Anarchism in Vietnam

Claudia Lodia interviews Mèo Mun*

CL: Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed.

James (any/all): You're welcome. And thank you so much for reaching out to us and for the opportunity to talk to you about anarchism in Vietnam.

CL: You all are part of a group called Mèo Mun (pronounced: 'Meow Moon') which I've heard of through the Bandilang Itim publishing collective in the Philippines. Perhaps you can tell me what Mèo Mun means as well as the story and motivation behind the creation of your collective?

James: Alright. Mèo Mun means "black cat" in Vietnamese. And we came up with the name and symbol by taking the black of anarchism and combining it with the wildcat strike which is the only type of strike that is possible in Vietnam at the moment. Also, we all love cats, you know. Mèo Mun wouldn't be here as an anarchist collective without the Southeast Asian anarchist library and Bandilang Itim. Due to State repression in Vietnam, it is mostly through the State framework, that is, through NGOs (non-government organizations) and NPOs (not-for-profit organizations), that people can organize for a better quality of life. In fact, critiques about the State with the use of an anti-capitalist lens is heavily frowned upon. When you organize for feminism or queer liberation, those tend to be frowned upon. People don't really want to hear it. So, Viet anarchists or people who don't particularly use any political label but are anti-capitalist and anti-authoritarian are very atomized. We tend to keep to ourselves.

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* Mèo Mun is an anarchist collective working to make anarchist materials and ideas more accessible to a Vietnamese audience while providing an analysis of social struggles from a Vietnamese anarchist lens.

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This feeling of isolation affects our organizing work because it is almost impossible to meaningfully connect and organize with like-minded people. And also, there's the fact that, when we try to find documents about Vietnamese anarchisms, there is virtually none. The little there is, is either not in Vietnamese or scattered around obscure corners of the Internet.

CL: You mentioned Bandilang Itim. Can you tell me a little bit about them and how you connected?

James: Bandilang Itim is a banner that brings together anarchists in the Southeast Asian regions. They were the ones that introduced us to the Southeast Asian Anarchist Library, which has been alive since 2020. Looking back, I think many of us were happy beyond ourselves and felt so hopeful when we saw the words "Welcome to the online Southeast Asian Anarchist Library" in Vietnamese on the anarchist library page. The library also had a *better* Vietnamese translation of "anarchism." Anarchism has been widely translated in Vietnamese as *vô chính phủ*, which was translated from the Chinese word "no government-ism." This word had quite a narrow and negative connotation in Vietnamese. But the word used on the Southeast Asian Anarchist Library is *vô trị*, which means "without being ruled," which is a much more encompassing translation of "anarchism."

CL: Okay, so you all met each other during the beginning of the pandemic? You mentioned earlier that as Viet anarchists you all felt quite isolated from each other because of the lack of social spaces to connect with like-minded people. Was Mèo Mun a result of this need?

James: I think that, yes. Part of the motivation is to address the lack of connection among other Vietnamese anarchists. We were also desperate for materials! Not only texts about Vietnamese anarchism in Vietnamese, but even in English. The materials were so scarce and inaccessible that we decided to organize and start archiving Vietnamese anarchist texts and translational work on the library. We also write about Vietnamese anarchism for the Vietnamese audience. We introduce new ways of analyzing issues and situations in Vietnam as well as alternatives ways of living.

CL: What are some issues Mèo Mun is tackling and how are you approaching these issues?

James: Some of our members have been engaged in social organizing in Vietnam around feminism and queer liberation and how they are intertwined. In general, these issues are often tackled on a very surface level and always separately. For some Vietnamese feminists, for example, feminism is only about leveling the field between men and women. When we bring up the effects of class in feminist discussions, they tend to be unsympathetic and see what we bring up as a distraction. Or if you point out to non-queers the long history of capitalist exploitation of queer workers, we often get confused looks… At Mèo Mun we try to introduce the analysis that it's actually capitalism intertwined with other hierarchies of power that are the roots of the problem in Vietnam. That is our approach.

CL: You mentioned that some of you practice other strands of anarchism such as anarcho-communism. What does it mean politically, to be an anarcho-communist in a country that's popularly viewed as a socialist capitalist country?

Vờ (they/them): Interesting question. What it means is that I get misinterpreted a lot. When I say that I am a communist, people tend to think of the communism of Vietnam's *bao cấp* era (1954-1986), which is characterized by scarcity and the overbearing and authoritarian State. To be honest, I don't really speak about my specific politics with fellow Vietnamese in my country. It's a very sensitive topic. Of course, what we have in Vietnam is State education. The State and the educational system and the whole culture of it, condones and rests on the alienation and unawareness of a lot of Vietnamese people. Talking about politics is something that is done only by a few—politicians, experts, not by the people themselves. In terms of spaces where I find it safe to speak about my politics, Mèo Mun is the only place.

James: Same.

CL: How do you then contextualize to people in Vietnam the need

for political consciousness via anarchism?

Vờ: Well, it is nigh impossible to explain anarchism—at least directly—to a Vietnamese person because you never know who you're faced with. There's a law against criticizing the State and advocating for its overthrow. One has to be really cautious about these kinds of discussion. Here at Mèo Mun, we're just basically "breaking the ice." We are building the foundational work of bringing anarchist principles into the political discussion. In many ways, we want to bring the State of politics in Vietnam to the attention of the Vietnamese people.

James: To add on to that, the way we organize an alternative space for political discussion is not only by invoking anarchist ideas but by making anarchist literature accessible so that when you Google anarchism or Vietnamese anarchism, people here will no longer be taken to some obscure page. Our goal is to disseminate both anarchist literature in Vietnamese and Vietnam anarchism in Vietnamese.

CL: How do you then establish or build this kind of literature? Where do you find it?

James: Yes, that is an interesting question. Most of the time, Mèo Mun comes across the texts. We also get alerted by other people interested in radicalism in Vietnam. We then gather and upload them onto the Southeast Asian anarchist library for ease of access.

CL: Would you say that there is a growing number of people in Vietnam who are welcoming and sympathetic to anarchist ideas?

James: There definitely is. And I think, at this moment in Vietnam, what we have to deal with is anarchism's obscurity, not so much the distaste or fear that people in other parts of the world might feel about anarchism. *What we have to deal with is obscurity*. The Marxist-Leninists who now rule Vietnam came to power by systematically eradicating all the oppositional currents of radicalism, including anarchism and the Trotskyists. Marxist-Leninists label us as "traitors," or as collaborators with fascists and colonialists. They tried really hard to paint the 20th and 21st centuries as a struggle between pa-

triotic Marxist-Leninists and foreign enemies. And any Vietnamese who is not a patriotic Marxist-Leninist must be a traitor or a collaborator with foreign enemies. I think this explains the current obscurity and lack of documents of many stripes of radicalism in Vietnam, not only anarchism. But you know, in the recent past, anarchism was specifically undermined by Ho Chi Minh (1890-1969), founder of the Communist Party of Vietnam. You know Ho Chi Minh? He knew how appealing anarchism was to the Vietnamese people under the yoke of French colonialism (1887-1954), Japanese colonial occupation (1940-1945) and the looming threat of the United States. He argued that anarchism is nonsense and that to spread anarchism is just as stupid as proposing a dying man fight in hand-to-hand combat or run a race. He actually wrote that. And he claims that for anarchism to work, every person would have to be perfect and without weakness. He also argued against anarcho-communism, which he characterized as the redistribution of riches and the suppression of laws—he argued against this very spirit. Eventually, as we all know, he and his party won, and they succeeded in weeding out all the oppositional groups, including the anarchists.

CL: Earlier, you suggested the fear of and distaste for anarchism have to do with obscuring its radicalism. What is the radicalism that anarchism brings to the lives of the people in Vietnam?

James: In the 20th century, during the French and the Japanese occupations, almost every current of radicalism in Vietnam was aligned with the fight against colonialism. Vietnamese radicals professed not so much the abolishment of hierarchical constructs but the goal of national liberation. They saw that the country was suffering under the hands of foreigners. At the time they hoped that once colonialism had been overthrown, the Vietnamese people would exercise their power to vote and create a new political system that is by the Vietnamese and for Vietnamese: gradually conflicts among the Vietnamese people would be resolved. The anarchists thought this as well.

Vờ: I think the radical energy is drastically different now. And I can speak to the radicalism that anarcho-communism or anarcho-syndicalism brings to the Vietnamese people. For example, as a tactic, both

anarcho-communism or anarcho-syndicalism advocate for horizontally organized unions which are effective in bringing about the conditions for the overthrow of government and capitalism. To put it into context, there are no helpful unions in Vietnam. What exists are unions centralized under a mass union called General Confederation of Labor which is influenced by the party.

James: Yes, there is only one union, the General Confederation of Labor, the "VGCL," which is State-led, as Vờ said. They haven't organized a strike in more than 25 years, much less encourage them. So, all the strikes that did and do happen are wildcat strikes and are considered "illegal." In Vietnam, we like to joke that the only thing the Union organizers organize are company trips to the beach.

CL: Has Mèo Mun organized something autonomous? Something delinked from or outside the purview of the city or the State or some national organization.

James: Individually, we have. As a collective, our way of organizing outside of the State is to translate, to archive, and to disseminate anarchist texts. And as part of Mèo Mun, we each have translated the spirit of our collective work into our individual organizing and practice. This kind of work is in its inception in Vietnam and in the periphery. That is why we go out of our way to not reveal any information about ourselves because the very act of talking about anarchism and anarchist texts and disseminating anti-Statist materials is illegal and it's outside of State framework in Vietnam.

CL: Yes. So how did you find each other and started trusting each other?

James: That's an interesting question. In our collective some members are friends in "real life." Others met through Bandilang Itim or through the Southeast Asian anarchist library. So, there's a vetting process through Bandilang Itim. Because we trust Bandilang Itim, we have to trust each other. Eventually, we have to learn to vet people and to trust each other because we cannot rely on anything or anyone else now.

Vờ: We do have a certain fact of trust. Trust is unavoidable. But it's not as if we trust each other with everything. The nature of our struggle makes it necessary to keep certain things secret. We don't know each other's faces except for those whom we're in contact with in "real life." If things aren't necessary for our work, our struggle, then it is not said. We learn to trust each other, of course, but we don't require trust to be an essential factor of organizing because sometimes trust can be detrimental. We try to be careful and to be as secure as possible.

CL: That's quite interesting. What seems apparent in anarchic and collective solidarity work is the spirit of cooperation or collaboration, right? And sometimes, trust can be one way to get there. But you seem to be interrogating this "value" of trust. On the one hand, trust can be used tactically. And on the other hand, it's cautionary. So, I'm wondering, if trust is not generally part of Mèo Mun's interface, is there something that helps you to build the kind of solidarity you have?

James: Personally, I act from care and friendship. Because of the nature of our political work, we need be careful about with whom we talk—not just for ourselves but for the safety of our family and friends. And when you can only speak to very few people about a very important part of yourself you want to nurture that relationship. It's a way to build a community and a kind of relationship that you would love to have and would not otherwise exist in Vietnam's capitalistic society.

Vờ: Again, I think trust is helpful, but I also believe that you can still do things well
without it—like the concept of a trustless architecture.

CL: Bờ did you want to add to that?

Bờ: Hmm. My English is not so good, but…

James/Bờ: Bờ wants to say, first and foremost, that they practice anarchism for themselves. They organize for themselves as workers, as a

person who's being exploited and as someone who is being oppressed in Vietnamese society. And they organize because they are seeing and meeting other people who also organize for themselves, who have the same goals and values that act as the driving force of our solidarity.

CL: That's beautiful. What you all have said so far is the nub of the matter, that caring for each other is irrevocably attached to self-care, which is partly an insistence to reclaim what is being taken or exploited: an organizing *for* yourself because you need to. Because you realize that Vietnam's colonial past and the latent effects of capitalist modernity continue to grip you. It is really interesting to see this kind of cooperative spirit that anarchist groups have been running on and have carefully instigated. It reminds me of the Philippine's notion of *kapwa,* which is often described as the practice of the spirit of cooperation or even communality. It's sort of "built in" in people, something you just experience as part of sociality; but easily recognized and reterritorialized, if you will, into practices that serve to produce profit, power and money right when in fact it has been the spirit that's been sort of built in. Is there something like that in Vietnam?

James: There definitely is. But first, before we answer your question, I'd like to share that just now, a member from Bandilang Itim just sent us an archive of turn-of-the-century periodicals of anarchist literature from Southeast Asia. They found a hundred years' worth of anarchist literature in Tagalog and some Vietnamese texts as well. This is basically how we found anarchist texts about Vietnam—by connection.

CL: How do you verify legitimacy, if I may ask?

James: We have been researching and reading books about radicalism and anarchism in Vietnam for some time now. We've seen them and we know that these texts exist. For example, the Vietnamese radical Nguyễn An Ninh (1899-1943) wrote an essay titled *Order and Anarchy*. We know that it was written but we cannot find it anywhere on the Internet or in libraries in Vietnam. We asked our contact to keep an eye out for this text. And when they came across it, they alert us. It's pure luck, sometimes.

CL: So, anarchism has always existed in the minds of a few Vietnamese people. Can you talk a bit about how anarchism came about in Vietnam?

James: As a political movement, anarchism was most developed in Vietnam during the 1920s. At the time, radicals in Vietnam were fighting against French colonialism. The colonial government suppressed all access to information, including freedom of the press. Many scholars and radicals could not talk about what was happening to them and to their compatriots, which inevitably led to them leaving for foreign countries, such Japan, France, or China. For example, the Vietnamese radical, Phan Bội Châu (1867-1940) went to Japan where he came in contact with Japanese and Chinese anarchists as well as those from other Southeast Asian countries. His radical organizing was heavily informed by anarchism. I recommend the book *Radicalism and the Origins of the Vietnamese Revolution* (1992) by Hue-Tam Ho Tai. Although this book is only in English and quite academic in language and thus inaccessible to most Vietnamese, she talks about Vietnamese anarchism much more eloquently than we ever can. And, to bring us back to your question earlier, you asked if there are "traditional Vietnamese ideas" if you will, that are compatible with anarchism, but often absorbed by capitalism and colonialism. There actually are. To preface our response, I would say there are many ethnic groups in Vietnam, fifty-four in total. I can only speak about my ethnic group, the Kinh people—the most populous ethnic group in Vietnam. For example, the Kinh people have a saying -- *phép nước thua lệ làng* -- which basically means "the country's laws come after the village rules." Before French colonialism each communal village of the Kinh group was administered by a Council of notables. They enjoyed quite a lot of autonomy and independence from the central regime. In these communal villages people acted and associated with each using local laws which they were able to maintain: these had precedence over the "official laws" of the central regime. Another idea that is compatible with anarchism is *lá lành đùm lá rách.* Its literal translation is "the strong and healthy leaves have to care for the torn leaves." This saying tends to mean that those with more means in Vietnamese society must take care of the people who are in need. This, to me, is compatible with anarchism's idea

of mutual aid. Unfortunately, in modern Vietnam, *lá lành đùm lá rách* is frequently deployed by charities and the wealthy few. Finally, there is the idea *bầu ơi thương lấy bí cùng, tuy rằng khác giống nhưng chung một dàn*, which basically means "we are different people, but we live in the same country and society, and so we have to love and care for each other." As anarchists, we interpret this as an evocation of mutual aid. And I also think that is how it was meant by previous generations. However, this saying has often been invoked to mobilize nationalist and capitalist agendas.

CL: Right. You orient us to a very important idea here: mutual aid or mutuality which, to me, seems to run in the same vein as an earlier idea we briefly mentioned, that is, self-organizing. Can you say a bit more about the practice of self-organizing? Why is it often hard to take root in capitalistic and/or colonial spaces? And would you all say that self-organization works hand-in-hand with mutuality or mutual aid? Or is it to be understood as something else altogether?

Mèo Mun discuss the issue collectively: James relates their response.

James: Thank you for the very interesting question. To say what self-organizing means to us is very difficult, so we are going to describe what it does not mean for us. In Vietnamese society, you have to ask permission to do everything. For example, if you want to start a community garden in your apartment building with your neighbors, you can't just start it. You have to ask for permission from the police, actually. If you want to open a community pantry, you also have to ask for permission and approval. If you don't, your project risks being shut down and you'll be fined. These types of self-organizing are often suspect. The authorities assume such initiatives are intended to recruit people into a cult or involve conspiring against the government. For everything we attempt to do, for every kind of creative activity in our lives, we have to act by the graces of the faceless entity that is the State; that is, the government. Even though the authorities don't know about our lives, nor do they actually live our lives, we have to ask permission from *them* concerning everything we do. It's almost as if we have to "determine their mood" before we can

act — "will this be okay with them or not?" This is the opposite of self-organizing.

Why is it hard [for anarchism] to take root in a place like Vietnam? It is because people have been conditioned not to self-organize for a very long time: from the time of feudalism to colonialism, and now, capitalism. People have been alienated from their own lives for generations. Their lives are commodified. They are dependent on [and subservient to] the State and the capitalists for their means of life and their means of production. Even if they desire to create something, to better their lives, they can't just do it, they have to *ask* for the means of life and means of production from the State and the capitalists. "Hey, can I work for you? Can I use these machines to make the things that my community needs?"

And so, when you have been conditioned that way for such a long time, it's very hard to act otherwise. It's very hard to even imagine that there is an alternative to this reality. This conditioning starts the moment we are born. We're dependent on [subservient to] our parents, our elders, our teachers: schools in Vietnam are hellish places, because they are dependent on [subservient to] the State. Dependency [subserviency] just goes on and on: it continuously conditions people and alienates them from their own lives. This is why we think that it's difficult for most people to self-organize; because it's hard for them to imagine that there is an alternative to all of this.

CL: It makes so much sense. I think what you all are saying serves to point out the way self-organizing is a creative activity; it is something that has to be created without asking for permission. As some anarchists have said, create as if you were free. And so, I feel like, anarchism, in some ways, begins with this kind of awakening. Perhaps it's a philosophical awakening that reflects on not only the machinations of institutions, social systems, and corporations but on the notion of the free self. Who are you and how do you take yourself back from having been taken apart by these large systems? More importantly, how do you ask people surviving day by day in Vietnam to begin from that; to imagine and understand that there's something better that exists?

Mèo Mun discuss the issue collectively: James relates their response.

James: What this question reminds us of is how the government of Vietnam and those who enjoy better material conditions often say: "We have to wait for the material conditions to be 'ripe' and then we can advance to communism." Which is to say, you know, we'll never 'advance' to communism. As a collective, as a people entrenched in work and survival, it is precisely because of our day-to-day experience that we know what we are doing is not at all "normal" and it's not at all healthy. We are working not for ourselves and not for the bettering of our own community, but for people from very far away [foreign capitalist interests]. They [those in power] want us to stay in our place and do what they say, and that is not okay. That is not all there is to life. It is because of these things that we realize there must be an alternative to all this. We think it's important to put this dynamic into perspective and to provide a counterpoint to what the State and the capitalists and the education system tell us every day from the day we're born. As a collective, we can share how we organize without a leader, how we strengthen each other for the bettering of ourselves and our community. Mèo Mun is an example of how we can demonstrate the possibility of an alternative.

CL: How do you see the future of Mèo Mun in Vietnam and how do you imagine the development of the practice of anarchism in Vietnam?

Mèo Mun discuss the issue collectively: James relates their response.

James: I'm going to interpret now. Mèo Mun, as it stands today, mainly works to provide a theoretical and educational backbone for the anarchist movement in Vietnam. And we think that without a rigorous theoretical foundation, the workers, the people, will remain indifferent toward current realities and alternatives to these realities. We need that theoretical foundation, and that is what we're trying to build at the moment. It is also very important to demonstrate and translate theoretical foundations into actions. As activists, we

translate what we learn as a collective into our own organizing. But these endeavours are still individualist and isolated, and we are often surrounded by people who don't necessarily share the same ideas and approaches as ours. This is unfamiliar territory for many people in Vietnam today. So, what we do hope in the future is to infuse our activism into the context of our community in Vietnam. We want to work as a collective and without our lives being endangered. To do this, we imagine building more infrastructure and international solidarity with anarchists throughout Southeast Asia as well as other regions of the world.

CL: Thank you again for sharing yourselves and your time to illuminate the significance of anarchism in Vietnam. I think the work that you do as militant archivists is really important. I'm glad that you found each other and are working together through the muck of 'State capitalism with socialist characteristics'.