**Notes on Chu Văn Hợp (1947-1995), Prepared by Tuong Quang Luu for Michael Easson on 17 September 2020.**

**Chu Văn Hợp in his youth and as a young man**

Chu Văn Hợp was born in 1947 at Quí Cao Village, Tứ Kỳ District of Hải Dương Province (near Hanoi) in the northern part of the then unified State of Vietnam with Saigon as its national capital.  His father, Mr Chu Văn Hòa, died when he was a toddler. When Vietnam was divided at the 17th Parallel under the 1954 Geneva Accords, his mother, Mrs Nguyễn Thị Vi, fled communist North Vietnam, with her only child, 7-year-old Chu Văn Hợp. They found a new life in Saigon.

Hợp’s mother, a devout Catholic, wanted him to have a good Catholic education before he could be admitted to a seminary for a future priesthood. He was sent to Đắc Lộ College for this purpose. This college was named after Reverend Father Alexandre de Rhodes (1591-1660), a Jesuit missionary who was the first Frenchman to visit Vietnam where, among other things, he contributed to the development of the Latinised Vietnamese written language. Hợp seemed happy to go along with his mother’s desire. However, ill health during his high school years prevented him from following his mother’s chosen path.

After completing his secondary education, Hợp successfully took a highly competitive examination for entry to the University of Saigon’s Faculty of Medicine and Pharmacy. During his second year, he won a scholarship to pursue his medical studies in the USA. For the second time, Hợp decided to change the course of his life, he studied chemical engineering instead.

After his graduation, as one of his cousins remembers, Hợp took his gap month to visit Western Europe and Australia before returning to Saigon in 1973 to take up a good position at the head office of Shell-Vietnam. Almost as a prescient preference, he intimated to his cousin, Mrs Chu Thị Hiệp, that if ever he had to leave Vietnam, then Australia would be his first choice as home.

[Chu Thị Hiệp, a few years younger than Hợp, grew up with him in Saigon. She came to Sydney under a family reunion program in 1995, two months before Hợp’s death in the USA]

**After the fall of Saigon – April 1975**

Hợp thought that his private (i.e., non-government) employment and his technical expertise would not put him in danger with the newly established communist regime. He decided to stay while many of his friends and colleagues fled. In a sense at least initially, he was not wrong. He was not rounded up into the so-called re-education camps. Instead, he was re-employed in a lesser position at a nationalised Shell branch office outside metropolitan Saigon.

However, as communist cadres learned their way around, Hợp’s position became less tenable to the extent that in 1978 he decided to flee the communist regime. He returned to Australia as a Vietnamese refugee, first a few months in Perth then in Sydney for permanent re-settlement.

(***Source***: Tuong Quang Luu’s conversation with Mrs Chu Thị Hiệp, one of Chu Văn Hợp’s cousins – Sydney 14 Sept 2020)

**Chu Văn Hợp – a Business entrepreneur**

After the defeat of NSW Premier Barrie Unsworth in March 1988, Hợp returned to private business as a sole trader in Cabramatta, a suburb in South Western Sydney with a high density of Vietnamese residence. This printing and advising business seemed too limited for a visionary and ambitious Hợp. He began exploring opportunities in his former country.

In 1989, he met my friend, Mr Chấn Hưng, a successful businessman of Chinese-Vietnamese background. Hợp made many trips back to Vietnam, sometimes by himself or together with Chấn Hưng who would become Hợp’s unofficial adviser. Hợp told me at the time that he found (Communist) party cadres in former Saigon “arrogant” and difficult to deal with, and decided to improve contacts with the Party bureaucracy in Hanoi. Vietnam was only a few years on its road to *Đổi Mới* (“Renovation”) after the Vietnamese Communist Party Congress in 1986. He finally got what he wanted – a licence to set up a banking business in Vietnam. But on a long-term basis, Hợp had no intention to set up and run a bank. He wanted to on-sell this license to an American business to make good use of the newly “Open Door” policy in communist Vietnam.

During his negotiation with the New York-based AIG, he would want to retain 51% of the enterprise. On Chấn Hưng’s advice, he finally agreed to sell 51% to the AIG for a price of US$5m. The majority shareholder would retain him in a managerial position for 5 years with an annual salary of US$132 000, provided he would submit a business plan at the time of signing the deal in New York.

Hợp spent the night before his departure at Chấn Hưng’s home and among other things, he asked Mr and Mrs Chấn Hưng to continue looking after his aged mother who lived by herself nearby in Cabramatta.  Recalling the same story, Mr Chu Vi Thành, another Hợp’s cousin, told me the price was in fact US$3m. The apparent discrepancy would explain Hợp’s net profit as he would spend a lot of money for Hanoi bureaucracy to set up the banking business.

In 1995, had Hợp flown directly to New York, his life story would have been totally different. He stopped over in Oklahoma City to see his boy and both died in a boat accident.

**After Chu Văn Hợp’s death**

His wife in Sydney, Mrs Lê Thị Kiêm was not financially able to bring the remains of her husband and son home for funerals. A group of friends headed by Chấn Hưng raised more than twenty thousand dollars for this purpose.

Mr and Mrs Chấn Hưng, true to their promise, and Rev Father Joseph Nguyễn Quang Thạnh, looked after Hợp’s mother, Mrs Nguyễn Thị Vi, spiritually and financially for another 5 years before her passing.

[Source: Tuong Quang Luu’s conversations with Mr Chấn Hưng and Mr Chu Vi Thành, Sydney 10-13 Sept 2020]

**Chu Văn Hợp’s position in the Commonwealth Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs – State Office - Sydney**

Chu Văn Hợp’s last position was Director (Ethnic Affairs) appointed by my predecessor, Wayne Gibbon as NSW State Director. When I came to Sydney from Canberra to replace Wayne Gibbon,Hợp remained in this position for some 6 months. In mid-1987, he discussed with me his intention to join Premier Barrie Unsworth’s staff. I encouraged him to take this new challenge, given his broad understanding of multicultural affairs and his capacity for problem solving.