

# Decoding Patriotism and Herstory in Vietnamese War Posters: A Multimodal Approach

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## Abstract

During wartime, the strength of a nation's military efforts relies heavily on the unity and resolve of its civilian population. Amid hardship and sacrifice, visual propaganda - particularly war posters - emerged as a powerful tool to foster patriotism and galvanize public morale. This article adopts a multimodal discourse analysis (MDA) approach to examine Vietnamese wartime posters, with a focus on their deployment of textual and visual resources to convey ideological messages. Grounded in social semiotic theory (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001, 2006), the study explores how images and slogans work in concert to promote collective identity, national resilience, and evolving gender roles during conflict. By decoding the integration of symbolism, color, gaze, gesture, and linguistic patterns, this research reveals how multimodal strategies served not only to persuade and unify, but also to elevate the representation of Vietnamese women from passive symbols to active agents in shaping both wartime narrative and national memory. The findings contribute to a broader understanding of how visual communication functions as an instrument of ideological influence in contexts of national crisis.

## Keywords

Vietnamese war posters; multimodal discourse analysis; visual propaganda; social semiotics; national identity; feminist representation; patriotic communication

## 1. Introduction

Throughout the 20th century, visual propaganda was pivotal in mobilizing public sentiment during wartime. In Vietnam, war posters were more than just information tools; they were influential cultural artifacts that unified the population, galvanized patriotic action, and forged a collective national identity. These posters - rich with symbolic imagery, emotionally charged slogans, and stylized depictions of ordinary citizens - functioned as multimodal texts, conveying urgency, sacrifice, and ideological vision amid conflict.

Within this visual lexicon, women held a prominent place, not only as cultural nurturers but also as active participants and symbols of resistance. Thus, Vietnamese wartime posters offer a unique insight into the intersection of communication practices, gender representation, power

dynamics, and nation-building. Despite their rich visual material and historical significance, however, few scholarly studies have critically examined these artifacts through a multimodal lens. Previous research has largely focused on their artistic, historical, or political value, often overlooking how various semiotic modes - visuals, text, color, symbolism, and gesture - interacted to produce meaning.

Addressing this gap, the present study investigates how Vietnamese wartime posters used multimodal strategies to construct persuasive narratives of patriotism and feminist agency. Employing a social semiotic framework (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006), this research explores how image and language coalesce to convey ideological messages within specific sociocultural and historical contexts. Specifically, it considers how visual elements like gaze, composition, color, and national symbolism interact with verbal structures such as slogans and pronouns to create an inclusive yet mobilizing call to action.

By decoding the design grammar of selected propaganda posters, this study contributes to broader discussions on visual communication, national identity, and gendered discourse. It positions Vietnamese posters not just as historical records, but as performative texts that both shaped and reflected the values, anxieties, and aspirations of a nation at war.

## 2. Research Aim

This study aims to investigate how Vietnamese wartime posters employ multimodal strategies to communicate ideological messages of *patriotism* and *feminist representation*. Drawing on the social semiotic framework proposed by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006), the research analyzes the interaction between image, text, and symbolic elements in a curated set of three posters. Through detailed visual and linguistic analysis, the study seeks to:

- Uncover how visual and verbal modes co-construct meaning;
- Examine how national identity and collective responsibility are framed;
- Highlight the evolving representation of women as agents of resistance and unity.

By decoding these multimodal messages, this research contributes to the broader field of visual communication, offering insight into how propaganda operates not just as visual rhetoric, but as a culturally situated, meaning-making process that reflects and reconfigures public consciousness during war.

## 3. Literature Review

This research is grounded in the interdisciplinary field of multimodal discourse analysis (MDA), with a particular emphasis on social semiotics and ideological meaning-making through visual and textual modes. The theories summarized below provide the lens through which the selected Vietnamese war posters are examined.

The forms of daily communication are not restricted only in written language but also expanded to other modes. What is more, communicative modes are not utilized independently but

simultaneously that interact and complement each other to achieve the target goals of producers. Consequently, the coinage of the term ‘multimodality’ that refers to the integrated use of various forms of communication remarks a milestone in communication research.

While Oxford Reference provides a general definition of multimodality as ‘the use of more than one semiotic mode,’<sup>1</sup> Kress and van Leeuwen (2001; 2006), whose work is foundational to the field, offer a more nuanced perspective. They define multimodality as encompassing the coordinated use of a range of semiotic resources (modes such as visual forms, language, music, gesture, etc.) to make meaning. This approach emphasizes the integrated and dynamic nature of meaning-making across different modes, moving beyond a simple additive understanding. For example, speaking of movie posters, the viewpoint of viewers is not only attracted to the image of actors and actresses introduced or written lines advertised but also caught by the design of the whole poster. The whole combination of image and language helps fulfill the message what its producers would like to convey. In detail, each mode, is a semiotic resource that shows ‘the simultaneous realisation of discourses and types of (inter) action’ (Kress & Leeuwen, 2001, p. 21). Examples of modes could be listed as language, image, music, sound, and gesture which are not autonomous and framed but are subject to change in the process of making meaning that is dominated by social and cultural values. For example, logograms, a form of written characters, are utilized to represent words or phrases in some countries such as Japan and China but they are not available in other communities.

Multimodal research aims at analyzing the effective use of a whole range of modalities. Jewitt (2013) claims that ‘multimodality provides resources to support a complex fine-grained analysis of artifacts and interactions in which meaning is understood as being realized in the iterative connection between the meaning potential of a material semiotic artifact, the meaning potential of the social and cultural environment it is encountered in and the resources, intentions and knowledge that people bring to that encounter’ (Jewitt, 2013, p. 251). It should be noted that the construction of making meanings through combined modes rests on the assumptions of authors about the identities and backgrounds of viewers that would determine the way messages are received. Therefore, to guarantee the effectiveness of the texts after the process of viewers’ ‘re-conceptualisation and re-contextualisation’, authors need to calculate the potential impacts of all modes in a specific cultural and social context (Cotoc & Mureșan, 2017, p. 316).

Sharing such a comparable opinion, Kress (2010) states that all forms of communication could be seen as methods of transferring meanings which are governed by social environment and social interactions. For this reason, the analysis of the relation between form and meaning via the perspective of the social semiotic theory is essential to get a bigger picture of the effectiveness of the multimodal strategy (Kress, 2010, Chapter 4). In line with Halliday’s terms, Kress and Leeuwen propose that the role of modes is required to fulfill three major functions, namely the ideational function, the interpersonal function, and the textual function. In detail, the meaning is constructed through the selection of different modes in representing states,

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/oi/authority.20110810105437336>

actions, or events that forms representations of the world around (the ideational function). Additionally, social orientations of a community concerning its cultures also involve the use of multiple modes in enacting human interactions (the interpersonal function). Last but not least, both of the functions above need to be articulated as coherent with its relevant environment, then be put into larger communicative texts such as conversations or reports (the textual function) (e.g in Kress & Leeuwen, 2002, p. 346, 2006, p. 25)

To sum up, from the perspective of multimodality, modes play a crucial role as a meaning-making resource that is characterized by specific social and cultural relations. Within specific social and cultural contexts, the integration of different modes brings effectiveness to representational expressions in relation to the communicative demands of communities.

#### **4. Methodology**

This study adopted a qualitative research design, applying multimodal discourse analysis (MDA) to examine the semiotic resources deployed in selected Vietnamese wartime posters. The analysis draws upon the social semiotic framework developed by Kress and van Leeuwen (2001, 2006), which posits meaning-making as an interactive process involving multiple communicative modes - including visual, textual, spatial, and symbolic elements - within specific sociocultural contexts.

The dataset comprises three propaganda posters from periods of national conflict in Vietnam. These were sourced from reputable digital archives specializing in state-produced visual materials, such as [vietnampropaganda.com](http://vietnampropaganda.com).

Each poster was analyzed in its original visual form to preserve typographic and compositional elements crucial for multimodal analysis.

## 5. Analysis and discussion

**Figure 1**



**Save the Country  
Save the Youth**

**Figure 2**



**Colonialists, International Traitors,  
Think Carefully Before You  
Take This Country**

**Figure 3**



**For our Future**

### *Lexical analysis*

War posters are powerful tools that combine language and imagery to evoke strong emotions and convey specific messages. The posters under examination, particularly Figure 2, vividly illustrate themes of patriotism and resistance through their lexical choices.

Figure 2 demonstrates strong lexical cohesion through the repeated use of the nouns “colonialists” and “traitors.” These terms do more than simply identify adversaries; they function to objectify the opposing side, reducing them to a morally corrupt and violent collective stripped of individuality. This lexical strategy constructs the enemy as a homogenous, dehumanized mass, defined by condemnation rather than complexity.

Moreover, the use of the second-person pronoun “you” in Figure 2 is not intended for a specific individual. Instead, it directly implicates the entire enemy faction, fostering a sense of confrontation. When combined with the negatively charged labels, this pronoun intensifies the binary opposition between “us” (the patriotic nation) and “them” (the immoral aggressors). The poster thus positions the enemy as a collective threat – “colonialists,” “traitors,” and the generalized “you” - rather than individual antagonists.

In stark contrast to the vilified enemy, the term “country” emerges as a symbol of collective patriotism and moral integrity. This juxtaposition between a positively framed national identity and a negatively defined enemy group underpins the poster’s persuasive power, cultivating a shared sense of unity in resistance.

This ideological framing extends to the portrayal of national independence as a communal mission, not an individual burden. The poster evokes a strong sense of solidarity by constructing a “positive self-representation” versus a “negative other-presentation” (Oktar, 2001, p. 313), reinforcing the message that patriotism is fundamentally collective.

A comparable lexical strategy is evident in Figures 1 and 3, which emphasize terms such as “country,” “youth,” and “future.” Each of these carries positive connotations that contribute to a shared vision of national unity. In Figure 1, the invocation of “country” transcends individual identities, positioning the viewer as part of a larger national entity. The imperative “Save the country” functions as a rallying call to collective responsibility. Similarly, the focus on “youth” in “Save the youth” elevates young people from isolated actors to a unified force essential to the nation’s endurance.

This method of depersonalization is further illustrated in Figure 3, where the phrase “For our Future” abstracts individual contributors and embeds them within a communal destiny. Such abstract yet positively charged terms forge a cohesive vision of purpose, enabling the posters to construct a clear “us” versus “them” narrative. The “us” is unified by ideals of nationhood, progress, and collective responsibility, while the “them” is defined through objectification and exclusion. This binary opposition is central to the posters’ ideological messaging, strengthening their function as instruments of persuasion and nation-building.

### *Syntactic structure*

The slogans in Figures 1, 2, and 3 employ distinct linguistic strategies to convey their messages of patriotism and warning. Each poster utilizes specific syntactic choices to maximize its impact and mobilize its audience.

Figure 1, “Save the Country, Save the Youth,” creates a memorable rhythm and easily spreadable message through its balanced structure. The repetition of the verb “save” not only depicts a firm determination but also highlights the forceful purpose behind the action. However, this choice of verb also subtly suggests vulnerability, implying that both the country and its youth are in danger and require immediate intervention.

Crucially, “save” represents a material process, framing patriotism not as an abstract feeling but as a concrete, actionable responsibility. The ellipsis (omission of the subject) in these clauses is a powerful rhetorical device. By leaving the subject unstated, the slogan implicitly invites the viewer to become the subject of the action – “You save the country, You save the youth.” This clever technique fosters a strong sense of personal responsibility and agency, directly engaging the audience in the nation’s defense.

In contrast, Figure 2, “Colonialists, International Traitors, Think Carefully Before You Take This Country,” shifts to a more accusatory and cautionary tone. The verb “think” describes a mental process of cognition, serving as a deterring action against the material process of “taking” the country. The sharp contrast between “save” (Figure 1) and “take” (Figure 2) vividly highlights the opposing intentions of the two sides: one seeks to protect, the other to seize. This binary opposition is reinforced through the direct address and the imperative to “think,” implying severe consequences for the antagonists.

Finally, Figure 3, “For our Future,” uses the possessive determiner “our” to once again establish an “us vs. them” dynamic, encoding the participants’ identity as a collective community. Similar to Figure 1, the ellipsis here also functions as a powerful rhetorical tool, but with a different effect. Instead of personal responsibility for an immediate action, it evokes a sense of shared aspiration and common destiny. The slogan invites the audience to imagine and collectively define this “future,” allowing them to fill it with their hopes and dreams for the nation, fostering a profound sense of unity and shared purpose.

In conclusion, the conciseness and emotional force of these slogans contribute to their memorability and effectiveness in mobilizing patriotic sentiment. The strategic use of verbs, pronouns, possessives, and ellipsis constructs a powerful sense of collective identity and purpose, encouraging citizens to translate patriotic feelings into concrete actions.

### *Visual analysis*

Beyond the verbal messages, the visual composition of the posters plays a crucial role in reinforcing their patriotic themes. The horizontal orientation of the posters creates a sense of stability and balance, allowing the visual and textual elements to work together harmoniously. Positioning the slogans at the bottom of each poster gives them prominence and reinforces their function as a call to action. The bold typeface and light color of the text further draw the viewer’s eye, emphasizing the explicit message of patriotism. It is not just that the text is visible; the visual treatment makes it insistent, demanding attention.






The background imagery in each poster is carefully chosen to resonate with familiar aspects of Vietnamese culture and history, adding layers of meaning to the slogans. In Figure 1, the bamboo grove evokes images of traditional Vietnamese villages, suggesting a connection to the peaceful, rural heart of the nation. This visual element grounds the abstract concepts of ‘country’ and ‘youth’ in a tangible, recognizable landscape, making them more relatable to the viewer. The imagery is not merely decorative; it reinforces the idea of what is at stake – the very fabric of Vietnamese rural life.

Figure 3’s depiction of blossoming rice plants symbolizes the fertility and abundance of Vietnam’s agricultural landscape. This imagery connects the ‘future’ to the nation’s history of agricultural production and prosperity, suggesting that protecting the future means protecting this vital aspect of Vietnamese identity and livelihood. It’s a visual promise of continued growth and prosperity tied to the land.

Figure 2 is particularly rich in symbolic imagery. The national flag, a powerful symbol of national identity and sovereignty, is prominently displayed. The ethnic motif and the icon of the national map further strengthen the connection between the individual and the nation, emphasizing a shared sense of belonging and territorial integrity. The underlying theme of a victorious national army instills hope and confidence in the eventual success of the patriotic struggle, but it's not just about celebrating past victories; it's about inspiring future ones. Moreover, the visual depiction of a strong, victorious army serves as a call to action, encouraging viewers to join the fight and contribute to the nation's triumph.

In summary, the visual elements of these posters, composition, typography, and symbolic imagery are carefully orchestrated to amplify the patriotic messages conveyed by the text. They create a powerful and evocative visual language that resonates with Vietnamese cultural values and historical experiences, making the call to patriotic action all the more compelling.

**Table 1 National symbols**

In figure 1	In figure 2			In figure 3
<b>Bamboo line</b>	<b>National flag</b>	<b>Map icon</b>	<b>Ethnic motif</b>	<b>Rice plants</b>
				

Furthermore, the appearance of the image of an innocent kid portrayed right on the right in poster 3 is symbolic and touching which conveys a message about peace for the sake of the happiness of each family and about the hope for a better future of the country. This encourages all citizens to do their part in the war to repel the invasion of the enemy to return peace to each family.

The repeated images in all the posters are black guns that embed a message that this war demands violence to prevent the enemy from invading the country. However, violence is not a prerequisite, which is demonstrated by the position of the weapons. The guns are worn on the back, not on the front that connotes a spirit of goodwill about peace. In figure 1, the image of a white lotus attracts beholders. In a country imbued with the Buddhist philosophy, the lotus represents purity, goodness, and peace which conflicts the symbolic meaning of the gun. The combination, nevertheless, is not conflicted but supportive which means that this country prioritizes peace but if the enemy disvalues this goodwill, all citizens would have to resort to violence to protect their own country. This detail reminds a line in a Vietnamese military march, which is literally translated: although our life fancies roses, the enemy forces us to hold



guns<sup>2</sup>. To conclude, the use of symbols and symbolic images in these posters is effective to raise an emotional response from each individual about their roles as a fellow citizen in the collective effort as well as the attitude of this country toward the war.

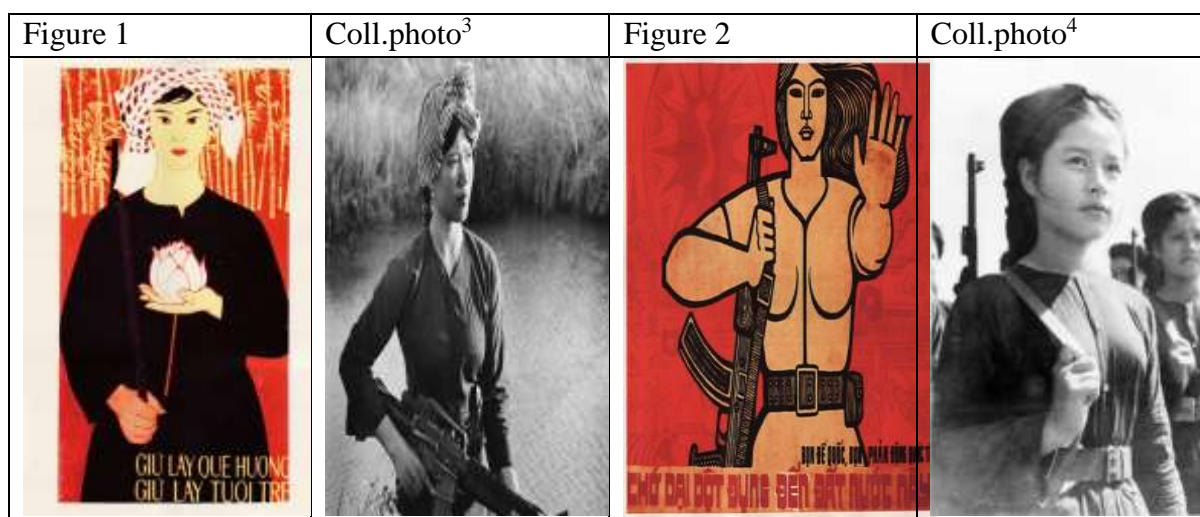
Speaking of color, it could be said that red and orange are the dominant colors. The different shades of red used here not only convey an ideational meaning that expresses energy and enthusiasm, but the color choice also tries to energize and motivate people. Additionally, instead of using modulated color, the artists just rely on basic and simplified flat colors which are perceived as ‘simple and bold in a positive sense’ (Kress & Leeuwen, 2002, p. 357). Using such the vibrant color to evoke emotions seems to aim at promoting people to follow the patriotic ideology.

In the accompanying images, the portrait of Vietnamese women locates right at the center of the posters and takes up most space of the frame. The difference in their traditional costumes reflects the diversity in Vietnamese cultures which also implies that the mission to protect the country does not belong to a single region, but demands the unity of the whole nation. In Figure 1, the woman’s attire (a ba ba blouse and Southern checkered scarf - áo bà ba, khăn rằn Nam bộ) appears to be a more simplified, perhaps even a more practical style of traditional clothing. This could suggest a connection to the everyday life of rural women in the south of Vietnam, implying that the call to ‘Save the Country, Save the Youth’ extends to all women, regardless of social status or background.

Figure 2 shows a woman in appears to be a more simplified, perhaps even a more practical style of traditional clothing. This variation, along with the others, reinforces the idea that women from all walks of life are united in their concern for ‘our future.’ The subtle differences in costume emphasize that this shared future belongs to all Vietnamese people, regardless of their regional or social identities. The costumes, therefore, become a powerful visual representation of national unity in the face of a common threat.

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<sup>2</sup> Hát mãi khúc quân hành (Forever carol this Military March) by Diep Minh Tuyen



The posters also successfully portray the feminine but resilient beauty of Vietnamese women in wartime. While the fine and soft brush strokes depict the elegant and sophisticated character of women, their pursed lips reflect their strong determination and persistence. Being different from other posters, figure 2 frames a woman in bold and hard brushstrokes that is like a subtle implication about the strength of women. Following the ideology of Barthes (1957) that a gesture is equivalent to a symbol (Barthes, 1957, p. 18), the gesture of raising an unarmed palm of the woman in figure 2 could connote peaceful goodwill or a determination to stop the enemy. In these pictures, the gaze of the women is direct that establishes strong eye contact with viewers. This look acknowledges the existence of viewers that urges them to create imaginary relations with the represented characters who seem to try to ‘demand’ something from the viewers (Kress & Leeuwen, 2006, p. 120). It might be a call for patriotism that is supposed to prove in actions. Moreover, the represented participants are shown at a higher angle that implies a power difference between them and viewers. This gives the impression that the participants have power over beholders due to their position of being justice representatives. The pose of the women also carries a similar message. The image of them standing still and straight instills a sense of fearlessness and determination of people who protect justice.

In all cultures, women are often assigned as a weak gender, but in the wartime, they who are willing to leave their home to fight for national peace. This is like a message to motivate the men in battles to be firmer and braver. Furthermore, the depiction of women in these posters is also reflective of a change in women’s role in wartime. War from now is not only ‘HISstory’ but becomes ‘HERstory’ (Chetty, 2004, p. 32). The role of Vietnamese women is not only restricted to taking care of their families in the rear but also positive to directly participate in battles in the front line.

<sup>3</sup> Le, M. Truong (1973) *A female guerrilla fighter stood guard on the Mekong River*. [Nữ chiến sĩ du kích đứng gác trên sông Cửu Long]. (1973). Retrieved from <https://dantri.com.vn/the-gioi/nhung-buc-anh-hiem-ve-chien-tranh-viet-nam-2016020620210258.htm>

<sup>4</sup> Nguyen, D. Uu (1960). *A female militia member* [Nữ dân quân]. Retrieved from <https://www.qdnd.vn/van-hoa/van-hoc-nghe-thuat/buc-anh-dau-tien-duoc-tang-giai-thuong-nha-nuoc-641156>

The depiction of women in these posters reflects the changing role of women in Vietnamese society during wartime. The wars against foreign powers and the subsequent conflicts significantly impacted gender roles. Women were not simply confined to domestic duties in the rear; they actively participated in various aspects of the war effort. Beyond caring for families, they served in logistical roles, provided medical aid, gathered intelligence, and, as the 'long-haired warriors' demonstrate, fought directly on the front lines. This direct participation in combat challenged traditional gender roles and demonstrated women's strength and resilience. As Chetty (2004, p. 32) argues, war transformed 'HISstory' into 'HERstory,' giving women a more prominent and active role in shaping national events. In the context of these posters, the representation of women in military or supportive roles underscores their vital contribution to the war effort and reinforces the message that national defense is a shared responsibility, not solely a male domain.'

## 6. Conclusion

As Evans and Donald (1999, p. 18) argue, posters are 'an exceptional visual form in that their function and design are geared to instant comprehension by a large proportion of the population,' often depicting people as 'a unified public body.' In these Vietnamese war posters, the interplay of text and image effectively conveys messages about fighting for the collective good – protecting the country – and highlights the crucial role of Vietnamese women during wartime. The combination of visual and textual elements creates a powerful sense of patriotism, urging viewers to actively participate in the struggle for national freedom and the well-being of their families.

The slogans themselves are condensed and impactful, demonstrating a keen understanding of wartime communication needs. Their brevity makes them easily memorable and shareable, crucial for disseminating messages under challenging circumstances. The language is not merely informative; it is persuasive, designed to ignite patriotic fervor and inspire action.

The visual resources in the posters do more than simply invite contemplation; they actively engage the viewer and evoke a sense of national connection. The use of familiar national and cultural symbols such as bamboo groves, rice paddies, and national flag resonates deeply with shared experiences and cultural values. These symbols are not just representations; they are calls to remember what is at stake and what is being fought for. The color choices also play a vital role like the use of bold red and yellow evokes a sense of urgency and revolutionary spirit. Rather than simply 'energizing,' the colors actively contribute to the poster's persuasive message, motivating viewers to take action and defend their nation.

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No.	Website
Firgure 1	<a href="https://www.vietnampropaganda.com/product/save-the-country-save-the-youth/">https://www.vietnampropaganda.com/product/save-the-country-save-the-youth/</a>
Firgure 2	<a href="https://www.vietnampropaganda.com/product/colonialists/">https://www.vietnampropaganda.com/product/colonialists/</a>
Firgure 3	<a href="https://www.travelpostersonline.com/vintage-vietnam-propaganda-poster-of-our-future-7507-p.asp">https://www.travelpostersonline.com/vintage-vietnam-propaganda-poster-of-our-future-7507-p.asp</a>