreds of in-depth interviews with Viet Cong and North Vietnamese POWs and defectors which today are a priceless archive of the ordinary communist fighter's life in the jungle. When Lee Lanning and I wrote INSIDE THE VC AND THE NVA we relied heavily on these interviews some of which were conducted by Mrs. Elliott herself. We used other RAND reports, particularly "Documents of an Elite Viet Cong Delta Unit: The Demolition Platoon of the 514th Battalion," authored by Mrs. Elliott and her husband, David. If only we'd paid closer attention to what the Elliotts and their colleagues were finding out about our communist enemy in Vietnam we might've gained valuable insights. And, as she very perceptively points out in this book, if we'd only done a similar study on our South Vietnamese ally we might've taken a different course in Vietnam than the one that led to disaster and the vast diaspora Mrs. Elliott describes in this book. Mrs. Elliott was only a child when the first Indochina War ended. She grew up in a privileged environment, went to the best schools, was educated at Georgetown at the American

taxpayer's expense, married an American intellectual, and was safe here in the States when Saigon fell to the North Vietnamese juggernaut. She never knew the ordinary people of Vietnam, the soldiers, the bar girls, the prostitutes, the street vendors, the street urchins, the rural villagers, not like the average GI and if he was an infantryman, he knew the Vietnamese countryside better than this author ever could, better, in fact, than many of his communist enemies fresh off the Ho Chi Minh Trail. Of her siblings none were killed in the war. But when the Duongs fled their country in 1975, those who didn't stay behind to experience concentration camps or victory in the ranks of the VC and the NVA, they came with nothing except a will to survive and provide for their children. A hundred-year membership in the mandarinate was worthless to these new immigrants. We should never forget it's people like them who've made this country what it is. Yes, Mrs. Elliott reveals in this book that she shared the anti-war views of the American intelligentsia which at the time outraged me and if I'd have met her back then I don't think I'd have liked her -- I'd have considered her a communist stooge. But she was right that the way we & our South Vietnamese ally were pursuing that war would end in failure and while she had close relatives who were devoted communists, she's not one herself, she's Vietnamese and that is a BIG difference. My son, daughter-in-law and grandchildren have all been back to Vietnam. It's not the same country it was in 1975. Mrs. Elliott doesn't beat you over the head with this fact, but it's clear and one might wonder who really won that war. My barber, a Vietnamese immigrant, wasn't even born when I first went there & he was but a baby when I left. That, Mrs. Elliott tells us in this book, is how we come to terms with the past, by living through and beyond it. Her family did it and so can the rest of us.

Unlike the standard history from an outsider perspective, this book is a page-turner. The author skillfully weaves together the larger picture of Vietnamese history with the moving and insightful story of her own family. It provides rich detail grounded in the authentic experiences of family members whose diverse life choices illustrate the complexities and challenges of a country and people in times of colonial oppression, war, revolution, and emigration. Highly recommended for anyone wishing to learn about the history and culture of this fascinating country from the perspectives of the Vietnamese themselves.

This is amazing story written by the author who lived it! Although long and complex, it helped me gain a greater understanding of the scenario behind the Vietnam war. That was a confusing time for me and for many Americans who lived during that period. I highly recommend this book for those interested in gaining clarity about that war and the culture behind it.

This book follows the story of a family Vietnam for the past 100 years or so. Good details about how live in Vietnam was and is. My only complaint is that the author stated that they were middle class yet they have quite a few servants. A great read for anyone interested in modern Vietnamese history.

Fascinating though a bit long account of Vietnamese history and the family's trials and victories.

Glad I read this after completing a three week trip to Vietnam. It's very detailed and was more interesting only because I could identify/imagine the locales. The author's habit of switching times between chapters can be disconcerting especially if you read this long book over a period of time.

Good book, worth the reading.

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