UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SAN DIEGO

An Assemblage of Fragments: History, Revolutionary Aesthetics and Global Capitalism in Vietnamese/American Literature, Films and Visual Culture

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in

Literature

by

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2009

The dissertation of Chương-Đài Hồng Võ is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

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University of California, San Diego

2009

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my advisor, Lisa Lowe, for her guidance and support. I am privileged to have worked with her and with an exceptional committee: Rosemary Marangoly George, Yen Le Espiritu, Nguyễn-võ Thu-Hương, Lisa Yoneyama and Yingjin Zhang. I would like to especially thank Thu-Hương, who met me for talk and coffee in Saigon, Vietnam, and Little Saigon, Orange County.

I would like to acknowledge support for my language study and fieldwork research from Southeast Asian Studies Summer Institute, Vietnamese Advanced Studies Institute, UCSD Institute for International, Comparative and Area Studies, UCSD Center for the Humanities, UCSD Department of Literature, University of California Pacific Rim Research Program, and Fulbright Foundation. Chapter Three, "New National and Global Imaginaries: Transformations of the Vietnamese Film Industry", in part, is published as "Vietnamese cinema in the era of market liberalization", in *Political Regimes and the Media in Asia*, Edited by Krishna Sen and Terence Lee (Routledge, 2008).

Finally, I would like to thank my family, nuclear and extended, and friends for their tremendous support throughout this process.

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"Memories That Bind: Đặng Thùy Trâm's Diaries as Agent of Reconciliation." *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 3: 2 (Summer 2008). 196-207.

"Vietnamese Cinema in the Era of Market Liberalization." *Political Regimes and the Media in Asia: Continuities, Contradictions and Change*. Ed. Krishna Sen and Terence Lee. London/New York: Routledge, 2007. 70-84.

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

An Assemblage of Fragments:
History, Revolutionary Aesthetics and Global Capitalism
in Vietnamese/American Literature, Films and Visual Culture

by

Chương-Đài Hồng Võ
Doctor of Philosophy in Literature
University of California, San Diego, 2009
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This project examines the politics of knowledge production in Vietnam during the transition from socialist realism to post-socialist aesthetics and neoliberalism. I look at literary, filmic and visual culture productions that challenge and present alternatives to the construction of history in the discourses of Vietnamese nationalism, French colonialism and U.S. imperialism. I attend to the cultural violence that came

out of the Vietnamese civil war and that continues to haunt the post-socialist society. I first focus on works produced by writers and filmmakers in the North to examine how they responded to the state vision of history-making. To recover the suppressed histories of those who fled Vietnam after 1975, I also examine diasporic Vietnamese films and visual culture that disrupt the unitary discourse of Vietnamese nationalism.

My project maps out the ways in which writers, filmmakers and artists negotiate the past through appropriations of political, aesthetic and gendered discourses of postcolonial and global nation-formation. I first trace the genealogy of Vietnamese literary criticism and the transition in post-1975 Vietnamese literature from socialist realism to post-socialist aesthetics. Moving from the literary to the visual, I look at short stories, war novels, films, installation art and photography made from within the nation and from the diaspora. I examine how literature and films can be productive sites for the interrogation of nationalist historiography, and how they can be sites for the staging of a modern, heterosexual masculine subject through their elisions of women. I also look at visual culture that unsettle positivist trajectories by attending to the reversals, openings and closings, ruptures and fissures in history-making.

This is a comparative, interdisciplinary, and multilingual study that brings together the fields of Asian Studies, U.S. Ethnic Studies, Feminist Studies, Cultural Studies, and Transnational Studies, and contributes to the body of research on postcolonial societies negotiating global capitalism.

INTRODUCTION

This project examines literary, filmic and visual productions that challenge and present alternatives to the construction of history in the discourses of Vietnamese nationalism, French colonialism and U.S. imperialism. Interested in the construction of Vietnam as a modern nation in the age of global capital, I begin with the post-1975 reconstruction of the society and economy and the socialist state's attempts to remake the newly unified country in its image. I trace the failure of the state-mandated collectivization movement, the opening of the domestic economy to global capitalism, and the eventual return of diasporic Vietnamese. The process of reconstructing the world-to-come involved great violence, not only during the civil war, but also during the post-war campaign by the Northern regime in the form of reeducation camps and forced hard labor for former military personnel and families associated with the Republic of Viet Nam. More than a million Vietnamese severed deeply rooted relationships to famiy, nuclear and extended, and risked their lives to escape the political, social and economic marginalization imposed on the South by the Northern regime.

That forced reunification entailed cultural violence as well, not only for those who were living in the South, but also for those who were living in the North and had supported the socialist revolution. Because I am interested in how the Democratic Republic of Vietnam imagined the new socialist society and how intellectuals and those in the arts who supported the revolution responded to that vision, for my

selection of domestic works, I focus on literature and films that came out of the north. To recover the suppressed histories of those who fled Vietnam after 1975, I also examine diasporic Vietnamese films and visual culture that disrupt the unitary discourse of Vietnamese nationalism.

My project maps out the ways in which writers, filmmakers and artists negotiate the past through appropriations of political, aesthetic and gendered discourses of postcolonial and global nation-formation. I first trace the genealogy of Vietnamese literary criticism and the transition in post-1975 Vietnamese literature from socialist realism to post-socialist aesthetics. Moving from the literary to the visual, I look at short stories, war novels, films, installation art and photography made from within the nation and from the diaspora. These works were made during the intense globalization of the Vietnamese economy, starting in the mid 1980s. I examine how literature and films can be productive sites for the interrogation of nationalist historiography, and how they also can be sites for the staging of a modern, heterosexual masculine subject through their elisions of women. In my examination of installation art and photography made in the Vietnamese diaspora, I argue that these works present new challenges to history-making by collapsing multiple spaces, times and artistic traditions, thus offering the possibility of resignifying nationalist, colonialist and imperialist images as tools of reflection and critical inquiry into their history, discursive usage and transmission.

These maneuverings required the excavation of history to carve out, reproduce or chisel away at in slight variation existing power relations. These representations provoke questions about the construction of history and collective memories, the

relationship between gender and sexuality and national identity, and neoliberal celebrations of mobility and individual freedom. Of all the arts, literature has the longest genealogy in Vietnamese culture, and so my project begins with a mapping of the relationship between writers and the state. In my examination of Nguyễn Huy Thiệp's short stories, and the war novels of Nguyễn Trí Huân and Bảo Ninh, I discuss the rejection of socialist realism by Vietnamese writers and intellectuals after 1975 and what they saw as the end of the need to use art to serve the nation in its anti-imperialist struggle. I then look at films, photography and installation art to examine the rise of the visual, which has come to play a much more important role in the post-socialist era as private investment pours into the country and diasporic Vietnamese reimagine the nation in their constant traversing between the "homeland" and the place of their upbringing. In this global age of intense movements across borders of capital, labor and images, the visual has garnered audiences in ways unexpected and unimagined even by its producers.[1] Vietnamese cinema has become a site for an international circuit of capital, labor and images as local and foreign filmmakers collaborate and draw on multiple national cinematic traditions to create a cultural "capital" the equal of other Asian sites. Digital art also has transformed cultural work by opening up the relationship among the artist, the archives and the material, the medium, the production and the distribution.

In my examination of how these works engage with historiography, I am influenced by Michel Foucault's notion of history as a dispersion of fragments and

[1] Many film critics have written about the rise of the visual. See, for example, Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, eds., *Multiculturalism, Postcoloniality, and Transnational Media*; Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*; Shu-mei Shih, *Visuality and Identity*; and Rey Chow, *Sentimental Fabulations, Contemporary Chinese Films*.

traces, remnants broken and displaced, without an origin and without a coherent narrative to give them structure. State power and state-imposed notions of modernization and nation require the construction of a naturalized account of the past and the imagining of the nation as a unified whole. This entails the suppression of alternative and divergent representations and understandings of the state and the arts. To dissect the power of the state, I attend both to its discourses and to those that challenge it and rise from within the ruptures and fissures of suppressed histories.

Although this project traces history-making in a chronological order, I am cognizant of the reproduction of state narration and state violence implicit in that assemblage. The chronology of the chapters is necessary for placing and understanding the primary texts in the specific historical period in which they were produced and the histories to which they look back. I unsettle the positivist trajectory of that chronology by attending to the reversals, openings and closings, ruptures and fissures in history-making that the various primary texts suggest.

My study of Vietnamese national and diasporic culture attends both to the primary texts, and the circumstances of history and political economy. Influenced by transnational feminist scholarship on the "politics of location", I consider the local, colonial, postcolonial and transnational dimensions of literary, filmic and art production to analyze the complex and conflicting representations of resistance to and appropriation of global capital.[2] As Laura Kang argues in *Compositional Subjects*, the

[2] There is a large body of transnational feminist scholarship on the politics of location and culture. Seminal works include Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan, eds., *Scattered Hegemonies*; M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, eds., *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures*; and Ann McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Context*.

work of criticism must involve an examination of not just the content, but also the genre and process of production, its industrial constraints and its possibilities.

My analysis of Vietnamese domestic and diasporic culture puts into conversation the local and the global, the national and the diasporic and the transnational to question nationalist historiography and the neoliberal transformation of Vietnamese society. Diaporic Studies has been a contentious field in the U.S. academy, with critics charging it as elitist, classist, overly celebratory and dismissive of the race-based struggles that still need to be fought.[3] In this world of decentered capitalism, however, the intranational, nonnational and transnational have become overlapping sites of production for capital, labor and images on an unprecedented level. As Shu-mei Shih argues in her study of Sinophone visual culture, one may be "flexible citizens" with multiple identities and multiple affiliations, appropriated and imposed.[4] Audiences will receive images in varied and unexpected venues and contexts, and an examination of texts in Vietnam and in the diaspora cannot but consider the relationship between the national and the transnational.

In the neoliberal transformation of Vietnamese society and culture, questions of national belonging and neo-colonialism figure prominently, and are commonly negotiated through representations of gender and sexuality. My examination of how these works resist globalization attends to the resurrection of masculinist discourses, and the construction of anti-statist masculine subjects that rely on the reproduction and

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[3] See, for example, Sau-Ling Wong, "Denationalization Reconsidered: Asian American Cultural Criticism at a Theoretical Crossroads"; Elaine Kim, *Asian American Literature: An Introduction to the Writings and Their Social Context*; and Sau-ling Cynthia Wong, *Reading Asian American Literature: From Necessity to Extravagance*.

[4] The phrase "flexible citizen" comes from Aihwa Ong, *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999.

reconfiguration of gendered epistemic violence. I am reminded of what Sonita Sarker and Esha Niyogi De observe is a "feminized geography [that] is imprinted by a masculinist history" in their discussion of how South and Southeast Asian women and men negotiate global capitalism (7).

In its examination of multiple literary and visual genres in overlapping contexts and locations, this project also questions the separation of disciplines within the American academy, and how Vietnam is imagined and represented in culture and in scholarship in the West. This is a comparative, interdisciplinary, and multilingual study that brings together the fields of Asian Studies, U.S. Ethnic Studies, Feminist Studies, Cultural Studies, and Transnational Studies, and contributes to the body of research on postcolonial societies negotiating global capitalism. As a subfield of Asian Studies, Vietnam Studies is still dominated by the social sciences—economics, political science and history—and strongly attached to the Cold War appropriation of scholarship on Asia as intimately tied to state intelligence and economic competition. By bringing literary theory to the study of Vietnam, I intervene in that tradition and make visible the geo-political dimensions of cultural production, and the approach of the American academy to Asian Studies. In that task, I call upon the tools of race and ethnic theories foundational to U.S. Ethnic Studies, the critique of gender and sexuality central to Feminist Studies, and the understanding of culture as a site that is integrally tied to historical, social and political conditions.

In Chapter One, "Vietnamese Literary Criticism and the Re-evaluation of the State Project of Modernization", I first look at how writers and intellectuals in late 1970s to 1980s Vietnam worked to reposition themselves and their institutions in the

struggle for knowledge production as the country sought integration into a global world order. I analyze the political maneuverings, discursive strategies and reexamination of realism in Vietnamese literary criticism written during the transition period from the expansion of collectivization to the state's endorsement of free market economics.

Through the decades of carefully shaping its political and cultural platform, the state had come to base its legitimacy on the premise that it could and did lead the masses in the fight to free the country of foreign aggressors, modernize the country through socialism, and maintain the people's "Vietnamese "essence" while disabusing them of feudalistic superstitions. All three of these principles would come under public attack in the years after the Indochinese Wars, and would be increasingly so with the advent of *Đổi Mới* [Renovation], the official policy of open market economics. With the policy's announcement in 1986, government-supported intellectuals and media channels argued that the Party was the catalyst for the proliferation of cultural texts and venues that freely debated social issues.[5]

To the contrary, artists and intellectuals working in and outside of state institutions had long been discussing and writing about topics that they then put aside because of war-time imperatives, but now no longer found compelling to ignore in the post-war period. This unwillingness to continue to defer to the state's cultural

[5] In one of the most important arenas in the battle over ideological formation, school textbooks credit the Party for the flowering of the arts. But they selectively exclude works and authors who challenged the official cultural platform, for example, from post-1975 to the early 1990s, when the state systematically cracked down on dissenting voices. A typical textbook for college students is *Một Số Vấn Đề vè Lí Luận và Lịch Sử Văn Học* [A Number of Issues About Literary Criticism and Literary History]. See also Lê Phong's *Việt Nam Hiện Đại: Một Số Gương Mặt Văn Chương-Học Thuật* [Contemporary Vietnam: Reflections on Literature and Learning]. All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

prescriptions recalled the social and cultural eruptions and consequent suppressions of the 1920s and 1950s. Under the French, various schools of local thought had anxiously debated the extent to which the country should modernize or hold on to "traditional" values and social philosophies. A few decades later, the founders of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam incorporated into their cultural and political platforms the modern faith in technology and scientific rationality. Writers and intellectuals in the North came to accept this. Even when they challenged the state's sway over the arts during the short-lived but significant Nhân Văn Giai Phẩm Affair of 1956, they did not question the Party's political authority. In the 1980s, however, a new generation of writers and intellectuals was less willing to quietly accept the submission of the arts to politics.

The circumstances no longer required a unified front against a foreign aggressor to justify the sole use of the arts for revolutionary ideological work. This would be seen most remarkably in the widespread rejection of the heroic, the cornerstone of the Vietnamese Marxist modern vision of developmentalist economics and narrative of social progress. With the state casting itself as the embodiment of the heroic spirit of the people, an attack on the heroic in the arts was not far from a questioning of the Party's legitimacy. The state recognized that such works were not just addressing aesthetics, but were touching on the bedrock of communist rule itself. It acted quickly to remind the dissenting voices of the Party's essential role in the making of modern Vietnamese history, and this would lead to a reversal of the liberalization of culture at the beginning of the *Đổi Mới* period.

To establish a framework for understanding the transition from socialist realism to post-socialist aesthetics, I first trace the genealogy of Vietnamese literary discourse to the pre-formation of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam. The state's cultural platform built its theoretical foundations on Mao Tse-Tung's statements about the intrinsically political nature of cultural production and the responsibility of cultural producers to be in service of the masses. I argue that the discourse of Vietnamese literary criticism in the second half of the 20th century has been established through the reiteration of personal attacks, the language of "sin" [*tội lỗi*] and the selective historicizing of the Party's successes. This created a discourse of literary criticism that writers and intellectuals in the post-1975 era would have to contest and appropriate as they pushed the boundaries of literary creativity and intellectual debate.

In the second part of this chapter, I show the connections between the debates in literary criticism and literary production by analyzing short stories written by Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, one of the most prominent writers of that time. I argue that his rejection of the masculine hero of socialist aesthetics was a challenge to the state's legitimacy as it sought to merge the Vietnamese economy into the global market. Thiệp provoked one of the most controversial literary and political debates in postcolonial Vietnam by creating a style of realism that self-consciously blurred the lines between the historical and the fictional, the canonical and the popular, the sacred and the profane. His stories raised the question of how the truth is constructed, codified and normalized, and, by extension, challenged the truth-telling position of the Party-led state.

The harsh criticisms and fervent praise these stories garnered was not just about literary acumen, but also about how the country's history had been selectively narrated and institutionalized, and what pasts and presents were a part of that history. In the post-1975 era, the process of official history-making in Vietnam had to consider the country within the context of postcolonial Cold War politics internationally, and reunification and reconstruction domestically. To clear the way for the new order, the Party sent hundreds of thousands of former officers of the Republic of Vietnam to reeducation and hard labor camps spread throughout the difficult environs of the Central and Northern Highlands. Meanwhile, in the North, artists and intellectuals who had willingly served the revolutionary cause agitated for freedom to go beyond the unequivocally celebratory parameters of socialist realism. What began as an exploration of grief, regret and dismay became a flood of works that aired disappointment with the socialist promise of a modern utopia and questioned official narratives about truth and legitimacy. Thiệp was not the first writer or artist to raise those issues, but he was bold enough to do so by using heroes who had been canonized by both nationalist and communist historiographies.

In Chapter Two, "The Legacy of the Revolutionary Memoir and Gendered Epistemic Violence in the Era of Liberalization", I examine the post-1975 literary recasting of the genre of the revolutionary memoir and its use as an official vehicle of memory-making. Dating back to at least the 1930s, a time of intense French colonial repression, Vietnamese rebellion, and the beginnings of the systematic organization of the Vietnamese Communist Party, the revolutionary memoir was an important tool in the creation of the founding myth of the nation.

During the transition from socialist realism to post-socialist aesthetics, war novelists appropriated the conventions of the revolutionary memoir to reclaim their place in national memory-making, a position that they had lost to the state, as embodied in socialist realism. As inheritors of this genre and its nation-building function, Nguyễn Trí Huân and Bảo Ninh reworked its meta-narrative of resistance, individual maturation and collective consciousness. Both novels claim the position of the feminine as a legitimate voice in contrast to the masculine of the state. Huân's appropriation of the feminine does not so much challenge state-sponsored nation-building as it seeks to insert the consideration of reconciliation. Moreover, the feminine position is represented as individual and abject versus the collective, masculine position of justice. In contrast, *The Sorrow of War*, one of the most famous war novels, challenges the state position of truth-telling by constructing an alternative masculinity whose subjectivity comes into being through an epistemic violence to the body of the woman.

In Chapter Three, "New National and Global Imaginaries: Transformations of the Vietnamese Film Industry", I examine the impact of globalization on filmmaking and the assertion of alternative masculine subjectivities in post-socialist Vietnam. Although literature has the most established genealogy in Vietnamese culture, cinema has come to play a much more important role as private investment pours into the country. I first trace the genealogy of Vietnamese cinema to the French era, and offer an analysis of films that exemplified each phase of the industry. I then examine the impact of global capitalism on Vietnamese cinema, which has become a site for an international circuit of capital, labor and images as local and foreign filmmakers

collaborate and draw on multiple national cinematic traditions to create a "media capital" the equal of other Asian sites.

In this transformation of the film industry, questions of history and national belonging figure prominently and are commonly negotiated through representations of gender and sexuality. Vietnamese director Dang Nhat Minh's *Nostalgia for the Countryside* (1995) constructs a contrast between a youthful national, masculine subject and a diasporic, feminine subject. This use of gender enables the film to subtly indict the state's embrace of neoliberalism as an exploitative collaboration between foreigners and domestic urbanites, and to implicate the diasporic subject within that neocolonial project. A decade later, with the demise of the state film industry and the return of diasporic filmmakers, crews and casts in large numbers, Vietnamese cinema is dominated by private investment and collaborations between locals and foreigners. This sea change in the industry has brought about very different conceptions of national and diasporic subjects. Charlie Nguyễn's diasporic film *The Rebel* (2008) represents historical and personal lineage by drawing on themes and imagery of national traditions that have become transnational in the circulation of people and cultures—blurring the lines between the national and the transnational, national historiography and colonialist nostalgia, the independent and the commercial. The film's multiple genres—historical drama, martial arts and romance—bring together literary and filmic influences that register with Vietnamese, diasporic and foreign audiences at varying levels of recognition and misrecognition. The film's quoting of multiple national traditions and cinematic styles constructs the nation as a heterogeneous space determined by histories other than communist, national history.

Whereas the feminine is used to distinguish between the national and the diasporic subjects in *Nostalgia for the Countryside*, in *The Rebel*, the feminine legitimizes the formation of an alternative masculinity that is the inheritor of a national, anti-colonial history.

In Chapter Four, "Dissonance and Disorientation in Post-911 Vietnamese American Visual Culture", I look at photography and video art installations as sites for the reexamination of Vietnamese nationalist history from the diaspora. Pipo Nguyễn-duy's photography series *East of Eden: Vietnam* responds to post-911 geo-politics by revisiting the Euro-American artistic concept of nature as a space untainted by the ravages of modernization. Shot in Vietnam, the project brings together European, American, Asian American and Vietnamese artistic and cultural traditions to unsettle Orientalist and touristic images of Vietnam as Edenic escape, and to make visible the destructive force of modern warfare. I argue that Hồng-An Trương's video installation piece *Adaptation Fever*, questions the unitary and teleological boundaries of Vietnamese national, French colonial and U.S. imperial historiographies through its excavation and redeployment of war footage shot in Vietnam by American and French observers. Her video installation foregrounds the constructiveness of the archives as an institution of truth-telling by modern regimes of governmentality and the use of the visual as historical evidence. Both of these artists simultaneously memorialize the wars endured by Vietnam and point to the continuation of U.S. imperialism.

This project, *An Assemblage of Fragments*, explores the reading and re-reading of history through literary criticism, short stories, novels, films and visual culture produced from the 1970s to the post-911 era in Vietnam and in the diaspora. The

project examines the constant appropriations and re-appropriations by writers, filmmakers and artists in challenging Vietnamese national, French colonial and U.S. imperial discourses. The project links debates and ideological exchanges between the Vietnamese/national and the extra-national and international subjects to Vietnam's current approach to globalization. In so doing, this project argues that the domestic production of culture cannot be understood separately from the transnational circulation of ideological frameworks, as seen in the country's history of colonial/imperial resistance and the current moment of globalization and the specter of neo-colonialism.

CHAPTER ONE

Vietnamese Literary Criticism

and the Re-evaluation of the State Project of Modernization

Much of the writings of literary critics at the beginning of *Đổi Mới* engage with the definition and role of the arts as they were set forth nearly half a century ago. During the tumultuous struggle for independence from French and Japanese colonial rule, the Việt Minh set out to offer a political and cultural platform that combined nationalism and socialism, and that would eventually hold up socialism as the only path to national liberation.[6] Influenced by Mao Tse-Tung's 1940 essay "On New Democracy" and the 1942 "Talks at the Yenan Forum on Literature and Art," the Việt Minh's top cultural theorist, the poet and composer Trường Chinh, wrote two treatises that would become the "Bible" of cultural criticism in Vietnam.[7]

[6] The Việt Minh [Việt Nam Độc Lập Đồng Minh Hội] was the predecessor to the Vietnamese Workers' Party [Đảng Lao Động Việt Nam] and the current Vietnamese Communist Party [Đảng Cộng Sản].
[7] Born Đặng Xuân Khu, Trường Chinh's name, which means "Long March," reflects the political and cultural theorist's admiration for Mao Tse-Tung. Trường Chinh was known for both his political acumen and his poetry. To commemorate the 100th anniversary of his birth in February 2007, the Vietnam News Agency Publishing House published an expensive, photo-rich book entitled *Đồng Chí Trường Chinh* [Comrade Trường Chinh].

Cultural works would increasingly come to be judged by their affiliation with the revolutionary state, as determined by the communist leaders and by the artist's ability to capture the "true essence" of the common people's heroism. Trường Chinh's 1943 "Đề cương về văn hóa Việt Nam" [Theses on Vietnamese Culture] set out the three factors that made for worthy revolutionary art—dân tộc hóa [to Vietnamize, to express one's ethnic and culture essence], đại chúng hóa [to popularize, to make common], and khoa học hóa [to make scientific]. Kim Ninh has noted the irony of the insistence on a Vietnamese essence when the Việt Minh, like so many organizations at the time, were denouncing much of what constituted Vietnamese customs and practices, which had been ill-equipped to rid the country of foreign aggressors and influences. However, the Việt Minh's emphasis on Vietnameseness and the condition of the common people laid the theoretical foundation that justified mass support for their political leadership. The third factor, "to make scientific," brought organizational discipline and rationality into a world torn apart by French colonialism and two World Wars (Ninh 26-39). Although the treatise had little circulation due to intense French censorship and an uncertain political climate in which the Việt Minh were fighting with other Marxist, nationalist and sectarian parties, the principles Trường Chinh set forth would be elaborated upon in subsequent writings by other Party cultural theorists.

Trường Chinh's second, more important and more extensive treatise, "Chủ nghĩa Mác và văn hóa Việt Nam" [Marxism and Vietnamese Culture] takes the firm position that no art is neutral. Given the reality of social divisions by class, there is no art that does not contain social content and does not have a political message, and art

that claims to be apolitical or “art for art’s sake” is not only disingenuous, but, worse, betrays the people and their fight for liberation. Like Mao, Trường Chinh argued that in order to create cultural works faithful to the revolutionary spirit of the people, artists and intellectuals need to immerse themselves in the lives of the masses—workers, peasants and soldiers—to observe and understand how the latter live (Ninh 39-47).

The Maoist and Vietnamese conceptions of socialist realism are redefinitions of Georg Lukács’ theory that literature should reflect “objective reality” as it truly is, and not just its immediate and surface manifestations (1037). According to this theory, capitalism promotes the separation of the different parts of an economic system into autonomous parts, and a Marxist theory of literature should insist on the depiction of the totality of representation in all aspects of its social context, and how a character's thoughts, feelings and experiences relates to his society. Unlike the naturalist writer, who does not experience life but only observes and describes it, the realist writer experiences life and conveys its essence to the reader. Although he argues that the socialist realist writes with social consciousness, Lukács does not make the claim that this writer proposes true consciousness, as opposed to the false consciousness of other types of realist writers (Livingston 13-30).

However, the distinction between true and false consciousness was a critical tenet of the Vietnamese Communist Party’s formation of legitimate cultural production. Trường Chinh’s treatise “Marxism and Vietnamese Culture” was the Party’s reaffirmation of its cultural position and rejection of any ambivalence among artists and intellectuals. Some had agreed that all art is propagandistic, because every work takes an ideological position. Other artists and intellectuals were willing to

accept the Party's leadership, but were alarmed by its absolute stance on culture. In publications and at cultural meetings and conferences, they debated the differences between art and propaganda (tuyên truyền). Many artists and intellectuals who wanted national independence saw the value of using art in service of propagandistic purposes, as a tool to rally the masses to the revolutionary cause. However, for them, that did not mean that art is the same as propaganda. Others like the writer and poet Nguyễn Đình Thi struggled with the demand to depict the truth as defined by the Party and the fear of losing artistic independence. He would write of the heartbreaking process of reconciling himself to what he believed was best for the country in the essay "Nhận đường" [Accepting the way], about the metaphoric road leading to the Party, the only path to independence.[8]

As the Việt Minh continued to consolidate its power in the anti-French resistance and gained confidence from seeing Mao Tse-Tung's success in China, the Party shifted from a nationalist, all-inclusive tone to a fervently socialist direction. On the cultural front, the Party would organize intellectuals and artists into the Vietnamese Union of Art and Literature under the stewardship of the writer Tố Hữu. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, Party theorists, themselves artists and intellectuals, led criticism and self-criticism sessions in which participants came under extreme pressure to condemn their own works before and after the August Revolution of 1945 as "tội lỗi" [sinful] because of their failure to portray the truthful and revolutionary nature of the common people. Attendees assessed whether the writer was in touch with

[8] Nguyễn Đình Thi, "Nhận Đường" [Accepting the Way] in *Văn Nghệ* 1 (March 1948): 19-32. See also Kim Ninh's chapter 2, "Intellectuals and Their Responses, 1945-48."

the lives of the masses, whether he was concerned with expressing his soul or the voice of the people. Writers whose intellectual experiments were too abstract or difficult to understand risked being criticized for being individualistic [cá nhân chủ nghiã] and out of touch with the masses. What once was a debate among equals about the content and form of creative works became increasingly harsh and even terrifying, *personal* attacks about the writers themselves and their *sinful* and bourgeois way of life and way of thinking (Ninh 93-98).

The most dramatic and traumatic demonstration of the Party's determination to assert its authority was the Nhân Văn Giai Phẩm Affair of 1956-1958. Nhân Văn [Humanism] and Giai Phẩm [Fine Art] were the two leading publications that questioned complete state governance of the arts. The controversy broke out shortly after the signing of the Geneva Accords in 1954, during a period marked by the end of the anti-French war and the as-yet-unknown war between the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) in the north and the U.S.-backed Republic of Viet Nam (RVN) in the south. With the cessation of war, writers, artists and intellectuals in the north questioned the need for strict state control of the arts. They reasoned that if the main purpose of socialist realism was to use culture to support the war effort, then the end of war should open the door to other modes of representation. They drew hope and inspiration from Nikita Krushchev's speech criticizing Stalinism at the Twentieth Party Congress in the Soviet Union in February 1956, the Hundred Flowers Campaign in China in May 1956, and anti-statist protests in Eastern Europe in the second half of 1956.

Back home, Vietnamese intellectuals and artists accepted the Party's vision of the country, but some increasingly questioned its direct leadership over the arts and culture now that the country was not at war. They called for a legal system, not the practice of criticism and self-criticism, to hold accountable political opportunists who exploited the environment of fear to seize power. They called for the right to freedom of speech, publishing, organization, congregation and movement; in effect, the freedom to dissent and question the Party's leadership. The state would eventually harshly crack down on them—sending a few to prison, stripping some of their high-ranking posts, subjecting many to public criticism that made even their friends afraid to be associated with them for fear of similar reprisals.[9] As Nguyễn-Võ Thu-Hương argues in *The Ironies of Freedom*, what was at stake was not so much the definition of socialist realism and its function, as it was who could claim to speak the truth—the Party or the artist.

As the top political and cultural theorists refined their vision of the formation of the DRV and the role of culture, criticism and self-criticism sessions and writings required intellectuals and artists to completely condemn their pasts, renounce their sins and embrace the Party as the source of salvation. This process of being reborn into a new society shifted the focus of evaluation from the intellectual and artist's professional capabilities, which could not be trusted in the new world-to-be-made, to their personal pronouncements and personal acts. Artistic form and technique were judged in relationship to the individual's absolute acceptance or refusal of the Party's

[9] See Kim Ninh's chapter "Intellectual Dissent: The Nhân Văn Giai Phẩm Period", 121-63. See also Georges Boudarel's "Intellectual Dissidence in the 1950s—The Nhân Văn Giai Phẩm Affair" and Shawn McHale's "Vietnamese Marxism, Dissent, and the Politics of Postcolonial Memory: Tran Duc Thao, 1946-1993."

leadership. On another level, shifting the focus from professional to personal qualities justified the Party's coming bureaucratization of every level of society and filling of posts with people with the proper revolutionary credentials. More important, the process of radically replacing the old with the new was more about the intellectual and writer's complete and unequivocal acceptance of the Party's authority and vision, no matter the sacrifices it demanded. The bitter irony is that in creating a new discourse of truth and power, the Party appropriated the very language of religion that is anathema to Marxist critiques of class and ideology. The metaphorical phrases "the Way" [đạo] and "accepting the way" [nhận đường] would become a mantra that normalized the idea that "the Way" was the path laid out and built by the Party, and that other envisioned paths toward national independence and nation-building were counter-revolutionary and dangerous.

The path to *Đổi Mới* [Renovation]

The end of the civil war and the formation of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam was a significant affirmation of the Party's military and political leadership. However, there was much hardship for the new country to bear. Its official reunification in 1976 did not translate into reconciliation of former enemies. What was seen by northerners as the Liberation of the South [Giải Phóng Miền Nam] was seen by southerners as a conquest and a forced assimilation into the dictates of the North. The Party tried to remake the South in its image, renaming Sài Gòn Hồ Chí Minh City; banishing Republic of Viet Nam officers to re-education and hard labor camps in the Central Highlands and the North for years, even decades, to clear the way for a new political order; and expanding the industrial and agricultural collectivization

programs initiated in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in the 1950s down to the former southern capital and commercial hub, the fertile fields of the Mekong Delta and beyond. Southerners rejected the forced collectivization, withholding their labor, stealing materials and putting their family's needs before that of the community's.[10] In his study of the peasantry in Malaysia, James Scott shows that resistance to hegemony can take the form of everyday practices. In southern Vietnam, the predominantly agrarian population demonstrated its opposition to communist ideology through its refusal to definitively participate in the collectivization of the economy.

Meanwhile, war was still on the borders, with Pol Pot's skirmishes into the Mekong Delta as early as 1975 and China coming down from the north in 1979 on the pretext that it opposed Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia in 1978. This would create a huge rift between Vietnam and China, which had contributed significantly to the training of future Việt Minh political and cultural leaders, and encouraged the former to ally itself more firmly with the Soviet Union. Throughout the 1980s, Vietnam strengthened its ties with the Soviet Union in the realms of culture, politics and economics. It joined the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance with Eastern European Bloc countries and received $3 billion in annual aid from the U.S.S.R. It sent its future leaders to the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe for higher education and political training.

In the Soviet Union, Communist Party General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev was leading a revolution of sorts—ushering in *Glasnost*, the gradual democratization of civil society, to open the country's management to public scrutiny and thus override

[10] See essays in Luong, Hy V., ed., *Postwar Vietnam: Dynamics of a Transforming Society*.

the top leadership and opposition to his program of economic restructuring known as *Perestroika*.[11] In Eastern Europe, democracy activists and nationalist leaders saw an opening and started agitating for more freedom from within and from the Soviet sphere of influence in the 1980s. This would lead to nationalist and secessionist movements such as Solidarity in Poland, the break-up of Yugoslavia, and the Fall of the Berlin Wall. For Vietnam, the dissolution of the U.S.S.R. and the Eastern European Bloc in the late 1980s and early 1990s gravely exacerbated the economic embargo led by the U.S. and imposed by the West. As Vietnamese communist leaders watched these international events unfolding, different factions from within the Party and the National Assembly maneuvered and jostled for power and for their vision of how to reconstruct the country.

The war-time devastation of the infrastructure and economy, the failure of the systematic integration of the South into the northern model, and the U.S.-led embargo created a desperate state of affairs that the leaders of the newly formed Socialist Republic of Vietnam had to address. Party General Secretary Lê Duẩn was criticized for his steel fist approach; meanwhile, leaders in Hồ Chí Minh City and the agricultural centers of the South experimented with letting farmers and small scale merchants work for their own profit as long as they sold a certain amount of their goods to the state at a price significantly below that of the market. At the Sixth National Congress in December 1986, the Party officially embraced market

[11] See Dubravka Juraga and M. Keith Booker, eds., *Rereading Global Socialist Cultures After the Cold War: The Reassessment of a Tradition*.

liberalization in the policy known as *Đổi Mới* and passed resolutions to focus on the renewal and expansion of trade and diplomatic ties with the West.

The move toward an open market economy signaled the Party's implicit acknowledgment of widespread grassroots resistance to centralized state planning of industries and agriculture on the domestic front and liberalization processes that were happening in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe Bloc countries.[12] Taking advantage of the fear among stalwart officials that the Party itself would collapse if it did not make room for alternative voices, more progressive factions within the Party pushed for cultural renovation.[13] Nguyễn Văn Linh, who was elected General Secretary at the Sixth National Congress after Lê Duẩn's death in July 1986, and a brief interlude led by Trường Chinh, announced an era of liberalization in the arts and culture. He and his supporters gave the green light for alternatives to socialist realism as the sole ideological model of artistic expression in thematic concerns and literary styles, which had largely been restricted to the portrayal of the working class and the armed forces as the vanguard in the process of nation-building. Unable to stave off the push for democratization of Vietnamese society, the conservative elements conceded ground, only on the condition that the new direction would not so much be a victory of the capitalist order over socialist ideals, as a more complex examination of the "reactionary elements" who could not understand or accept the development of an open market society with the Party at the helm.

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[12] See Luong (2003) and Nguyen Tho Xuân, *The Press and Media in Vietnam*.
[13] Heng, R. H. *Of the State, For the State, Yet Against the State: The Struggle Paradigm in Vietnam's Media Politics*.

Across the spectrum of cultural production, from 1987 to 1990, there was tremendous open discussion about change and reform. General Secretary Nguyễn Văn Linh understood that in the interests of gaining public support for the state's vision of establishing a market economy under the mantle of socialism, there had to be a democratization of civil society. Loosening the Party's grip on culture could serve that purpose. He started a weekly column that was printed in several news and cultural publications, notably in the daily *Quân Đội* [The Army] and the weekly gazette *Văn Nghệ* [Literature and Art], that openly promised to "cởi trói" [to untie] the binds that had hitherto dictated the direction and content of artistic and intellectual work. The Party would take the lead in forming a new society based on transparency and truth-telling: "The Party's approach in assessing the situation is to look straight at the truth, to judge it according to the truth, and to speak the truth".[14] Artists and intellectuals were quick to take advantage of the opening of the cultural realm to new ideas. There were debates about the tenets of socialism in popular newspapers, such as *Thanh Niên* [Youth], *Nhân Dân* [The People] and *Quân Đội* [The Army]; investigative reporting of government corruption and mismanagement; critiques of developmental narratives in the dissident writings of Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, Dương Thu Hương and others. Intellectuals debated alternative visions of modernization and the role of the state in the arts, as seen in *Văn Nghệ* [Literature and Art] under the editorship of Nguyên Ngọc, the central region's premier literary magazine *Sông Hương* and even conservative academic journals like the Literature Institute's *Văn Học*.

[14] "Thái độ của Đảng ta trong việc đánh gía tình hình là nhìn thẳng vào sự thật, đánh gía đúng sự thật, nói rõ sự thật." Qtd in Phan Cự Đệ, ed., "Lí luận, phê bình văn học Việt Nam giai đoạn 1986-2000" [Vietnamese literary debate and criticism, 1986-2000], *Văn Học Việt Nam Thế Kỷ XX* [Twentieth-century Vietnamese Literature], Nhà Xuất Bản Giáo Dục: Hà Nội, 2004, 755.

While the Party's public pronouncements of relaxed state control did much to spur artistic and intellectual production, it was not the main or only impetus for the push for more civil freedoms. As seen during the periods under French colonial rule and the construction of the Republic of Vietnam, writers and intellectuals did not wait for the state to initiate cultural renovation to push the boundaries of creativity and innovation. The Party had used the urgency of wartime mobilization to justify its linking of cultural production and political ideology. But with the reunification of Vietnam in 1976, that reason was no longer tenable. Writers and intellectuals once again openly agitated for cultural freedom. Ironically, one of the loudest and consistent of those voices came from within the ranks of the army. During the war, some of the officers served as war journalists, honing their writing, observation and analytical skills in the field. Many prominent post-war writers and poets would come from their ranks. One of the most famous was Nguyễn Minh Châu, who wrote a series of essays that presented the case for moving away from the strictures of socialist realism. These essays would be collected in *Trang Giấy Trước Đèn* [The Page in Front of the Light].

As the country was trying to rebuild itself, the former Army Colonel saw what Walter Benjamin calls that "moment of danger" when history cannot be left to be presented as a given, unquestioned truth, but must be seized to make possible a reinterpretation of past events (255). A prominent member of the Vietnam Writers Association, Châu was very much a part of the political and cultural establishment. His approach was to reaffirm the Party's leadership and the responsibility of the arts in support of the revolution, all the while calling for a new artistic vision that was more

relevant to the needs of a free-thinking society. In mapping out the relationship between the writer and the reader, in "The writer, the character, the reader . . .", he first reiterates the discourse of revolutionary mobilization and resistance to foreign aggression.[15] During the wars against the French and the U.S., the whole country had to be mobilized, including the arts to serve the nationalist cause: "in order to defeat two imperial invaders twice as strong as us, literature, too, had to become a soldier" (74).[16] The essay does not dispute the Party's vision of the arts as a necessary weapon [vũ khí] in the fight against foreign aggression: "The literature of the last 35 years also had to shoot and kill all that was weak and cowardly and took upon itself the responsibility of affirming the hero and the traditional essence of love for country and heroes that has developed to unlimited heights" (75).[17]

Nguyễn Minh Châu understood the importance of gathering support from within the system; not only does he use the language of socialist realism to lay the groundwork for his argument, but he appropriates the ubiquitous figure of the soldier as the embodiment of righteous action. After celebrating the political use of literature in the revolutionary era, he specifically pays homage to the cadre/officer [cán bộ] as the one who has the deepest understanding of life because "they understand the

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[15] Nguyễn Minh Châu, "Nhà văn, nhân vật, bạn đọc…" [The writer, the character, the reader…] in *Trang Giấy Trước Đền* [The Page in Front of the Light], pp. 74-78. This essay was first published in *Văn Nghệ Quân Đội* [The Army's Literature and Art], issue 9 (1980) under the same title, and *Tạp Chí Văn Học* [Literature Magazine], issue 5 (1980), but under the title "Nhà Văn, đất nước và dân tộc mình" [[The writer, the country and our people]. Although I will note the original publication dates of Nguyễn Minh Châu's essays, my page references will be based on their publication in *Trang Giấy Trước Đèn* [The Page in Front of the Light].

[16] "để chiến thắng hai kẻ thù đế quốc xâm lược mạnh hơn chúng ta gấp bội, văn học cũng phải trở thành chiến sĩ"

[17] "Văn học ta 35 năm qua cũng phải bắn chết tất cả những cái gì yếu hèn và tự đặt cho mình nhiệm vụ khẳng định cho được người anh hùng và cái bản chất truyền thống yêu nước và anh hùng đã phát triển tới độ cao vô hạn của dân tộc ra."

geography of the country down to each house, each mound of earth, the history of each person living there" (75).[18] He then makes the ironic turn in his essay be using the figure of the cadre as the ultimate judge of good literature, a judge whose experience of the complexity of history disposes him to prefer multi-faceted foreign literature to the one-dimensional narratives of his fellow countrymen. In contrast to life, which is made up of diverse and complex experiences, Vietnamese revolutionary literature is shallow in its adherence to didactic, simplistic portrayals of characters and narratives. The irony in Châu's use of the figure of the cadre is that it was the cadres who during and after the war were the heads of state-run departments, associations and institutions, including those that controlled and censored the arts.

What the state claimed was the depiction of the truth, Châu saw as a literature predetermined by set formulas, an inauthentic fake, a surface gleaning of the real—what he termed "văn học minh họa" [illustrative literature].[19] For a special convening of the Vietnam Writers Association in 1987, with Secretary General Nguyễn Văn Linh in attendance, he had intended to deliver a speech that distinguished two types of writing—one for the author and the reader, and one for the "gatekeepers" [những người lính gác] (131).[20] Writers have had to learn to write for the ordinary reader [người đọc bình thường], on the one hand, and for the cultural authorities [lãnh đạo văn nghệ], on the other:

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[18] "họ hiểu địa dư đất nước đến từng ngôi nhà, từng mô đất, lịch sử từng con người"
[19] Nguyễn Minh Châu, "Hãy đọc lời ai điếu cho một giai đoạn văn nghệ minh họa" [We should say farewell to the period of illlustrative arts and letters] in *Trang Giấy Trước Đền* [The Page in Front of the Light], pp. 127-39.
[20] According to the footnote in *Trang Giấy Trước Đền*, Nguyễn Minh Châu did not deliver the speech because he came down with a throat infection. But the essay was published in *Văn Nghệ* 49-50 (December 5, 1987); 2, 15. See *Trang Giấy Trước Đền*, p. 127.

> It seems as though each time a writer sits in front of the page he has to hold two pens: one pen to write for the ordinary reader, for life, another pen for the Way, preoccupied with hiding, writing for the heads of literature to read. (129)[21]

Revolutionary demands had over time become the norm, and the art of writing has evolved into a "conditioned habit" [thói quen]. Writers learned to metaphorically walk along "a narrow passageway, narrow and low" [thành lang hẹp, vừa hẹp vừa thấp], ducking their heads, adapting to prohibitions on their creativity as one adapts to the deprivations of war (131). The practice of writing within narrow strictures passed down from one generation to the next. The result is a writer without a soul, a body of literature of negligible importance within the country and around the world:

> The greatest loss of our illustrative literature is the result of writers losing their creativity and literary works losing their imaginative quality—meaning new and original imagination that embodies each writer's general sense of life. One becomes like a person who has lost their soul, and only has their body, or only has a soul provided by the state. (132-33) [22]

Although Châu does not dismiss the role of văn học cách mạng [revolutionary literature] in the shaping of Vietnamese literature and society, he makes it clear that state mandates on creativity have become so dogmatic that the artist is now more like an empty shell than a source of innovation.

The revolutionary path that Trường Chinh had celebrated as the Way toward liberation and that Nguyễn Đình Thi and hundreds of his contemporaries and those

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[21] Có vẻ tuồng như mỗi nhà văn mỗi khi ngồi trước trang giấy là cùng một lúc phải cầm hai cây bút: một cây bút để viết cho người đọc bình thường, cho đời, một cây bút khác viết cho đạo, lo việc che chắn, viết cho lãnh đạo văn nghệ đọc.

[22] "Thất thiệt to lớn nhất của văn nghệ minh họa của ta là từ đấy những nhà văn đánh mất cái đầu và những tác phẩm văn học đánh mất tính tư tưởng—nghĩa là những tư tưởng mới và độc đáo mang tính khái quát cuộc đời của riêng từng nhà văn. Như một người đánh mất phần hồn còn phần xác hoặc chỉ còn cái phần hồn do nha nước bao cấp." The word "đầu" literally translates as "head." I am translating it as "creativity" to convey the loss of the writer's ability to write outside the dictates of the cultural authorities.

who followed had accepted and strove to construct has evolved into a “low and narrow passageway” that is suffocating and claustrophobic, a path that has left little room to move, let alone breathe. In being forced to accept the Way due to the urgency of war and the punishing scrutiny of the state, writers lost the courage and the ability to develop their creativity. Addressing himself to both writers and intellectuals and their gatekeepers, Châu lodges a remarkably direct condemnation against the cultural authorities as arbitrary [độc đoán] and tyrannical [chế áp]. It was unusual for writers and intellectuals to directly criticize the state leadership for its firm hold on the arts, let alone to refer specifically to the practice of criticism and self-criticism as a detriment to creativity rather than a necessary tool to remind the writer and intellectual of their purpose.

Châu’s call for a true liberalization of the arts was symptomatic of the thirst for new ideas and writing styles from many corners of the literary world. Another prominent voice urging change was Nguyên Ngọc, who with the backing of the powerful Politburo member Trần Độ, became Editor-in-Chief of the weekly *Văn Nghệ* [Literature and Culture] for a year-and-a-half between 1987 and 1988. A highly respected war veteran and intellectual himself, Nguyên Ngọc transformed the war-time government mouthpiece praising the Party to a must-read weekly filled with updates on international cultural scenes; forums for literary debates; and the latest experimentations in Vietnamese literature, visual arts and music. *Văn Nghệ* saw literature as an art form that benefited from exchanging ideas and creative energy with other art genres within the country and around the world. The weekly implicitly presented a case for the separation of art and propaganda, offering a regular venue for

critical assessments of the state's cultural policies and the political role of the arts. However, not all artists and intellectuals agreed with this push for radical change. One of Nguyên Ngọc's firmest opponents was none other than Nguyễn Đình Thi, who two decades earlier had felt great ambivalence in being forced to accept the Way and was now the Editor-in-Chief of *Tác Phẩm Mới*, which focused on Vietnamese canonical literature and writers officially approved by the state for their adherence to socialist realism.

If the late 1980s was a period of dramatic experimentation and testing of censorship restrictions, the 1990s witnessed the reassertion of state power by officials who wanted to make clear that the Party would not tolerate criticism of the state as a whole. Conservatives within the Party managed to regain a majority at the Seventh Party Congress in June 1991, renewing the use of revolutionary discourse to call for the production of culture to serve the people and, thereby, the Party, which was the vanguard. The Congress reaffirmed the principles of Leninist-Marxist ideology with the people as their own "masters." The election of Đỗ Mười as General Secretary, a position he would hold for six years, signaled the resumption of power by the conservative factions within the Party and the rolling back of the liberalization of the arts and public debate.

Two years earlier, as a member of the Party's Central Committee, Đỗ Mười delivered a speech at the Fourth Annual Vietnam Writers Association National Conference, that made it clear to his audience that the Party was not about to easily let go of its direction of the arts. Entitled "Our literature can only change correctly within the renovation work of the people according to the direction of socialism, under the

leadership of the Party," the speech reiterated the discourse of socialist realism as laid out by Trường Chinh and other Party cultural theorists decades ago. Mười recycled phrases that had been and still are being used in official cultural directives and productions.[23] Whereas Nguyễn Minh Châu was pushing for the creation of a new discourse of literary and artistic truth-telling, Mười was reinstating the truth of the Party with well-worn phrases and concepts. He opens his speech with the discourse of the Socialist Revolution, recalling the work of the previous generation's writers and intellectuals in propagating the message of heroic salvation and resistance. Reaffirming the linear trajectory of Marxist historiography, he argues *Đổi Mới* literature is a continuation of, not a break from, revolutionary literature, and that its goal is:

> *to serve the Fatherland, to serve the people, to serve the work of revolutionary socialism as led by the Party* so that the Fatherland can become a strong socialist country, the people's lives can be comfortable, happy, civilized, devoting all of one's strength to the struggle for peace, independence and social progress. (25; original emphasis)[24]

Literature and literary criticism should be critical by opposing the negative [chống tiêu cực] for the purposes of building a better society, not to create distrust of the Party and distance from revolutionary literature (26-27). Such a move, he argued, would be a return to the ill-fated direction of the arts under French colonialism and U.S.

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[23] Đỗ Mười, "Văn học ta chỉ có thể *Đổi Mới* đúng hướng trong sự nghiệp đổi mứi của nhân dân ta theo hướng xã hội chủ nghĩa, dưới sự lãnh đạo của đảng" [Our literature can only change correctly within the renovation work of the people according to the direction of socialism, under the leadership of the Party]. *Báo Chí Văn Nghệ Trong Sự Nghiệp Đổi Mới* [Newspapers, Magazines and the Arts in the Cause of Doi Moi]. Hà Nội: Nhà Xuất Bản Sự Thật, 1989. 23-35.

[24] "*…phục vụ Tổ quốc, phục vụ nhân dân, phục vụ sự nghiệp cách mạng xã hội chủ nghĩa do đảng lãnh đạo* làm cho Tổ quốc ta trở thành một nước xã hội chủ nghĩa giàu mạnh, cuộc sống của nhân dân ta được ấm no, hạnh phúc, văn minh, góp hết sức mình vào công cuộc đấu tranh cho hòa bình, độc lập dân tộc và tiến bộ xã hội."

imperialism. To be a writer who is a credit to society and to the country, one must increase one's knowledge of Leninist Marxism and one's cultural level. One must cultivate one's socialist morals [đạo đức xã hội chủ nghĩa] and reject individualism, which is selfish and of little use to society (29). Rejecting the rhetoric of humanism for the purposes of reaffirming the Party's vision of realism, he said, "If the writer *only thinks of himself*, then how can he *speak of the pain of humanity* and how can he build and nurture a noble spirit for anyone?" (30; original emphasis).[25]

The Benjaminian "moment of danger" that Nguyễn Minh Châu saw as an opportunity for a radical and urgent break with the past was to Đỗ Mười a potentially explosive threat that had to be contained. Heralding the crack down of artistic dissent in the 1990s, Đỗ Mười reframed his predecessor Nguyễn Văn Linh's definition of *Đổi Mới* as an era that would permit and encourage an honest examination of the truth. In between the convening of the Sixth National Congress in 1986 and the Seventh National Congress in 1991, the Soviet Union was collapsing; Eastern Europe was in political and economic chaos; and China had shown that political dissent, the most recent of which dramatically rose up in Tiananmen Square, should be dealt with quickly and decisively. Conservative factions within the Vietnamese Communist Party would make sure to prevent similar upheavals at home. Đỗ Mười drew the line—the arts should provide an arena for creative expression and criticism, but it should do so within limits and keep in mind its social responsibility to the people. Reusing the established language of the Party's cultural platform in the years before the official

[25] "Nhà văn mà <<chỉ biết có mình>> thì lam sao nói được <<nỗi đau nhân tình>> và làm sao co thể xây dựng, bồi dưỡng tâm hồn cao quí được cho ai."

hailing of *Đổi Mới*, he argues that to be free to think does not include opposing the Party or the socialist state. Democracy in Vietnam was a democracy in the Leninist Marxist framework, one best understood and defined by the Party, the representative of the people: "To expand democracy is not without limits. Our democracy is a socialist democracy. A democracy has to have leaders and leadership through democratic means, on the foundation of expanding democracy" (33).[26]

Đỗ Mười's insistence on a reinstatement of the doctrinal vision of socialist realism did not go unchallenged. A flurry of essays published in cultural publications and newspapers expanded on Nguyễn Minh Châu's call for a new vision. In an essay tellingly entitled "Không 'Có một thời…' như thế" [There is no 'There was a time…' like it], Hà Xuân Trường warns of the regressive consequences of state censorship by alluding to the Nhân Văn Giai Phẩm Affair.[27] Recalling the debates about "art for art's sake" and art as propaganda [nghệ thuật và nghệ thuật tuyên truyền] at the Association of Writers' Second National Congress in 1957, he argues a similar situation is happening in the present:

> The leadership of the arts has perceptions that are simplistic, shallow in terms of how the arts should serve politics, take lightly the responsibility of the individual, seldom encouraging thinking and curiosity in creativity; strictly imposing on the artwork's subject matter and form in a narrow, one-dimensional way. (6)[28]

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[26] "Mở rộng dân chủ cũng không phải là không có giới hạn. Dân chủ cua ta là dân chủ xã hội chủ nghĩa. Dân chủ phải có lãnh đạo và lãnh đạo cũng bằng phương pháp dân chủ, trên cơ sở mở rộng dân chủ."
[27] Hà Xuân Trường. "Không 'Co một thời…' như thế" ["There is no 'There was a time…' like it] *Văn Nghệ* [Literature and Art]. (December 5, 1992: 49). 6-7.
[28] "Về lãnh đạo sáng tác, đã có những quan điểm giản đơn, thiển cận về vấn đề văn nghệ phục vụ chính trị, dẫn tới chỗ coi nhẹ trách nhiệm cá nhân, ít khuyến khích sự suy nghĩ, tìm tòi của từng người trong sang tác; gò bó đề tài va hinh thức nghệ thuật một cách hẹp hòi, phiến diện."

Later in the essay, he links the prohibitions on creative and intellectual work to the stunted development of the educational system, which is taught by teachers and professors with little knowledge of intellectual schools and methodologies that have developed outside of the country. Unlike the Western liberal concepts of individuality and "art for art's sake," these concepts are here seen in relation to social responsibility. The argument Hà Xuân Trường makes is not for a separation between art for the self versus art for society, but it is for the artist's right to define his own responsibility, to determine the content and form of his creative work.

Appropriating Trường Chinh's conception of the arts as socially relevant, Hà Xuân Trường argues for a literature that is connected to daily life and social conditions.

> Literature itself does not have a history if it stands outside of life, social setting, especially the setting of political struggle. If we only look at the literary act, from 1945 on, right in the fire of two wars, when we touch upon literary issues, the arts, never does Comrade Truong Chinh—one of the leaders who representing the Party spoke about culture, literature—not criticize phenomena that are simplistic, shallow, formulaic, one-dimensional, naturalistic, decorative, degrading of literature, the arts. (6)[29]

What is stake is not just artistic content and form, but the right to redefine the Party's cultural platform itself. Equally important was the position of the writer, whether his source of creativity stemmed from the Party or from life. Life here is not just the

[29] "Văn học tự thân nõ không có lịch sử nếu đứng một mình tách tời khỏi cuộc sống, bối cảnh xã hội, đặc biệt là bối cảnh đấu tranh chính trị. Chỉ chiếu theo văn bản, tôi thấy từ sau 1945, ngay trong khói lửa của hai cuộc chiến tranh; khi đề cập vấn đề văn học, nghệ thuật, không lần nào, đồng chí Trường Chinh—một trong số đồng chí lãnh đạo thay mật Đàng phát biểu về văn hóa, vân nghệ—không phê phán các hiện tượng giản đơn, sơ lược, công thức, một chiều, hình thức chủ nghĩa tự nhiên chủ nghĩa, tô hồng, bôi đen trong văn học, nghệ thuật."

experiential substance of writing, but a metonymy for the writer's control over his creative process and artistic work.

This contention with the re-writing of literary history and history-making itself would continue within state institutions, structures of power and popular publications. Scholars and researchers working in educational and research institutions published school textbooks and journals that credited the Party as the initiator of *Đổi Mới*. The official line was that *Đổi Mới* was announced at the end of 1985, well before the fall of the USSR and Eastern European Bloc countries in 1989. Literary scholars would point out that the Sixth Congress' Resolution #5 did not speak of the arts as a weapon [vũ khí] in service of the Party:

> The arts and literature are an essential necessity in the spiritual life of society, manifesting the degree of a country's development as a whole, an era. The arts and letters nurture the spirit, creating cultural value and artistic work that gets passed on from one lifetime to another, enriching one's life.[30]

Cognizant that concessions had to be made to at least give the appearance of openness, researchers, scholars and Party officials would eventually acknowledge there are many paths toward national salvation and creative production. This allowed for the recognition of pillars of Vietnamese nationalism such as Phan Châu Trinh and Phan Bội Châu who lived during the French colonial era, and even those writers and intellectuals condemned to hard labor and ostracized by their communities during the Nhân Văn Giai Phẩm Affair. Going back in time, historians could elide the violence of the power struggles among the communists, nationalists and other sectarian

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[30] "…văn nghệ là nhu cầu thiết yếu trong đời sống tinh thần của xã hội, thể hiện trình độ phát triển chung của một đất nước, một thời đại, là lĩnh vực sản xuất tinh thần tạo ra những giá trị văn hóa, những công trình nghệ thuật được lưu truyền từ đời này sang đời khác, làm giàu đẹp thêm cuộc sống con người." Nguyễn Văn Linh, quoted in "Lí luận, phê bình văn học Việt Nam giai đoạn 1986-2000." *Văn Học Việt Nam Thế Kỷ* XX. Nhà Xuất Bản Giáo Dục: Hà Nội, 2004, 756.

movements. Nearly a century later, former enemies were no longer around and an acknowledgement of their achievements could be used to signal the Party's openness to alternative points of views. Writers and intellectuals who fought against the Way of the Party would eventually weary of such back-and-forth maneuvering within the halls of power and the circuits of production. Desperate to agitate for a new discourse of literary criticism, they would gradually move away from the formulaic assessments of literary works, and embrace writers such as Nguyễn Huy Thiệp and Bảo Ninh whose portrayals of the nation's past greatly destabilized the teleological trajectory of the Party's vision of inevitable history.

Nguyễn Huy Thiệp and the end of the heroic

In 1988, in the revamped issues of what would become the widely read weekly gazette *Văn Nghệ* [*Literature and Arts*], Nguyễn Huy Thiệp published a trilogy of short stories that not only dared to defame canonized national heroes, but also debased the enshrined image of the nation's *de facto* poet laureate of all time, Nguyễn Du. The eighteenth-century poet is described as the child of a virgin raped by Chinese civilization, a virgin who simultaneously felt pleasure, humiliation and vengeance due to the rape. But Nguyễn Du knows not that he is the product of a degrading violation, a bastardized descendant of a mightier force. By portraying the emblematic figure of the best of Vietnamese literature and the arts as a bastard and myopic imitator of a great civilization, Thiệp was not only taking issue with what constitutes worthy Vietnamese literature, but he was also challenging the Vietnamese Communist Party's rein over the arts by way of debunking a sacrosanct figure like Nguyễn Du.

In a host of stories published in 1987 and 1988, the relatively unknown author provoked one of the most controversial literary *and* political debates in postcolonial Vietnam by creating a style of unadorned realism that challenged the heroic language and artifice of socialist realism. Thiệp self-consciously blurred the lines between the historical and the fictional, the canonical and the popular, the sacred and the profane. He used plain language to describe scenes and characters in a reportage style that implicitely claimed a truthful reality based on facts and observations rather than preconceived notions of human actions and motivations. His style was remarkable for its un-revolutionary portraits of corruption and cynicism among civil servants and officers, the break-down of traditional morals and values, filth and the degradation of all that is good, and the unreliability of official sources and institutionalized texts. Some critics hailed his unadorned realism as a much-needed innovation in Vietnamese literary development; others denounced him for falsifying historical facts, propagating lies, and displaying a poor understanding of literary theory and experimentation.[31]

Nguyễn Huy Thiệp's short stories generated much debate not so much because they are remarkable for their literary innovations, but because they raise questions about history-making and nation-building. In organizing Vietnamese history as a teleological formation that progressed from Confucian feudalism to colonialism to communism, the state had to repress contradictions and multiplicities that could not be

[31] Nguyễn-Võ Thu-Hương uses the term "empirical realism" to describe what she has argued was the depiction of observable reality by a wide range of Vietnamese writings in the 1950s and the 1980s/early 1990s, as opposed to what these writers and intellectuals saw as the "surface" reality of socialist realism. She argues empirical realism was a feminized alternative to the masculinist state discourse of socialist realism. See Nguyễn-Võ, *The Ironies of Freedom: Sex, Culture, and Neo-Liberal Governance in Vietnam*, chapter 7: "From Antigone to the Kneeling Woman: A Genealogy of the Real from Socialism to Preparation for Marketization", 185-214.

contained within that history. One way to do so was through the imposition of the state's vision of modernization on cultural production. Much of the writings of literary critics at the beginning of *Đổi Mới* engaged with the legacy of socialist realism and its definition of realism as didactic art that promoted the revolution in a straightforward manner understandable to the masses. In departing from that prescription of realism, Thiệp provoked anxieties and questions that harked back to the tumultuous and unresolved debates stirred by Vietnamese writers and intellectuals during the French colonial era and again during the founding of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam (DRV) in the mid 20th century. In contradistinction to the neat, teleological order of communist state's version of history, Thiệp's stories represent history as a messy and ambivalent process with multiple and conflicting voices, contradictory conclusions, and incomplete archives.

Using sparse language, minimal descriptions and short anecdotal passages, Nguyễn Huy Thiệp's stories teem with the ordinary. He first drew the attention of critics with the June 1987 publication of "Tướng về hưu" [The General Retires]; that would be followed by a string of other works, most notably the historical fiction trilogy "Kiếm sắc" [Sharp sword], "Vàng lửa" [Fired Gold] and "Phẩm tiết" [Chastity].[32] The historian Tạ Ngọc Liễn decried "Vàng lửa" as a misdirected act [sai lầm] lacking in "cultural aptitude" [vốn trí thức văn hóa] and "historical understanding" [vốn hiểu biết lịch sử] (170).[33] The literary critic Hoàng Ngọc Hiến,

[32] See "Interview: Nguyễn Huy Thiệp" in *Journal of Vietnam Studies*.
[33] Much of the critical essays on Nguyễn Huy Thiệp's short stories are collected in the volume *Đi Tìm Nguyễn Huy Thiệp* [*In Search of Nguyễn Huy Thiệp*] edited by Phạm Xuân Nguyên. See Tạ Ngọc Liễn's essay, "Về truyện ngắn 'Vàng lửa' của Nguyễn Huy Thiệp" [About Nguyễn Huy Thiệp's short story "Fired Gold"], in Phạm, 169-178. The essay was originally published in *Văn Nghệ* [Literature and

however, hailed Thiệp's depictions of the ugliness of contemporary life as the advent of a realism based on observed reality. Hiến saw the end of the "epic" style [cách nhin sư thị], which had as íts hero the laboring man of extraordinary strength, a common man who persevered due to his confidence in the righteousness of the communist revolution.[34]

Thiệp's short stories were controversial because their plainness was so unlike the epic style of socialist realism, which promoted representations of Vietnamese as valiant, resilient and unequivocally devoted to the anti-imperialist resistance and the work of nation-building. In contrast to the epic style's glorification of the people's unflinching will to sacrifice for the nation, Hiến argued, realism should present complex characters who may be both base and deserving of compassion, and situations that incite conflicting responses (14-15). If the epic genre served the state, empirical realism would now serve the people: "The writer speaks directly about the people, not through the relationship between 'the leadership' and the people" (13).[35] This conception of art was a direct challenge to the decades-long official cultural platform, which imagines the Party as the vanguard that would will the masses into consciousness.[36] The writer has replaced the Party as the source of consciousness, as the link between the people and the expression of their reality.

Culture], No 26, 26 June 1988. This and other important literary debates also took place in the pages of respected publications such the central region's premier literary magazine *Sông Hương* [Perfume River] and Hà Nội-based *Văn Nghệ Quân Đội* [Army Literature and Culture].

[34] Hoàng Ngọc Hiến, "Tôi không chúc bạn thuận buốm xuối gió" [I do not wish you smooth sailing], in Phạm, 9-20.

[35] "Tác giả bàn thẳng về nhan dân chứ không thông qua mối quan hệ giữa 'lãnh đạo' và nhân dân."

[36] See V.I. Lenin's *Selected Works*. For a discussion of Leninist Marxist ideology, which imagined the Party as the vanguard that propels the masses forward into history, and the Vietnamese Communist Party's conception of socialist realism as a Party-led cultural vision in the 1950s, see Nguyen-Vo's *The*

Questions of authority and history take on satirical, mythical and ironic casting in Thiệp's short stories. Except for his historical trilogy, which I will discuss later, the stories written in the 1980s have the same temporal setting as the time of their publication, and are deeply critical of the modernization of Vietnamese society, as seen in their portraits of the corrosive effects of urban life. The first to make a critical splash was "Tướng về hưu" [The General Retires], which presents a binary of gendered values—the old patriarch representing the idealism of the war veteran generation and the daughter-in-law embodying the greed and individualism of the post-war, open market society. The story narrates the progressive decline and eventual death of a decorated war veteran. Having spent most of his life in the military, he finds himself unable to adapt to civilian life. An older institutionalized system of exchange that he represents—valor, patronage and social rituals—has been trumped by raw materialism. All the major events in the cultural life of Vietnamese society have become depressing sources of embarrassment for the individuals and families involved. Asked to represent the groom's side of the extended family at his nephew's wedding, the general fumbles his speech and feels overwhelmed by the drunken merrymaking. At his wife's funeral, the importance of money rather than paying respect for the dead dominates the scene. While the general's entrepreneurial daughter-in-law calculates the costs of feeding the guests down to the exact change, his son's unwillingness to censor her leaves the general feeling even more ashamed and impotent.

Ironies of Freedom, chapter 7: "From Antigone to the Kneeling Woman: A Genealogy of the Real from Socialism to Preparation for Marketization", 185-214.

The most damning indictment of the older, patriarchal system of power and social mores happens during the general's last farewell to his family, when his youngest grandchild asks, "*Đường ra trận mùa này đẹp lắm* có phải không ông?" [*The road to battle this season is very beautiful*, right, Grandfather?] (original emphasis; *Những ngọn* 45). Having felt displaced from any position of power during his retirement, the patriarch had chosen to leave his son's house in the city and accept an invitation to visit the countryside indefinitely. Instead of paying tribute to his past, the child's quotation of an old revolutionary song accentuates the humiliation and embarrassment embodied in that decision, and the general suddenly experiences a moment of revulsion. Realizing the irony of this defeat, he curses his granddaughter for recalling a heroic vision that did not materialize.[37]

If "Tướng về hưu" is an ambivalent critique of the revolutionary past and its displacement by market economics, **"**Không có vua" [Without a King] is an unequivocal satire of the new socialist society. Playing on the Neo-Confucian social theory that the family is the basic unit of the nation, the story is divided into seven sections that represent the parts of a day in the life of a family and the major days in the life of the nation: Gia Cảnh [the family situation], Buổi Sáng [morning], Ngày Giỗ [death anniversary], Buỗi Chiều [afternoon], Ngày Tết [Lunar New Year], Buỗi Tối [night], and Ngày Thường [an ordinary day].[38] The members of this "traditional family" represent all the major social and class divisions in Vietnamese society: the

37 The line is from Phạm Tiến Duật's song "Trường Sơn đông, Trường Sơn tây" [Truong Son East, Truong Son West]. I thank Professor Lê Đình Tư of Hà Nội National University of Foreign Studies for pointing this out.

38 On the Neo-Confucian analogy of the family and the nation in early 20th century Vietnam, see Hue-Tam Ho Tai's chapter "Our Fathers' House" in *Radicalism and the Origins of the Vietnamese Revolution*, 10-56.

father Lão Kiền is a manual laborer, repairing bicycles; the oldest son Cần is a small entrepreneur, owning a barber shop; Đoài is a bureaucrat in the Department of Education, representing the civil service; Khiêm is a company employee, working as a butcher; Khảm is a college student, representing the younger generation; and Tốn is mentally impaired, representing the most marginalized of society. Amidst this all-male family is Sinh, Cần's wife and the object of Lão Kiền's voyeurism and Đoài's aggressive sexual innuendos and advances. She represents the virtuous feminine that has to adapt to the vulgar masculine; in the new society of freedom, the base and the crass are on full display.

A scathing commentary on the state's propaganda campaign to uphold the "traditional family" [gia đình truyền thống] as the building unit of the new socialist nation, this "model" family is held together by moral corruption and mutual disregard.[39] Khiêm steals meat from his company for his daily contribution to the household's material needs while Khảm steals from the family's rice stock. Đoài humiliates his father for lusting after Sinh, but does not hesitate in accosting her himself and scheming with Khảm to marry for money. The irony is that it is the family's background that made it possible for Đoài, the craftiest of the sons, to attain a government post. Foreshadowing his callousness toward his father's severe illness later in the story, he derides Lão Kiền's complaint about the risk of getting electrocuted each morning when he puts on the kettle:

> …Lão Kiền got electrocuted, and then yelled: "Damn you all, you all wish me harm. You all hope I'll die, but God has eyes, I'll live long." Lying in bed,

[39] On the use of visual arts to promote the construction of the new socialist society and the new socialist citizen, see Nora Taylor and Hjorleifur Jonsson, "Other Attractions."

> Đoài said loudly, "I don't know about elsewhere, but in this house, *the yellow leaf stays on the tree, the green leaves fall down* is the normal state." Lão Kiền yelled, "Damn you, how dare you speak to me like that? I don't understand how they let you work at the Department of Education. Đoài laughed, "They checked our family background. They saw our family is traditional, three generations clean like glass." (original emphasis; *Những ngọn* 121)[40]

After the civil war between the North and the South, the Party instituted a social system that gave favored status to the families of those who supported the revolution. This entailed background checks for everything from college admissions to civil servant employment to landownership. In the North, the Party had established a new bureaucracy whose employees were judged more on their allegiance to the Party than on their education and aptitude; that system of merits would be expanded in full force into the South after 1975.[41] Artists and intellectuals themselves had been corralled into the state's Association of Art and Letters in 1948**,** which by the 1980s was seen by dissenters as little more than a mouthpiece for the Party. In "Without a King," those who benefit from the Party-led system may be educated [có học], but they lack in good upbringing [có giáo dục], the essential marker of virtuous character.[42]

Thiệp depicts the new socialist society as one devoid of social bonds and driven by a materialist brashness bordering on mayhem. The state's vision of the modern society reached into the home, and required drastic changes in the household and the ways people celebrate family and public holidays. To prevent what it saw as

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[40] …lão Kiền bị điện giật, bèn chửi: "Cha chúng mày, chúng mày ám hại ông. Chúng mày mong ông chết nhưng trời có mắt, ông còn sống lâu!" Đoài nằm trong giường nói vọng ra: "Ở đâu không biết, chứ ở nhà này thì *lá vàng còn ở trên cây, lá xanh rụng xuống* là chuyện thường tình." Lão Kiền chửi: "Mẹ cha mày, mày ăn nói với bố thế à? Tao không hiểu thế nào người ta cho mày làm việc ở Bộ giáo dục!" Đoài cười: "Họ xét lí lịch họ thấy nhà mình truyền thống, ba đời trong sạch như gương".

41 On the establishment of the new bureaucracy in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, see Patricia Pelley, *Postcolonial Vietnam*.

[42] In Vietnamese society, the concept of being educated [có học] and having good upbringing [có giáo dục] are understood to go hand-in-hand. "Giáo dục" means both "education" and "upbringing."

the extravagant use of resources, the state prohibited any but the most basic rituals. And in breaking with the past, it outlawed any practices deemed superstitious and contradictory to its vision of modernization.[43] In "Without a King," the prohibitions against ostensibly unnecessary celebration and superstition have stripped society of any sense of social ties and civility. On the anniversary of Lão Kiền's wife's death [ngày giỗ], her brother confesses to not knowing how to pay respects to her memory: "'We cadres are atheists. These last forty years I've followed the revolution, my house doesn't have a shrine, I don't know how to pray'" (126).[44] The loss of social conventions within the home has spread outside to include the breakdown in communal ties:

> [During the Lunar New Year, the] neighbors came over to give their wishes. Đoài greeted them. After exchanging greetings, they sat down to have a drink and to chat. Đoài said, "Sir, I apologize. I don't even know how many children you have, what their names are." The older man smiled, "I am the same." Đoài said, "In the old days, burglars had a rule to not steal from four types of households. The first was your neighbor's, the second was your friends', the third was the house with sad news, the fourth was the house with good news. As things are, I would just go steal, violating all rules." The older man smiled, "My children are the same." Once he and his son finished their drink, they left. His son said, "That Đoài is educated, but he speaks in trifles." The older man said, "Chaos" (*Những ngọn* 141-42).[45]

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[43] See Shaun Kingsley Malarney's essay "The Fatherland Remembers Your Sacrifice: Commemmorating War Dead in Northern Vietnam" in Hue-Tam Ho Tai's edited anthology *The Country of Memory*, 46-76.

[44] "Cán bộ chúng em vô thần. Bốn chục năm nay em theo cách mạng, nhà không có bàn thờ, chẳng biết khấn vái thế nào."

[45] Nhà hàng xóm sang chúc tết. Đoài ra tiếp. Chúc mừng xong ngồi uống nước nói chuyện phiếm. Đoài bảo: "Xin lỗi bác cháu chẳng biết nhà bác có bao nhiêu người, tên là gì". Ông hang xóm cười: "Thì tôi cũng thế". Đoài bảo: "Ngày xưa bọn ăn trộm có luật chia ra bốn loại mà chúng không lấy. Một là nhà hàng xóm, hai là nhà bạn bè, ba là nhà đang có chuyện buồn, bốn là nhà đang có chuyện vui. Cứ thế này cháu cứ đi ăn trộm, lơ mơ phạm luật". Ông hàng xóm cười: "Thì các con tôi cũng thế". Uống nước xong, mọi người ra về. Đứa con ông hàng xóm bảo: "Cái tay Đoài có học mà ăn nói linh tinh". Ông hàng xóm bảo: "Loạn".

Đoài, the most articulate member of the family, may not have the proper social etiquette, but even his mentally impaired, youngest brother can learn the meaning of the New Year festival rituals. Upon receiving good luck money for the occasion, Tốn asks, "Tiền là gì?" [What is money?] Khiêm answers, "Là Vua." [King] (140). The depiction of post-war Vietnamese society as one consumed by greed for money, as seen in "The General Retires" and "Without a King," was not so much a lament for traditional values as it was more an attack on the state's vision of the new socialist nation.

An excavation of Vietnamese historiography

The implicit questioning of state authority and legitimacy would be much more developed in the trilogy "Kiếm sắc" [Sharp sword], "Vàng lửa" [Fired Gold] and "Phẩm tiết" [Chastity]. These stories provoked one of the most well known literary controversies because they blurred the boundaries between history and literature, fact and fiction, and raised the question of how the truth is constructed, codified and normalized. The stories revolve around three main protagonists: Quang Trung Nguyễn Huệ, Nguyễn Phúc Ánh Gia Long and Ngô Thị Vinh Hoa.[46] The first two characters come from history. Both nationalist and communist historical accounts portray Nguyễn Huệ as a hero. He is known for having led a peasant movement known as the Tây Sơn Rebellion that rid the country of the Nguyễn Lords in the South and the Trịnh Lords in the North, drove out the Chinese and unified the country. Communist historiography claims Nguyễn Huệ's successful surprise attack against the Qing on

[46] Following the common practice of taking a royal name upon becoming emperor, Nguyễn Huệ took the name Quang Trung and Nguyễn Phúc Ánh took the name Gia Long. Hence, after he becomes emperor, the character known as Ánh in "Sharp Sword" is Gia Long in "Fired Gold" and "Chastity".

Lunar New Year 1789 as an earlier incarnation of the 1968 Tet Offensive waged by the National Liberation Front and North Vietnamese army against the American backed Republic of Vietnam.[47] A statue of Nguyễn Huệ holds a prominent public place in present-day Sài Gòn, and a street named after him runs through virtually every city and town in Vietnam. Gia Long, who founded the Nguyễn Dynasty in 1802, ten years after Nguyễn Huệ's unexpected death, is seen in communist historiography as a traitor who opened the country to the Thai and the French. In Nguyễn Huy Thiệp's short stories, both men are petty and lustful. However, the one-dimensional historical portraits are made more complicated with Gia Long seen as a leader who has the good of the people in mind while Nguyễn Huệ seems preoccupied with trivialities. The last of the main characters, Ngô Thị Vinh Hoa, is fictional and represents the feminized, sacred embodiment of the arts that neither of the male, political characters can possess.

The mix of fact and fantasy in the stories provoked heated exchanges about truth-telling, hero-making and the intimate connections between culture and nation-building. Writing about "Vàng lửa," the historian Tạ Ngọc Liễn accuses Thiệp of distorting Vietnamese history and literary achievements. Liễn upholds the nationalist vision of Vietnam's resilience against all aggressors, a resilience that enabled the country's literati to produce an extraordinary civilization able to hold its own.[48] Liễn also accuses Thiệp of being an apologist for French colonialism and the usurper Gia Long through his invention of the character who serves as the emperor's French

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[47] George Dutton, *The Tây Sơn Uprising*.
[48] "Về truyện ngắn *Vàng lửa* của Nguyễn Huy Thiệp" [About Nguyễn Huy Thiệp's short story "Fired Gold"].

advisor, Phăng-xoa Pơ-ri-ê [François Powrie] (171, 176). The literary critic Lại Nguyên Ân refuted Liễn, saying fiction cannot be read like historical documents.[49] Noting that literature is not political commentary [chính luận], Ân says "Vàng lửa" ruffled feathers because it engages with a history that has been normalized as Truth:

> The fact of the matter is "Vàng lửa" has touched upon a familiar conception that has become the way that Liễn has accepted as truth, which is not a little bitter. So he requests that when one writes history, even a writer "has to submit to the truth, according to the essence of history, and cannot distort history." [50] The belief is that one cannot dispute that, but in reality it is different. The truth "in itself" always exists, but it is in the realm of the possible. As for "the truth for us" (foremost, the truth "that is beneficial for us"!), it does not always closely align with the truth "in itself," due to the degree of recognition, due to the temporary advantages, etc… (185)

In distinguishing between literature and history, Ân argues that fiction can be more truth-telling than history in that the former points to the constructedness of the latter. Thiệp's use of multiple narrators forces the reader to engage with contradictory ideas and perspectives that expose the ideological position of each, and point to the instability of any one narrative (Ân 182).

At stake in the critical reception of Thiệp's trilogy was the idea that history is a story to be narrated, rather than a given truthful and undisputable account of the past. Đỗ Văn Khang attacks Thiệp's authority as a writer by taking issue with his depiction of state figures out of political context. He derides "Fired Gold" as an unsuccessful

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[49] "Đọc văn phải khác với đọc sử" [Reading literature has to be different from reading history]

[50] Dẫu sao thì *Vàng lửa* cũng động đến cả một vùng nhận thức quen thuộc đã thành nếp mà bạn Liễn chấp nhận như chân lí, không chút đắn đo. Vậy là bạn đề nghị khi viết về lịch sử, cả nha văn 'cũng phải phục tùng sự thật, đúng bản chất lịch sử, không được làm cho diện mạo lịch sử máo mó đi.' Cái điều tưởng là không thể tranh cãi ấy, trên thực tế lại khác. Sự thật 'tự nó' thi bao giờ cũng có đấy, nhưng là ở thế tiềm năng. Còn 'sự thật cho ta' (nhất là sự thật 'có lợi cho ta'!) thì không phải bao giờ cũng trùng khít với sự thật 'tự nó', do trình độ nhận thức, do lợi ích nhất thời, v.v…

attempt at "aesthetic theory" [triết mỹ] (191-92).[51] Differing from Liễn's interpretation of the character Phăng, Thuỳ Sương sees the character as a vehicle through which the author exposes the one-dimensionality of Vietnamese historiography by pointing to its selective reiterations and suppressions (198-99).[52] Trương Hồng Quang and Nguyễn Mai Xuân argue the multiple and contradictory conclusions in "Fired Gold" point to an extra-textual voice that undermines the authority of the textual voice (217).[53] Quang and Xuân criticize Liễn's insistence on a particular Truth that is self-evident [hiển nhiên] and universalist [tính phổ quát]; however, like Liễn, they do not question the teleological narrative of Vietnamese history as a movement from capitalism to socialism (219-28). Đỗ Văn Khang defends the established version of history, saying Thiệp's portrayal of Quang Trung in "Chastity" as brutish and petty is inconsistent with what we know about the historical hero, and only reveals the writer to be "ungrateful" [vô ơn], amateurish and vulgar (242).[54] A leader like Quang Trung would have been concerned with state affairs and the threat from the West, not with a figure such as Vinh Hoa (Khang 240). Arguing that our knowledge of heroic figures comes from constructed narratives, Đặng Anh Đào says anti-heroic portrayals are met with revulsion because they come up against the normalized version (271).[55]

Set in the 1800s, Thiệp's historical trilogy takes place during a popular peasant rebellion, the rise of a new dynasty, and the introduction of the European modern

[51] "Có một cách đọc 'Vàng lửa'" [There is one way to read "Fired Gold"], in Phạm, 188-194.
[52] "Về một cách hiểu truyện ngắn 'Vàng lửa' [One way to understand the short story "Fired Gold"], in Phạm, 195-202.
[53] "'Vàng lửa' của Nguyễn Huy Thiệp 'triết học lịch sử' hay là 'văn xuôi nghệ thuật'?" [Is Nguyễn Huy Thiệp's "Fired Gold" historical philosophy or artistic prose?], in Phạm, 207-230.
[54] "Sự 'mơ mộng' và sự 'nghiêm khắc' trong truyện ngắn 'Phẩm Tiết'" [The dreamy and the serious in the short story "Chastity"], in Phạm, 231-243.
[55] "Kiếp luân hồi của Nguyễn Trãi qua Nguyễn Thị Lộ" [Nguyễn Trãi's metamorphosis through Nguyễn Thị Lộ], in Phạm, 269-273.

concept of territorial borders.[56] The volatile historical context of the stories allowed Thiệp to make an indirect critique of the present moment of post-war, nation-building and its precarious negotiation of another stage of modernization.The first story, "Kiếm sắc" [Sharp Sword], offers a parable about loyalty, absolute rule and the violent erasure of inconvenient truths in the establishment of a new world order. The story portrays the intimate relationship between Nguyễn Phúc Ánh, the future emperor, and his fictionalized advisor Đặng Phú Lân. Having come from a family line that had served the rival Trịnh Lords, Lân is already in a suspect position. He serves Ánh resolutely; however, Lân does not ingratiate himself with Ánh as other officials do by saying what is expected of him or observing empty formalities (*Những ngọn* 220-21). He represents the outspoken intellectual who is loyal to the ruler, but who holds on to his own views and risks punishment for speaking his mind. The two men have very different notions of power. Ánh will use whomever will benefit his rise to power; he is portrayed as a leader who trusts no one and has little regard for the four qualities that define relationships, according to traditional, Vietnamese values: nhân, nghĩa, trí and tín [humanity, faith, talent and trustworthiness] (*Những ngọn* 219). He purges the intellectual class that had served his rival and publicly severs his enemies' bodies as a display of his power. In contrast, Lân imagines the wise ruler to be magnanimous and humble, to know that his right to rule comes from wisdom and fortune, not brute force. In his portrayal of the relationship between the ruler and his advisor, Thiệp sets up a

[56] For an examination of the European concept of physical borders to mark the territorial domain of a nation-state and the introduction of such concept to Southeast Asia, see Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-Body of a Nation*.

conflict of interests between the political and the intellectual, and warns of the dangers posed by former to the latter, who represents the social conscience.

The incompatibility of the two worldviews is further developed through the gendering of the political as male and the cultural as female, with whom the intellectual aligns himself. Anticipating his opportunity for victory, Ánh sends Lân out on a reconnaissance mission, warning him not to fail. During his journey, Lân stays overnight at an inn where he hears the innkeeper's daughter sing a song similar to the one the prophetic Vinh Hoa sung to Ánh after he had captured her from Quang Trung:

> A hundred years
> What is talent?
> All one sees is pain
> Buds, green leaves
> Rely on the rain to bring milk
> Rely on the wind to bring atmosphere
> Rely on the earth to bring nourishment
> Unwilling to let anyone pick
> Whoever picks finds it useless
> Beauty will fade
> Righteous conduct will come to naught
> …
> (*Những ngọn* 228-29)[57]

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[57]

Kìa trăm năm
Tài mệnh là gì
Chỉ thấy đớn đau
Nụ non, lá xanh
Nhờ mưa mang sữa cho
Nhờ gió mang khí thở cho
Nhờ đất mang lương thực cho
Chẳng chịu cho ai hái
Ai hái cũng phí
Nhan sắc mỹ miều cũng qua thôi
Phẩm hạnh thanh sạch cũng nhạt thôi
…

Two women, who represent culture, sing a similar song to two male, political figures about the futility of human vanity in the face of the inevitable cycle of life and death. Man's will ultimately cannot overcome nature's will. The poem metaphorically represents the inaccessibility of the feminized culture to the masculinized political power. Whereas Ánh had responded to Vinh Hoa's singing with the desire to possess her, Lân responds to the innkeeper's daughter's song by abandoning his mission. Upon his return, Ánh executes him, using his servant's heirloom sword. A witness to the generations of wars between the Trịnh Lords and the Nguyễn Lords and their foreign allies, the sword was now being used against the most loyal member of the intellectual class. The parable contained in the song about the precarious nature of ambition and beauty becomes a reality that Lân must endure, from a ruler who has little regard for past service.

Besides offering a cautionary tale about political purges and absolute rule, "Sharp Sword" introduces the idea of disbelief in the authoritative narrator. When Lân is beheaded, a white, sap-like fluid squirts out. Adding to the puzzlement created by the description of this unnatural scene, in the conclusion, the third person narrator becomes a first person narrator who says that by chance he met the descendants of Lân and Vinh Hoa in the Northern Highlands. He says they ended up living among the ethnic minority Mương after they had escaped from Nguyễn Phúc Ánh Gia Long. The conclusion raises questions about how stories are constructed and what materials are used and what are left out of any one narrative:

> I want to thank a number of historians and knowledgeable friends who have helped me search for and correct those materials necessary for the work of

> writing literature, originally very tiring, difficult and tedious at that—of mine…. (original ellipses; *Những ngọn* 231)[58]

The narrator had begun the story by noting that no historical text has ever mentioned Lân (*Những ngọn* 218). The story does not alert the reader to which character is historical and which is fictional, and the lack of distinction between the real and the fake is underscored when the first-person narrator negates his own story of Lân's beheading with his amendment-like tale of meeting the character's descendants. The story suggests that in addition to stories and personages recorded in the history books, there are also sources outside established channels of truth-telling. In this case, the source with the most intimate knowledge of the protagonist comes from the Northern Highlands, the margins of the nation-state.

In switching the perspective from third person to first person, the narrator foregrounds his *direct* access to sources on the ground, outside the official institutions of power. In casting doubt about what happened to Lân, the story points to the unreliability of official archives and forces the reader to question what may at first be presented as real. As the literary critic Hoàng Ngọc Hiến notes, Thiệp's stories disregard the intermediary function of the Party, and speak directly to the reader. Building on that observation, I would argue that in undermining his own story, the author-as-narrator is positing himself as a reliable source of truth-telling who is willing to consider contradictory sources and marginalized voices. The implicit argument that the story makes is that literature, as an arena of contradictory

[58] "Tôi cũng xin cảm ơn một số nhà nghiên cứu lịch sử và bạn bè quen biết, đã giúp tôi sưu tầm, chỉnh lí những tư liệu cần thiết cho công việc viết văn, vốn rất nhọc nhằn phức tạp, lại buồn tẻ nữa—của tôi …"

possibilities and multiple perspectives, opens up a space for the discovery of suppressed truths that the official historical archives do not allow for.

A house in ruins

The specter of doubt introduced in "Sharp Sword" will have much more significance with the political critique embedded in "Fired Gold". This second story of the trilogy is about texts within texts, each offering a perspective that makes the reader question the authority of the others. By degrees moving back in time, the story begins with the author-narrator introducing the reader to the source of his story, Quách Ngọc Minh, a descendant of Lân and the keeper of memoirs dating back to the 1800s. Multiple narrators are heard through the intermediary position of the author-narrator: Minh, whom we hear through a letter he sent to the author-narrator commenting on the inadequacies of "Sharp Sword"; Phrăng-xoa Pơ-ri-ê [François Powrie] through his memoir; Gia Long, whom Phrăng quotes; Nguyễn Du, whom Phrăng does not quote but about whom he offers observations; and the unnamed Portuguese [Bồ Đào Nha], whose memoir undercuts the reliability of Phrăng's version of their gold mining expedition. The last voice we hear is the author-narrator offering the reader three possible endings to stories told in the memoirs that were left inconclusive.

The story, as a collection of contradictory narratives and multiple conclusions, infer the instability of any archival source as a site of unitary truth. All assurance of reliable narration is thrown into question in the multiple versions of the gold mining expedition. Whereas the first half of the story presents Phrăng, through his memoir, as a neutral and wise observer of human flaws, the second half, through the Portuguese's memoir, presents him as a cruel and cold-blooded individual whose greed for gold is

primary, even to the point of pushing the expedition forward at the cost of leaving the sick to die. The Portuguese's tale ends with a passage about the expeditionary forces being attacked by the natives, and leaves unknown the outcome or how the memoir survived. The author-narrator claims that he tried without success to find out more about the French and Portuguese memoirs and what happened to the expeditionary forces. Left without sufficient archives, he imagines three possible outcomes: In the first conclusion, Phrăng and two other Europeans from the expedition survive and are reappointed by Gia Long to go back. After two years of successful exploitation of the mines, Phrăng receives much compensation, but then dies due to food poisoning by the emperor. Regardless of how much he accomplished in the service of the state, his life came to nought. In the second conclusion, Phrăng eventually escapes and returns to France happily married to a Vietnamese woman. They live a full and prosperous life as France and Vietnam enter the modern age ushered in by the Napoleonic Revolution and the spread of the written word. In the third conclusion, the expeditionary forces are killed not by the natives, but by imperial soldiers, and Gia Long sends a royal family member to oversee the excavation of the gold mines. These conclusions all throw into confusion what the reader learns from the memoirs of Phrăng, which portrayed Gia Long as humble and magnanimous, and of the Portuguese, which says the expedition was attacked by the natives. The story ends with the author-narrator commenting that the Nguyễn Dynasty left nothing to history except mausoleums, monuments to dead rulers. In depicting the last dynasty's legacy as nothing more than the sum of ruins, Thiệp disowns any notion of romanticizing the past. He erases the suggestion seen in Phrăng's depiction of Gia Long as a symbol of foresight, and

redoubles the meta-narrative's focus on the question of what constitutes the proper role of politics in the arts. Hồ Chí Minh's Mausoleum in Hà Nội holds a central place in Vietnamese communist architectural iconography, and the literary reduction of an entire political system to its mausoleums suggests a call for the end of another era.

Thiep also condemns state-sanctioned art by gendering it as feminine—as symbolized by Nguyễn Du and his ornate, romantic language—as opposed to the new masculine of his bare bones realism. The songs that Vinh Hoa and the innkeeper's daughter sing in "Sharp Sword" are an allusion to Nguyễn Du's epic poem *Truyện Kiều* [The Tale of Kiều].[59] In "Fired Gold", Thiệp depicts Nguyễn Du as the child of "a virgin maiden who gets raped by Chinese civilization" and who "conceals from her child the humiliation and endures with her lofty spirit, suppressing" (*Những ngọn* 236-37).[60] Like the fictional character Lân, Nguyễn Du came from a family that had served the Lê Dynasty, which was controlled by the Trịnh Lords. He would serve the Nguyễn Dynasty under Gia Long. The mandarin class viewed the switching of loyalties to be the mark of a less-than-noble spirit, and Nguyễn Du's doing so would always haunt his reputation. During his post as Ambassador to China, he came upon a minor Chinese story called "Kim Văn Kiều" that would become the inspiration for his epic poem, *Truyện Kiều*. The main protagonist is the daughter of a mandarin who sacrifices her chance to marry her sweetheart to save her father from financial debt. She unexpectedly finds herself being sold into prostitution and having to serve various

[59] The opening line of *Truyện Kiều* is "Tài mệnh tương đồ" [Those who have talent do not always have fortune]; in other words, the fates do not always bless the talented. I would like to thank Professor Lê Đình Tư of Hà Nội National University of Foreign Studies for pointing me to this allusion.
[60] "Đây là một cô giá đồng trinh bị nền văn minh Trung Hoa cưỡng hiếp. Cô gái ấy vừa thích thú, vừa nhục nhã, vừa căm thù nó....Người mẹ của Nguyễn Du (tức nền chính trị đương thời) giấu giếm con minh sự ê chề và chịu đựng với tinh thần cao cả, kiềm chế."

masters. During the French colonial era, to evade the censors, writers and intellectuals condemned and upheld the exigencies of collaborationist politics under the guise of debating Kiều's predicament in having to serve several masters.[61] Both nationalist and communist literary histories have upheld the poem as the emblem of Vietnamese cultural greatness, due in no small part to the fact that it was the first epic poem written in the vernacular script chữ nôm instead of classical Chinese and uses the lục bát metrical rhyme scheme of alternating six and eight syllables common in Vietnamese folk songs; supposedly, this made it easy to memorize, even among illiterate peasants.[62] The historical associations of Nguyễn Du and his magnus opus with inauthenticity, faithlessness and literary derivation become for Thiệp symbolic of the state's endorsement of the bastardly.

In depicting the arts as a feminine and a willing victim, albeit resentful, Thiệp alludes to the literary debates over accommodationist politics among intellectuals and writers in the 1910s and 1920s. Back then, editors, writers, artists and intellectuals debated the constraints of family obligations as a metaphor for French colonial rule and *The Tale of Kiều* as a parable about the sacrifices and justifications of accommodationist politics.[63] Writers and intellectuals expressed their views through a critique of the figure of Kiều. Thiệp directly attacks the symbolic figure of Nguyễn Du, simultaneously deriding the Vietnamese literary canon and exposing it as a prostituted and compromised cultural tradition that has willingly collaborated with the state. Of

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[61] See Hue-Tam Ho Tai's chapter 3, "Daughters of Annam," in *Radicalism and the Origins of the Vietnamese Revolution*, in particular 109-113.
[62] Woodside, Alexander. "The Historical Background" in *Community and Revolution in Modern Vietnam*, xi-xviii.
[63] See Tai, ibid.

the stories in this trilogy, “Fired Gold” received the most vitriolic and persistent attacks because it dared to implicate the cultural establishment in its ambivalent, but willing intimacy with the state.

The last of the trilogy, the vignette-like “Chastity”, is about the resistance of the arts to political manipulation. It is also about a morality lesson about the ruler who forgets those who helped build his power base. Although the story revolves around Ngô Thị Vinh Hoa, she is barely developed as a character and functions more as an extraordinary object to be possessed and passed from one conqueror to the next. Whereas “Fired Gold” associates state-sanctioned art with the imitative and prostituted legacy of Nguyễn Du, “Sharp Sword” and “Chastity” establish the new masculine of independent creativity with the feminine of the ethereal, that embodied by Ngô Thị Vinh Hoa.

Conclusion

For decades, the state urged artists and intellectuals to make works that would be easily understandable to the masses, and that reflected their supposedly unequivocal pride and resilience. In the mid to late 1950s, however, during the brief interlude between the First and Second Indochinese Wars, artists and intellectuals who had supported the communist revolution openly questioned what they saw as a shallow realism, and created works based on the empirical, the observable. The state would respond by ostracizing those who dared to question its version of reality. This contest would break out into the open again in the post-1975 era, after the end of another war and what intellectuals saw as the end of the submission of the arts to politcs. Taking their cue from previous generations, a new crop of writers increasingly

resisted the surface imperative of socialist realism as a mode of depicting the real. The most prominent among them was Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, who retold stories about historical figures and literary giants to destabilize nationalist historiography, as represented by the literary canon and the archives. His use of gender further drew a distinction between the new masculine of his observation-based realism and the prostituted, feminine of state-sanctioned cultural production and history-making.

CHAPTER TWO

The Legacy of the Revolutionary Memoir and Gendered Epistemic Violence in the Era of Liberalization

In the 1980s and 1990s, the Vietnamese literary world saw a proliferation of war novels that appropriated the truth-telling authority of the revolutionary memoir. Written in the postwar years, these works depicted soldiers and officers returning to society. Novelists engaged with the question of how former army, guerrilla and militia men and women would be reintegrated into civilian life, how their lives and world views had changed, and how the society they had left had changed. The literature explored the interiority of the characters, focusing on their ambivalence about war and nationalism, their reflections on the loss of their youth, and the messy process of reconstituting community and social relations. Recurring themes included broken romantic relationships, poverty, alienation, and bureaucratic corruption.[64] A particularly sensitive theme that authors approached was the issue of reconciliation with the past and with former enemies. Although war and nation-building figured prominently, these novels focused on representations of private and individual memories rather than collective memory.

[64] See, for example, Chu Lai, *Phố* [City Quarter] and Lê Lưu. *Thời Xa Vắng* [A Distant Time].

This chapter examines the post-1975 literary recasting of the genre of the revolutionary memoir and its use as a vehicle of memory-making. The genre dates back to at least the 1930s, a time of intense French colonial repression, Vietnamese rebellion and the beginnings of the systematic organization of the Vietnamese Communist Party.[65] In his study of the French colonial penal system in Vietnam and how political prisoners turned confinement into resistance, historian Peter Zinoman uses among his sources colonial-era prison memoirs, written soon after the writer's release or escape and from a wide range of ideological perspectives, and communist leaders' prison memoirs, most of which were written after 1954.[66] He notes several distinguishing characteristics, which I will argue would be recuperated and reworked in the war novels of the 1980s and 1990s. First, colonial-era memoirs tended to be rich in their details about daily prison life, a stylistic feature Zinoman connects to the phóng sử [realist reportage] genre of the times.[67] On the other hand, the communist prison memoirs were vague in details, but had narrative patterns in common. These memoirs emphasized the representation of imprisonment as a period of Marxist-Leninist training, the protagonist's resistance and revolt against French cruelty, and his conversion of non-communists to the anti-colonial, revolutionary cause. Zinoman argues that these memoirs followed a "master script" in their use of similar and

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[65] Founded in 1930, the Party has had several name changes: Indochinese Communist Party (1930-1951), Vietnamese Workers' Party (1951-1976) and Vietnamese Communist Party (1976-Present).
[66] Peter Zinoman, *The Colonial Bastille Bastille*, and Peter Zinoman, "Reading Revolutionary Prison Memoirs", in Hue-Tam Ho Tai's edited anthology *The Country of Memory*, 21-45.
[67] Literacy spread rapidly in Vietnam after the French Jesuits romanized the alphabet in the 17th century. In the early 20th century, newspapers and magazines became a popular forum for discussions about modernity and civil society under French colonialism. New forms of observation-based realism emerged with the creation of this popular cultural media. See Shawn McHale, *Print and Power: Buddhism, Confucianism, and Communism in the Making of Modern Vietnam*.

sometimes identical narrative structures, tales of oppression and resistance, and stylistic language.[68] The Democratic Republic of Vietnam published dozens of these communist prison memoirs from the 1950s to the 1970s, propagating a master narrative about the founding fathers of the Vietnamese Communist Party and the founding of the modern nation-state.

The revolutionary memoir was an important tool in the creation of the founding myth of the nation. In directly linking the organization and growth of the Indochinese Communist Party to the history of Vietnamese anti-colonial struggle, the revolutionary memoir simultaneously posited the future leaders of the Party as the founders of the nation and erased the resistance work of non-communists and communists of other stripes. Given such an intimate relationship between nation-building and cultural production, Zinoman's observation that the Vietnamese memoirists were avid readers of French romantic novels is all the more pertinent. Victor Hugo's *Les Miserables* and other French romantic novels that espoused nationalism, heroism, revolution and armed struggle were widely read by the French-educated Vietnamese intelligentsia, a socio-economic class that gave rise to many of the future Party leaders.[69]

Nationalism and romanticism went hand-in-hand in their developments in Europe in the 19th century. The literary style hailed individual heroism, emotional identification, and a return to the folkloric roots of a people, in reaction to the

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[68] Zinoman, "Reading Revolutionary Prison Memoirs", in Hue-Tam Ho Tai's edited anthology *The Country of Memory*, 22.

[69] Zinoman also argues that the revolutionary memoir owes much to Vietnamese Buddhist poetry and Confucian literature about confinement dating back to the 15th century. I do not see a clear connection here. Zinoman, "Reading Revolutionary Prison Memoirs", in Tai, 23-31.

championing of science, reason and technology by proponents of the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution. Romanticism also grew out of a period that saw the formation of European nationalisms, exemplified by the movement's glorification of the downtrodden protagonist who rises to heroic heights. The French Revolution of 1789 provided a real-life drama for the subsuming of the individual into national history. Philosophers of the period such as Germaine Necker de Staël, Rousseau and Hegel theorized romantic art as an expression of a collective polity called a nation.[70] By the early 20th century, the use of literature as a cultural form that can be mobilized to create the sense of belonging to an imagined community called the nation was not new.[71]

Keenly aware of the political influence of literature, publishing houses in Northern Vietnam turned out dozens of revolutionary memoirs as part of the post-1954 campaign to establish the legitimacy of the newly formed Party-led nation-state. Along with the prison memoirs, authors created a second type of revolutionary memoir, one used it to transmit tales of collective consciousness and resistance against foreign aggression in everyday life. This type of revolutionary memoir would be developed and codified it as a vehicle for the critique of civil and economic institutions of power such as the Catholic Church, French plantations, and the Vietnamese land-owning class.[72] These memoirs follow a narrative structure of

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[70] Germaine Necker de Stael, *Germany*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1859, and David Aram Kaiser, *Romanticism, Aesthetics and Nationalism*, Cambridge, U.K. and New York City: Cambridge UP, 1999.
[71] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, London and New York: Verso, 1983/2000.
[72] A typical example is a memoir by Trần Tử Bình, who became one of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam's first generals and later ambassador to China. Born Phạm Văn Phú, his revolutionary name means "the man who dies for peace". Trần Tử Bình as told to Ha An. *Phú Riềng Đỏ* [The Red Earth: A Vietnamese Memoir of Life on a Colonial Rubber Plantation]. Trans. John Spragens, Jr. and Edited by

maturation similar to that of a *bildungsroman*: the protagonist grows up in a society exploited by French colonists and the Vietnamese elite; he protests against the injustices and is banished from institutions of power; he finds work and quickly discerns the class divisions that capitalism depends upon; and finally he organizes the workers and successfully leads them to rebellion. As in a *bildungsroman*, the narrator is an authoritative, usually male, agent; he gains wisdom and strength from having overcome barriers and tribulations. The maturation of the individual and the development of his social consciousness is a metaphor for the formation of the communist nation. The progressive trajectory of the memoir from youth to maturation, from individual struggle to collective resistance, is historically ordained. The narrative structure and elements of the revolutionary memoir imply the inevitable convergence of Vietnamese national formation and Party leadership.

Beginning in the 1980s, the genre of the memoir transformed from being a vehicle for revolutionary mobilization to a re-examination of communist historiography and memory-making. As part of the legacy of the revolutionary memoir, there developed another subgenre—what I call the Đổi Mới [Renovation] memoir.[73] Some of these memoirs recollect the proletarianization movements and political crackdowns of the 1950s and 1960s, while others raise questions about open market economics and globalization in the Renovation era. These memoirs were

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David G. Marr. Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Center for International Studies, Center for Southeast Asian Studies, 1985.

[73] Having officially acknowledged the failures of collectivization, the Communist Party embraced economic liberalization in 1986. Known as Đổi Mới [Renovation], this policy signaled the relaxation of state management of the social sphere, and opened Vietnam to foreign investment and the rebuilding of relations with other countries, including former enemies. This policy is analogous to *Glasnos*t and *Perestroika* in the former Soviet Union. I discuss the cultural changes during this shift from a command economy to a free market economy in the Introduction chapter of my dissertation.

written by well established writers, many of whom had seen their fortunes turn during the early years of the founding of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam, when the Party systematically set out to enforce its platform of socialist realism. As early as the 1949 Conference of Debate in Việt Bắc, the Party-established Association of Art and Literature had gathered writers and intellectuals to lay out its cultural directive and eliminate dissension (Ninh 88-93). As part of this retreat and others to follow, writers and intellectuals underwent criticism and self-criticism sessions on the "bourgeois" qualities of their works, much of which had been well received in earlier decades—dreamy imagery, techniques considered too complex and not easily accessible to the masses, thematic exploration of despair and loneliness; in sum, any emotional or literary qualities that the cultural gatekeepers deemed "individualistic" and "anti-revolutionary". The Đổi Mới memoirs revisit the ambivalence of the writers, the terror of the cultural campaigns, the land reforms of the 1950s, and the state's assignment of artists and intellectuals into the countryside to become "proletarian" through hard labor. Other memoirs question the impact of modern nation-building on the country's ethnic minorities, the countryside, and the urban underclass.[74] The Đổi Mới memoirs are concerned with recovering the marginalized memories and spaces that were left out of the linear narratives espoused by the state.

While the revolutionary memoirs uniformly focus on *visible displays and acts* of nation-building, the Đổi Mới memoirs assert the importance of *the individual's interiority*, the emotional life behind the representation of heroism. As inheritors of

[74] See, for example, Tố Hoài, *Cát bụi chân ai* [Dust upon whose feet] and Nguyên Ngọc, *Tản mạn nhớ & quên* [Scattered remembrances and forgettings].

this long genealogy of the memoir, Đổi Mới war novelists seized its authority as a truth-telling genre to reclaim their place in national memory-making, a position that they had lost to the state, as symbolically embodied in socialist realism. In this chapter, I will examine Nguyễn Trí Huân's 1989 novel *Chim én bay* [Swallows in Flight] and Bảo Ninh's *Nỗi buồn chiến tranh* [The Sorrow of War] to examine how Đổi Mới war novels appropriated and destabilized the state's position of truth-telling. I read these two war novels as part of the lineage of the revolutionary memoir. While Nguyễn Trí Huân recycled the conventions of the genre for the purposes of extending the prerogative of nation-building into the post-war years, Bảo Ninh outright rejected its celebration of revolutionary work as patriotic and heroic, and its memorialization of the individual's journey of maturation as the inevitable movement of the nation into history.

Gender and reconciliation

Nguyễn Trí Huân's 1989 novel *Chim én bay* [Swallows in Flight] is a novel about the tension between martyrdom and reconciliation. The novel received the 1984-1989 Literature Prize from the Ministry of National Defense and the top literary prize from the Association of Vietnam Writers in 1990. A former army colonel, Nguyễn Trí Huân went on to hold the posts of Vice President of the Association of Vietnam Writers, Editor-in-Chief of *Army Arts and Letters*, and Editor-in-Chief of *Arts and Letters*.[75]

[75] Văn nghệ quân đội [Army Arts and Letters], "Nhà văn Nguyễn Trí Huân nhận Giải thưởng văn học Mê Kông lần 2", December 29, 2008, http://www.vannghequandoi.com.vn/-nhanvt-vn-skin/1--nhanvt-vn-skin/3899-nha-vn-nguyn-tri-huan-nhn-gii-thng-vn-hc-me-kong-ln-2.html, April 19, 2009.

Swallows in Flight is an important text to examine for several reasons. It is one of the few well known texts set in the central region, an area that saw intense militarization and fighting during the Second Indochinese War, rather than in the north, particularly Hà Nội. The novel was published by Nhà Xuất Bản Quân Đội Nhân Dân [The People's Army Publishing House], a powerful endorsement by a state and cultural institution. It is a text written by a man about a woman's experience of the war. The memoir-like narrative of a female guerrilla offers an important intervention in the male dominated literary and nationalist imagination. And the novel raises the question of how the Party will and should reunify the population, not just militarily, but also socially in terms of how the new socialist nation will incorporate the former Republic of South Vietnam and those who were associated with it, willingly or not. In its concern with the ostracized, the broken and the marginalized, *Swallows in Flight* was part of a new generation of war stories that pushed the boundaries of memory-making and nation-building.

The novel draws upon the conventions of the revolutionary memoir to extend the imperative of nationalism into the post-war period. The novel is an allegory about gratitude and remembrance of the Party-led struggle for liberation. One of the purposes of the revolutionary/war memoir genre is to present the protagonist's life as a history lesson in devotion to country. In that history lesson, the individual's struggle is a metaphor for collective struggle. *Swallows in Flight* opens with a prologue that represents the urgency of that lesson not as an imposition of state ideology, but as a rightful homage to the dead. At the bequest of the local school teacher, a stand-in for

the state ideological apparatus, the narrator/protagonist Quy explains her reason for recalling her past as a Việt Cộng assassin:

> [The local school teacher] said with deliberateness that the work of educating the young generation in not forgetting the past hardships of the country's heroes is of great urgency. That his friends' blood stains hadn't even dried yet, and already people were pushing aside the war. That not a few people have the intention of forgetting so that they can safely commit immoral acts, betray the previous sacrifices that they themselves … (original ellipsis; 6).[76]

The work of national ideology-formation is represented as an act of moral rectitude, a corrective against forgetting the sacrifices made to liberate the country. Those who would willingly forget are traitors, not to the Party, but to those who died and even to their own past convictions. Quy, as the living embodiment of that history, can offer school children the evidence of that truth. Framed like a history lesson, *Swallows in Flight* is a vehicle for instruction on collective duty.

That lesson is conveyed through the first-person perspective to give the semblance of an eyewitness, "truthful" recounting of the past. *Swallows in Flight* uses this perspective to establish the relationship between the narrator and the reader as one of horizontal identification. A former assassin who has become a local Party representative, Quy represents the Party leader who shares a relationship of equals with the villagers and, by extension, the national populace. The novel opens with the narrator referring to herself as "chị", a pronoun used to refer to an older female person close to one's age such as a relative or a friend, or a respectful form of address for a woman. In the context of this novel, it also creates the semblance of an informality and

[76] "Anh ta nói một cách văn vẻ rằng, việc giáo dục thế hệ trẻ đừng bao giờ quên quá khứ đau khổ nhưng [sic] anh hung của quê hương là một điều hết sức bức thiết. Rằng bây giờ những vết máu của bạn bè anh còn chưa khô, cuộc chiến tranh đã bị người ta gạt sang một phía. Rằng không ít người đang cố tình lãng quên để yên ổn làm những điều xấu, phản bội lại sự hy sinh trước đây của chính bản than họ…"

intimacy between the narrator and the reader. It is not until page 12 that we know her name is Quy, when her sister bids her farewell and leaves the family to join the guerrilla movement. In Vietnamese, one's use of pronouns is an important indicator of one's familial and socio-economic position in relation to the addressee, and one's feelings about the person. In the prison memoirs, the male narrators use the pronoun "tôi", a neutral form of "I". However, when women use the "tôi" form, they are seen as distant and too formal due to the implicit gendering of the pronoun and its signification of authority. *Swallows in Flight* deploys an intimate system of address for all the characters in relation to the narrator, thereby constructing an imagined, horizontal community of villagers and readers. The novel invites the reader to identify with Quy, and to move forward with her into the new socialist, nationalist history.

As in a revolutionary memoir, the novel's plot is driven by the meta-narrative of trials and tribulations that test and reveal the protagonist's spiritual strength. These standard episodes of "trial by fire" include agitation and organization of workers, guerrilla warfare, imprisonment and torture, spiritual resistance, and continued faith after escape or release from jail. This meta-narrative has two functions: it establishes the narrator's revolutionary credentials and it instructs the reader on the qualities necessary for membership in the socialist nation. *Swallows in Flight* reproduces this meta-narrative in its mapping of the protagonist's maturation as a journey from the local, rural landscape to the national, political body, and back to the originary space of one's revolutionary tutelage. Quy's lost of childhood innocence is linked to her awareness of the atrocities of the "traitors" who work for the American-backed Republic of South Vietnam. The traitors are within the community as well, as

exemplified by Tuân, a former family friend who is now head of the local anti-communist militia. Quy's determination to kill him symbolically conveys the necessary task of being constantly vigilant even among intimates and eliminating threatening forces within the nation-in-formation. Having lost her family to Tuân, she comes into adulthood in a new type of family, that of revolutionary nationalists. As used by the revolutionary memoir, a meta-narrative comprising standard episodes of resistance and triumph legitimizes her entry into the revolutionary family of the nation. These episodes include: multiple imprisonments, notably at the infamous Côn Đảo Island Prison[77]; refusal to betray her fellow revolutionaries despite rape and torture; unwavering commitment and success in killing Tuân and preventing him from killing other revolutionaries; formal education in Leninist Marxism in the Soviet Union; election to the National Assembly; and return to the village to work for the local Party office. Her return to the village as a Party leader signifies the institutionalization of communism at the grassroots level. This journey from the biological family of childhood into the revolutionary "family" of adulthood takes Quy and the reader from the private history of the individual into the public history of the nation.

The novel expands on the nationalist, didactic function of the prison memoir by weaving in a second plotline about the ethics of reconciliation that offers the potential of complicating the triumphant tenor of communist historiography. The narrative moves between the two plots, which are held together by flashbacks and Quy's reflecting on the consequences of memory-making. The prologue opens in 1980

[77] About an hour's plane ride off the eastern coast of Southern Vietnam, Côn Đảo Island Prison was a French colonial-era prison built in 1861 specifically to hold and torture political prisoners. During the civil war, the Republic of South Vietnam used it to imprison communist leaders. See Zinoman's *The Colonial Bastille* on the transformation of Côn Đảo Island Prison into a site of anti-colonial resistance.

with her telling the reader she has been asked by a school teacher to give a guest talk about her past as a revolutionary. This request shores up for her anxieties about coming face-to-face with students who may include among them the children of former enemies she had assassinated. This self-reflection in turn takes the reader back to 1969 and the start of her journey into Party leadership. The constant movements back and forth between the two plotlines undermine the confidence implied by the forward linearity of that journey. However, as the narrator repeatedly reminds the reader, history is inevitable: "Even now, if I had to live again those days and months of old, it's certain I would live as then. I would not have done differently because it's fate, the survival or perishing of my country" (20).[78] Ultimately, the novel's invitation for us to relive the past is not so much a re-examination of the elisions of nationalist history as it is a resurrection of martyrs to legitimate the reconstitution of society along the lines of state-approved work.

The possibility of reconciliation is gendered feminine, as opposed to the masculine position of nationalism and official historiography. Unlike the plethora of prison memoirs written by and about men who became the top Party leaders, the novel is about a female revolutionary and martyr. Against this literary history, in which the Party transmits its lesson of nation-building through the masculine subject, the novel speaks of reconciliation through the feminine subject. This is clear in the novel's representation of the ethics of reconciliation as Quy's concern alone, in contrast to the male Party leaders' efforts to shift her attention to those who fought for the revolution.

[78] "Mặc dù ngay lúc này đây, nếu phải sống lại những năm tháng cũ, chắc chắn chị sẽ vẫn sống như thế. Chị không thể làm khác vì đó là sinh mệnh, là sự còn, mất của cả quê hương chị."

This distinguishing between the feminine position of forgiveness and the masculine position of righteousness allows for talk of reconciliation in the national discourse without displacing the latter. Moreover, that feminine position of forgiveness is an *individual* one rather than the collective of the masculine position of nation-building. The framing of the ethics of reconciliation as an individual issue creates the semblance of an inclusive nationalism of alternative voices without challenging the communal, truth-telling narrative of the masculine position. This strategy of inclusiveness of individual voices accords with the official Đổi Mới policy of canonizing nationalist leaders, writers and intellectuals once seen as threats to the Party, but who have been long dead and whose works can be selectively emptied of ideological difference and folded into Leninist Marxist historiography.[79]

The novel continually diminishes the moral and political imperative of forgiveness and reconciliation through a reification of nationalist representations of woman as rape victim and symbol of the land. A common literary trope in Vietnamese literature and historiography is the depiction of the countryside as a site of resistance against both domestic corruption and foreign aggression. Nguyễn-Võ Thu-Hương notes how that symbol was gendered as female in 1930s anti-French colonial literature and resurrected in Đổi Mới literature.[80] In *Swallows in Flight*, the feminization of the countryside is embodied in the figure of Quy. She is both rape victim and defender of the land. A violation of her body is an attack on the countryside and the integrity of

[79] One stark example is the selective re-publication in the 1990s of formerly banned novels and poems by writers associated with the 1930s group *Tự Lực Văn Đoàn* [Self Reliant Literary Group] and the 1956 controversy *Nhân Văn Giai Phẩm* [named for the journals *Humanism* and *Works*].
[80] Nguyễn-Võ Thu-Hương, *The Ironies of Freedom*, 210-212. On the historiographic depictions of the countryside as the seat of rebellion, see George Dutton, *The Tây Sơn Uprising: Society and Rebellion in Eighteenth Century Vietnam*.

the nation.[81] An essential part of the novel's didactic function, this gender iconography is meant to remind readers of the relevance of continued vigilance against threatening forces to the nation.

The representation of forgiveness and reconciliation problematically relies upon and reaffirms this naturalized language of woman as victim. The novel feminizes empathy by establishing it as an emotional state borne out of ostracized female subjectivity. Quy's outcast position is bound by her own humility, rather than patriarchal disciplining of women as reproductive bodies. Having been raped, tortured and imprisoned multiple times during the war years, Quy becomes unable to bear children and she preemptively ends her relationship with Cường, accepting her inability to fulfill the primary duty of a wife: "We should not continue our relationship with each other. You need children, but I can't …" (original ellipses; 19).[82] Her willingness to recognize her inability to perform her social role as a woman leads not to a questioning of the social order, but to empathy for those widows and children of traitors to the revolution, in particular the widow and children of her former enemy Tuân. In retribution for his actions, the villagers and the local Party branch officers had denied them full membership in the post-war community. Quy, whose name means "to bring together" and "to recognize", feels an affinity with her former enemy's widow Năm because, in her mind, they share "the capacity of two women

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[81] The representation of the woman as a symbol of the nation is a common postcolonial and nationalist literary device. See, for example, Leslie Bow, "Le Ly Hayslip's Bad (Girl) Karma: Sexuality, National Allegory, and the Politics of Neutrality"; Mary Layoun, "The Female Body and 'Transnational' Reproduction; or, Rape by Any Other Name?"; and Lydia Liu, "The Female Body and Nationalist Discourse: *The Field of Life and Death* Revisited".

[82] "Chúng ta không nên tiếp tục quan hệ với nhau. Anh cần những đứa tre, mà em thì không thể…" (original ellipses). All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.

who have similar misfortunes" (123).[83] Quy's stunteded social formation due to her damaged woman's body has circumscribed her citizenship within the community of families, and enables her to empathize with Năm's desperate desire for social inclusion.

The feminine position of forgiveness ultimately must yield to the masculine position of justice, which is represented as the voice of the community. To everyone's objection, Quy petitions for the reintegration of Năm's family into the community, pointing to retribution in the form of deprived economic livelihood. Cường, the current district head who had led the local Việt Cộng cell during the war, cautions against such action in the absence of revenge attempts on those "evil" ones who had fought for the "puppet" government. To him, the villagers have spoken: "Evil doers must pay forever and ever. I don't want to speak of these kinds of people. The public decides these matters more even handedly than the law does" (42).[84] Retribution is portrayed as the democratic judgment of history, an act that the Party leaders should not interfere with. Through the masculine position of righteous action, this naturalization of justice as the spontaneous will of the people textually echoes and connects to the spontaneous uprisings that were a standard part of the meta-narrative of the prison memoirs. Thus, in its appropriation of the prison memoir as a genre about war and memory-making, *Swallows in Flight* reproduces and expands, rather than challenges, its nation-building function.

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[83] "tư cách của hai người phụ nữ cùng có những nỗi bất hạnh giống nhau"
[84] "Cái ác phải trả giá mãi mãi Tư à. Anh không muốn nói đến những loại người ấy. Nhân dân phán xử việc này công bằng hơn pháp luật."

Nationalist history-making requires the destruction of past events that cannot be reconciled with its narrative.[85] If socialist revolution is the inevitable future, then those individuals who did not carry its banner cannot occupy a position among the horizontal community of new citizens. The impossibility of reconciliation between former enemies becomes manifest in Năm's committing suicide. This impossibility is made all the more emphatic by Quy's death shortly afterwards. As she endures the last stages of uterine cancer, a result of her imprisonment for the revolutionary cause, she remembers being raped by the local militia members and losing her virginity, being tortured in the prison at Quy Nhơn, being brutally interrogated at Côn Đảo. This last scene operates like a history lesson that answers the call made at the beginning of the novel, when the local teacher had asked Quy to share her experiences of the war so that the school children would know the sacrifices that made their new society possible. That morning, realizing that some of the children she would speak to may be the children of those men and women she had killed, Quy had hesitated upon nearing the school. The remembering of nationalist duty that Quy could not offer the young generation becomes possible through the vehicle of the war novel.

The novel's memoir-like narration of the revolutionary journey asserts the ethics of retribution and reconciliation without disrupting nationalist history. This positing of ethics as an *individual* conflict draws upon the use of the abject. In her examination of theater images of Asian Americans, Karen Shimakawa theorizes the concept of the abject as that which must be expelled and yet wholly necessary for the

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[85] Naoki Sakai, "Introduction: Nationality and the Politics of the 'Mother Tongue'" in *Deconstructing Nationality*, 1-40.

dominant culture's understanding of itself.[86] In *Swallows in Flight*, the abject, as embodied in the damaged remnants of Quy's body, is an important reminder of the righteousness of the revolutionary war and the justified killings. However, once it has been used to affirm that Party-led vision of the nation, the abject must be ejected from the new history because the living cannot accommodate the dying.[87]

The novel closes with Quy's transportation into a different world, accompanied by Cường, the face of the Party's national, male dominated leadership. He had promised to come back to her in the month of January; as he waits by her side, her feverish nightmares subside and she begins to feel lifted into another world:

> He [Cường] calls, stuttering. But I don't hear him anymore. It seems as though I've left the cramped hospital room and am flying here and there like the pure, white clouds. The clouds foretell of good and bad omens in my hometown. It seems as though I'm joining a group of swallows that have suddenly rushed out of the sky. And January, that January that I have always waited for, it seems as though it's returned…(original ellipses; 171).[88]

A symbol of the return of spring and the start of a new cycle, the swallows portend of both death and life. Reincarnated as the bird representative of her Việt Cộng, assassin group "Swallows", Quy returns to a world of purity and unbounded youth. This transportation of Quy and the reader from damaged body to national symbol elides the costs of state-sponsored history-making, not only for the family members of those men and women who did not support the Northern cause, but also for Quy. Her damaged

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[86] Karen Shimakawa, "Introduction" in *National Abjection*, 1-22.
[87] My reading of the relationship between the living and the dead to the formation of history is influenced by Cathy Caruth's re-reading of Freud and Lacan in *Unclaimed Experience*.
[88] Anh lay gọi, lắp bắp. Nhưng chị không còn nghe anh nữa. Dường như chị đã thoát ra khỏi căn phòng chật hẹp cua bệnh viện và đang bay lang thang như những đám mây màu trắng tinh khiết. Những đám mây báo trước những điềm lành, điềm dữ trên quê hương chị. Dương như chị đang hòa nhập vào bầy chim én không biết từ đâu bỗng uà ra đen đặc trên bầu trời. Và tháng giêng, cái tháng giêng mà chị từng mong đợi dường như cũng đang trở về…(original ellipses)

body, her inability to bear children, was a constant contradiction to the perfect physique represented in propaganda posters depicting heroic soldiers, peasants and proletariats during and after the war. Her metaphorical metamorphosis into a swallow offers the possibility of her inclusion into a nationalist history that could not accommodate the broken bodies of the living and the dead.

The new socialist man

First published in 1987, Bảo Ninh's *Nỗi buồn chiến tranh* [The Sorrow of War] was the most controversial of the Đổi Mới era war stories.[89] The novel received much condemnation not only because it debunks the figure of the *individual* soldier as the exemplar of heroism, but also because it portrays Hà Nội, Vietnam's political and cultural center, as completely devastated and exhausted by decades of war. The novel's representations of physical and psychological damage contradicted the resoluteness of nationalist war mobilization and socialist nation-building. The debates about the novel did not just concern literature, but also the domestic and international images of the state and the nation. In visual art, theater and music performances, documentaries and feature films, and literature and news reports, the Northern, communist state had shaped the image of revolution as the unquestioned duty of every man and woman to liberate the South from an imperialist-backed, puppet government. Not only did Bảo Ninh represent characters who are apathetic to this decades-long rhetoric, he rejects its triumphant vision by foregrounding the violence of modernization, war, and nationalism.

[89] It was originally published with the title *Thân phận của tình yêu* [The Fate of Love] in 1987 because the title *Nỗi buồn chiến tranh* was too controversial. When the novel was republished in 1991, Bảo Ninh changed the title back.

The novel's portrayal of the hollowness of revolutionary rhetoric stirred the literary and political circles to heights reminiscent of the fervor generated by Nguyễn Huy Thiệp's provocative short stories. Although he provides little explanation, the literary critic Hoàng Ngọc Hiến compares *The Sorrow of War* to the famous tale of ill-fated love in the epic poem *Truyện Kiều* [The Tale of Kieu], the writings of the 1920s literary circle *Tự lực văn đoàn* [Self-Reliance Literary Group], and *Romeo and Juliet*.[90] *The Tale of Kieu* and the writings of the Self-Reliance Literary Group are prominent examples of the Vietnamese literary canon, much as Shakespeare is regarded in the West. Hence, such comparisons were rare and implied the social importance as well as the literary caliber of a work. It is curious, however, that the comparison highlights the war novel's romantic plotline rather than its political critique. On the other hand, the historian Đỗ Văn Khang, who also had denounced Nguyễn Huy Thiệp's stories as desecrations of accepted history, sees the free-association writing style and temporal and spatial overlaps as "jumbled" [rối bời] and indicative of Ninh's lack of confidence.[91] Khang expresses disbelief with the portrayal of "Liberation" soldiers as cruel, weak, ambivalent and regretful, saying such representations diminish the integrity of real life Liberation soldiers by equating them to the ignoble Americans.[92] Huỳnh Như Phương disagrees, arguing the novel's portrayals of the destruction of all that is beautiful shows the unbounded limits of war,

[90] Hoàng Ngọc Hiến, "Những nghịch lí của chiến tranh (đọc *Thân phận của tình yêu*)" [The paradoxes of war (reading *The Fate of Love*)], *Văn Nghệ* 15 (1991): 7.
[91] "không tin vào chính mình, vào chính lời cua minh"
[92] Đỗ Văn Khang, "Nghĩ gì khi đọc tiểu thuyết *Thân phận của tình yêu* [Thoughts on reading the novel *The Fate of Love*], *Văn Nghệ* 43 (1991): 6.

rather than a leveling of the morality of imperialist aggression and war of defense.[93] The tenor of the debate increased with the Vietnam Writers Association's awarding of Bảo Ninh one of its top prizes in 1991. The Ministry of Culture reacted by forcing the prize committee to rescind its decision. The committee had to censure the novel publicly; later, some of the members distanced themselves from those denouncements and took the controversy public by writing commentaries and rejoinders in literary journals such as *Văn Nghệ* [Arts and Letters], *Văn Nghệ Quan Đội* [Army Arts and Letters], the central region's influential *Sông Hương* [Perfume River], and the online diasporic Vietnamese cultural website *talawas*. The controversy brought to light the intensely intricate relationship between literature and historical memory in war novels.

The Sorrow of War appropriates the genre of the revolutionary memoir as a vehicle of socialist history-making. The novel simulates a memoir to transform the performance of writing about war from being the consolidation of a particular official history to the recovery of the elisions of that history, which dismiss the stories of suffering and dying, the desire to escape the daily toil of war, the stories of the non-heroic, pedestrian aspects of war. Like the revolutionary memoirs, Bảo Ninh's novel is a story within a story about the individual's journey into national consciousness through fighting the enemy. However, the novel departs from the genre's heroic style in its use of reportage-like language and straight-forward tone, rejecting the glorification of nationalism and claiming a "realism" based on first-hand experience that is more real than the "real" of socialist realism.

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[93] Huỳnh Như Phương, "Chiến tranh tình yêu và sự cứu rỗi" [War, love and salvation], *Những Tín Hiệu Mới* [New Signs], Hà Nội: Nha Xuất Bản Nhà Văn, 1994, 65.

The narrative mode alternates between third-person objective and first-person, which is at times stream-of-consciousness, asserting the formation of the individual amidst the national prerogative of collective formation. The protagonist is an anti-hero, whose participation in the "Liberation of the South" leads to disillusionment rather than an affirmed sense of nationalism and faith in the Party-led state. The novel also disrupts the revolutionary memoir's conventions through its overlapping of time and space and lack of a resolution. It begins with the narrator's maturation and ends with a return to an impossible, idealized youth and lost innocence. Kiên's maturation is tied to his disengagement and eventual disappearance from the public sphere, rather than the individual's absorption into national history. If the revolutionary memoir is the conventional structure for representing the rise of the nation, *The Sorrow of War* questions the story of its inevitable future.

Bảo Ninh revises the revolutionary memoir to make visible alternative forms of history and memory. Time and space are not always clearly discernible; they intertwine as the past, present and future inform one another. The cyclical movement backwards in time is the literary excavation of history through the remembering of stories and scenes that recur in more filled-in form with each remembering. This excavation of alternative spaces of memory occurs outside official history in the realms of nature, dreams and hallucinations, personal relationships, and the arts. These are spaces in which the individual's desires and ambivalent feelings can be manifest. However, war is so great and encompassing in its devastating effects that even the private sphere cannot compensate for the losses experienced in the public sphere, as

seen in the social disintegration of the protagonist, in his abandonment of writing, and in the impossible reconciliation between him and his lover.

The narrative continually moves back and forth through temporal and spatial settings, exposing ruptures suppressed in official discourse. This recurring tension undermines the stability of the linear trajectory of national history, and the assumption of authority and confidence implied in that linearity. The novel opens with the end of 1975, moves backwards to 1969, forward to the days before the Fall of Saigon in April 1975, jumps to the protagonist's post-war work with the Missing-in-Action Remains Gathering Team, his memory of being one of only 10 survivors from the 27th Battalion members, playing cards with his friends when they were still alive, the invasion of Saigon. This confusing overlap of time and space reveals the rifts through which stories of death and despair suppressed in national history can come to surface. It is within these ruptures of time and space that Kiên recalls forgotten memories, revisits friends long gone, comrades who sacrificed their lives for him, the women he met during the long years of war. These ambiguous overlaps of time and space connect seemingly unrelated events and point to the possibility of multiple stories. This understanding of temporality disrupts the chronological narrative of communist nationalism that depicts history as a series of direct cause-and-effect events with a fated teleology.

The novel presents history as an assemblage of incongruent pieces, rather than an organized narrative. History is a scattering of fragments—fragmented memories, individual and collective stories mixed together. As it moves back in time, the narrative exposes the layers of history as an archaeologist exposes the layers of

sediment. The task of the protagonist/writer is the recovery of the fragmented, residual remains of the past. His work in recovering the bodies of the dead with the MIA Remains Gathering Team is the metaphoric search for the buried memories and stories that do not fit into official history. During his return to the jungle with the MIA Team, he repeatedly dreams of his army mates. One of the dreams is of them playing cards together for the last time:

> "'Slow down a bit,' Kiên suggested. 'If we leave this game unfinished Heaven will grant favors, keeping us alive to return and finish the game. So, slow down and we'll survive this battle and continue the game later.'
>
> 'You're cunning,' said Thành, grinning. 'But Heaven's not stupid. You can't cheat Him. If you play only half the game The Man Up There will send for all four of us and we'll torment each other.'" (10)[94]

This recurring dream of the desire to slow down the game is Kiên's calling back of the war dead, his desire to arrest history and to re-write it, to refuse to let his men die. In contrast to the state-sponsored representations of the war and V-Day "with cheering, flags, flowers, triumphant soldiers, and joyful people", Kiên remembers those years as a time when he and his army mates did what they could to escape the thought and likelihood of imminent death (107). The playing cards appear in his dreams time and again, a metonymic reminder of lost lives.

Dreams figure prominently in the novel, offering a space of personal agency wherein the soldiers can suspend history and replace the reality of war with an ideal tranquility. Whereas Kiên's postwar dreams are nightmares, the dreams that he and his army mates had during the war are ideal fantasies, often brought on by hallucinatory plants. The ideal is gendered feminine in contrast to the masculine signifiers of official

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[94] Bảo Ninh, *The Sorrow of War*, Trans. Phan Thanh Hao, New York: Riverhead Books, 1996. All English translations of the novel are from this version.

history, as represented by the army commanders who see the soldiers' desires for diversions as a threat to military discipline:

> "The tasty *canina* had many wondrous attributes. They could decide what they'd like to dream about, or even blend the dreams, like preparing a wonderful cocktail. With *canina* one smoked to forget the daily hell of the soldier's life, smoked to forget hunger and suffering. Also, to forget death. And totally, but totally, to forget tomorrow.
>
> Smoking *rosa canina* Kien would immerse himself in a world of mythical and wonderful dreams which in ordinary moments his soul could never penetrate. In these luxurious dreams the imagined air was so clean, the sky so high, the clouds and sunshine so beautiful, approaching the perfection of his childhood dreams. And in those dreams the beautiful sky would project pictures of his own lovely Hanoi. The West Lake on a summer afternoon, the scarlet flame trees around the lake. Once in his dream-picture he had felt the waves lapping the side of his tiny sampan and looking up he had seen Phuong, youthful, innocently beautiful, her hair flying in the Hanoi breeze." (12-13)

In the world of dreams, the soldiers can shape their own perception of reality and decide their own fate. The landscape is vast and unbounded by limits; it is pristine, untainted by and oblivious to violence. Within this landscape is the conventional image of Hanoi as a romanticized ideal, personified by the long-hair, innocent Vietnamese female beauty. This landscape reflects and embodies the soldier's sexual fantasies and idealization of home as a sanctuary gendered female. However, these imagined realities of eternal innocence and individual agency are only possible in the world of dreams and hallucinations.

At times, the horrors of war invade this world, bringing with it grotesque images of death. The violence that the soldiers avoid speaking about, their fears and sorrows in seeing countless friends die, and their knowledge of the high likelihood of their own imminent death, take shape in their dreams, in the form of "monstrous animals":

> "Along with the gambling and smoking of *canina* went all sorts of rumors and prophecies. Perhaps because the soldiers in their hallucinations had seen too many hairy monsters with wings and mammals with reptilian tails, or imagined they smelled the stench of their own blood. They imagined the monstrous animals plunging about bleeding in the dark caves and hollows under the base of Ascension Pass on the other side of the valley from the jungle." (14)

In these dreams, nature is not the conventional symbol of life and pastoral beauty, but is a landscape overrun by inhuman beings. The unexplainable materializes in gothic forms, overwhelming the natural world order with predators that feed on the soldiers' blood. What information the army high command withholds from the soldiers becomes legible as "rumors and prophecies" and monstrosities that haunt their dreams and hallucinations. These vague forms refuse shape except as excess that in their assemblage convey the horrors of war.

Nature is an alternative archive, a realm of anti-heroic memories, a realm that recalls the loud silences muffled by official history. Rather than life-giving, nature is a space of death, deprivation and scarcity. The opening portrays the jungle, a spatial signifier of the Vietnam/American War, as a post-war torn landscape, a space that is continually haunted by the past. The pastoral is not an idyllic landscape, but one infected by human death, populated by aberrant growth. This symbolism is most acutely seen in the representation of the Jungle of Screaming Souls, the site where all but ten men from Kiên's battalion fell:

> "Bloated human corpses, floating alongside the bodies of incinerated jungle animals, mixed with branches and trunks cut down by artillery, all drifting in a stinking marsh." (5)

> "Kiên was told that passing this area at night one could hear birds crying like human beings. They never flew, they only cried among the branches. And nowhere else in these Central Highlands could one find bamboo shoots of such a horrible color, with infected weals like bleeding pieces of meat. As for the

> fireflies, they were huge. Some said they'd seen firefly lights rise before them as big as a steel helmet—some said bigger than helmets." (6)

This landscape is sickly and infested with death, which is so pervasive that it has infiltrated every aspect of life. Out of this landscape is born grotesque and deformed incarnations of the dead. The bamboo "with infected weals", the birds and fireflies represent the dead souls that nature must accommodate because national history will not. The cries assert the persistence of memory, the haunting of the past into the present. Kiên's multiple returns to the site of death is a metaphor for the excavation and memorializing of forgotten memories and forgotten histories, of the thousands of dead who are not acknowledged as the devastating costs of war.

The world of dreams offers the possible recuperation of the individual soldier's masculinity from the damages inflicted by war. This recuperation is effected through the gendering of individual memory as feminine in contradiction to the masculine of state memory, and relies on the problematic portrayal of woman as rape victim. Devastated by the memory of the death of friends, the images of post-war poverty, and his disappointment that his childhood love Phương had other lovers during his absence, Kiên feels an immense impotence in his waking hours. But in his dreams, he is able to reconstruct the past and claim history by appropriating the feminine position. The starkest example of this re-enactment is seen in his remembering of Hòa, the scout who saved Kiên and his wounded men by making herself visible to the American soldiers tracking them so that she could throw them off their search:

> "We were only able to meet for a moment in my dream, a passing glance at each other. In the thick mist of the dream I could only see Hòa vaguely, far away. But I felt a passionate love and a grieving intimacy I'd not felt for her at the time of our traumatic, violent parting after Second Tet in

> 1968. During our brief time together I'd only felt a shameful impotence, a feeling of death and desperate exhaustion.
>
> For the entire night I floated in the sea of suffering called Mau Than, the tragic year of 1968. When I awoke it was almost dawn, yet the dream images were then transferred to my waking hours: Hòa fallen in a grassy clearing in the jungle, the American troops rushing towards her, then surrounding her, like bare-chested apes, puffing and panting, grabbing her, breathing heavily over her body. My throat still hurt from screaming during the nightmare, my lips were bleeding, the buttons of my pajama coat had been ripped off, my chest was deeply scratched, and my heart beat painfully, as though I were in danger, not our courageous Hòa." (45-46).

In this first-person account of the American soldiers raping Hòa, Kiên remembers feeling impotent while he hides in the bushes, waiting for the soldiers to leave so that he can return to his troops and lead them to safety, following the path that Hòa had showed him. This remembering re-presents the violated woman in a romantic and romanticized relationship with the one who remembers her. His memory of her is vague and recast in heteronormative terms that re-presents her more as an absence, rather than an active agent who had saved his life. At the same time, the violation of her body is transferred onto his body. This scene draws on the conventional use of the trope of rape as an affront to native masculinity by foreign invaders whose occupation of the land is metaphorically represented as a violation of the land, which is symbolically represented by the Vietnamese woman. In his impotence, Kiên identifies with the feminine, violated subject. Ironically, his empathy for her centers the reader's attention on him, and positions the reader to identify with his pain. The author uses this feminine position of victimhood to undermine the masculine position of official history, and to indict the state in the violation of the land and its mythologized, pure essence.

Bảo Ninh's appropriation of the conventional trope of woman-as-victim exposes the violence of the masculine position of state nationalism, only to create another form of epistemic violence. Kiên's sense of impotence is the individuated knowledge of the nationalist failure to protect the homeland, which is gendered female. The novel condemns that failure through the visceral transference of its violation onto Kiên's body *and* the construction of his position as that of savior. By claiming the feminine position, the novel performs an alternative masculinity to that of the state, one that offers the compassion and interiority lacking in the action-oriented, ideology of nationalism. Kiên's position of empathy and salvation is made possible through the construction of the feminine as embodiment of abject excess or pathetic lack. The feminine comprises either youthful innocence and safe havens or damaged bodies and damaged spirits: the three young sisters on the farm /lovers to Kiên's army mates who get raped and murdered by Southern scouts; Hanh, the beautiful, young neighbor who awakens Kiên's sense of his sexuality during their work digging a bomb shelter for her; Hòa, the scout who gets raped by the American soldiers; Lan, the woman from the tiny, distant hamlet who symbolizes home and an originary sanctuary ("There is always one place and one woman here for you." [56]); Vinh's sister, the "Green Coffee Girl"/sex worker Kiên saves from an abusive client; Hien, a war invalid with whom Kiên shares a brief affair on the train ride northward at war's end; and Phương, Kiên's love and disappointment. Phương, in particular, symbolizes the contradictory bifurcation of woman as virgin and whore—the memory of her youthful innocence sustains Kiên's spirits, but her presence repulses him. Her being subjected to gang rape at war's opening; her transformation from cultured, schoolgirl to sex worker; and her

promiscuous lifestyle exemplify for this alternative position of masculinity the violence and falseness of the nationalist rhetoric of heroism that depleted individuals of all spiritual substance.

While it appropriates the feminine in its critique of state nationalism, the novel's alternative masculinity locates its legitimacy within its claim of a past and pure culture. This masculinity is embodied in the figures of Kiên's father, a painter whom the state-sponsored artistic community ostracizes for "being out of step" and unwilling to accept "socialist ethics" (125); Kiên's stepfather, an "old-fashioned" poet who cautions him to not romanticize martyrdom (135; 58-59); and Kiên, the eccentric who writes at night, during the working hours of "professional burglars and prostitutes", the criminalized and the disenfranchised (116). Both of the father figures are outcasts and recluses, and both die soon after the start of the war. Their position of masculinity asserts a humanistic freedom that is incompatible with the masculine of what Kiên's father derides as "philistine", state-sponsored art (125). In this realm of freedom, individual difference, "different memories" and "different destinies" displace the collective consciousness of the state (232).

This claim to humanistic freedom draws its authority from the presence of the feminine, the symbol of the pure essence of the nation and, hence, the legitimizing witness to the formation of an alternative historical consciousness. While this masculinity cannot exist within the state-sponsored public sphere, its spirit lives through the women who are present at its destruction. In his greatest condemnation of state-sponsored art, Kiên's father burns all his paintings before his imminent death, with Phương as his only helper and witness. Before his own disappearance two

decades later, Kiên repeats this act of self-erasure, burning his manuscript pages until the mute woman stops him. It is through another male narrator, however, that the manuscript comes to the reader. This oppositional comprehension of art as humanistic freedom posits an alternative male lineage that undermines the masculinity of the state through its repossession of the feminine as the source of cultural truth.

Conclusion

Nguyễn Trí Huân's novel *Chim én bay* [Swallows in Flight] and Bảo Ninh's *Nỗi buồn chiến tranh* [The Sorrow of War] were part of a new generation of post-war novels that reflected upon the relationship between historiography and nation-building. As inheritors of the literary lineage of the revolutionary memoir, Huân and Ninh reworked its meta-narrative of resistance, individual maturation and collective consciousness. Huân's novel recycles the genre's conventions in his depiction of a protagonist fortified by the standard episodes of resistance, torture and rape, and resilience. Her martyrdom offers the reader a reminder of the legitimacy of the Party-led state and its relevance in the post-war years. In contrast to the linearity of Huân's portrayal of war, Ninh offers a novel of spatial and temporal overlaps, wherein the past, present and future continually haunt one another. Instead of joining the Party in the making of national history, Ninh's protagonist is cynical of its rhetoric and disengages completely from its present. Both novels claim the position of the feminine as a legitimate voice in contrast to the masculine of the state. Huân's appropriation of the feminine does not so much challenge official history as it seeks to insert the consideration of reconciliation. However, that intervention is tied to the position of the abjected victim and constantly diminished in the narrative's representation of justice

as masculine and popular. Ninh's use of the feminine creates a gendered epistemic violence in its construction of an alternative masculinity in opposition to the masculine of the state project of socialist realism.

CHAPTER THREE

New National and Global Imaginaries:

Transformations of the Vietnamese Film Industry

This chapter will examine the filmic representation of history and the assertion of alternative masculine subjectivities in post-socialist Vietnam, in particular during the neoliberal transformation of the cinema industry, starting in the mid 1980s. In my previous chapters, I discussed the rejection of socialist realism by Vietnamese writers and intellectuals after 1975 and what they saw as the end of the need to use art to serve the nation in its anti-imperialist struggle. Although literature has the most established genealogy in Vietnamese culture, cinema has come to play a much more important role in the post-socialist era as private investment pours into the country. In this global age of intense movements across borders of capital, labor and images, the visual has garnered audiences in ways unexpected and unimagined even by its producers.[95] Vietnamese cinema has become a site for an international circuit of capital, labor and images as local and foreign filmmakers collaborate and draw on multiple national cinematic traditions to create a cultural "capital" the equal of other Asian sites. In this transformation of the industry, questions of history and national belonging figure prominently, and are commonly negotiated through representations of gender.

[95] Many film critics have written about the rise of the visual. See, for example, Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, eds., *Multiculturalism, Postcoloniality, and Transnational Media*; Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*; Shu-mei Shih, *Visuality and Identity*; and Rey Chow, *Sentimental Fabulations, Contemporary Chinese Films*.

Using a comparative reading of Đặng Nhật Minh's *Thương Nhớ Đồng Quê* (1995) [*Nostalgia for the Countryside*] and Charlie Nguyen's *The Rebel* (2008) [Dòng Máu Anh Hùng], I examine how Vietnamese and diasporic Vietnamese filmmakers interrogate and rework official histories and collective memories in their opposition to state and international definitions of belonging and modernization. In staking their place within national and global imaginaries, they construct a new masculine subject distinguishable from that of the state, and that is staged on the body of the woman.

From revolutionary socialism to market liberalization

Vietnamese cinema has changed radically in the last 30 years with the end of the Indochinese Wars and the opening of the market to international investment, which has brought with it a flood of cinematic influences and products from across Asia, Europe and the U.S. With the advent of *Đổi Mới* [Renovation] in the mid 1980s, Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP) Secretary General Nguyen Van Linh announced an era of liberalization in the arts and culture. The move toward an open market economy signaled the VCP's implicit acknowledgment of widespread grassroots resistance to centralized state planning of industry and agriculture on the domestic front and liberalization processes that were happening in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe Bloc countries.[96] Taking advantage of the fear among stalwart officials that the Party itself would face collapse if it did not make room for alternative voices, more progressive factions within the VCP pushed for cultural renovation.[97] They wanted to make room for alternatives to socialist realism as the sole ideological model

[96] Hy V. Luong, ed., *Postwar Vietnam: Dynamics of a Transforming Society*.
[97] Russell H. Heng, *Of the State, For the State, Yet Against the State: The Struggle Paradigm in Vietnam's Media Politics*; Trần Đoan, *Đổi Mới: Niềm Vui Chưa Trọn*; and Nguyễn Xuân Thọ, *The Press and Media in Vietnam*.

of artistic expression in thematic concerns and film styles, which in Vietnamese cinema meant the portrayal of the working class as the vanguard in the process of nation-building. Unable to stave off the push for democratization of Vietnamese society, the conservative elements conceded ground, only on the condition that the new direction would not so much be a victory of the capitalist order over socialist ideals, as a more complex examination of the 'reactionary elements' who could not understand or accept the development of an open market society with the Party at the helm. Across the spectrum of cultural production, from 1987 to 1990, there was tremendous open discussion about change and reform. There were debates about the tenets of socialism in numerous publications, such as the most popular and well respected newspaper *Thanh Niên* [Youth], *Nhân Dân* [The People] and *Quân Đội* [The Army]; investigative reporting of government corruption and mismanagement; critiques of developmental narratives in the dissident writings of Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, Dương Thu Hương and others. Intellectuals debated alternative visions of cultural work and the role of the state in the arts, as seen in issues of the weekly publication *Văn Nghệ* [Literature and Art] under the editorship of Nguyên Ngọc .

Since the mid 1980s, Vietnamese cinema has shifted away from portrayals of resistance against regional and Western enemies, and turned more to stories about individual relations and the effects of market liberalization on people's lives. Việt Linh's *Gánh Xiếc Rong* (1988) [An Itinerant Circus] portrays the exploitation of an ethnic minority village by a traveling Việt troupe, whose greed for gold symbolizes the deterioration of morals in the fetishization of wealth. Adapted from Nguyễn Huy Thiệp's short story of the same name, Nguyễn Khắc Lợi's *Tướng Về Hưu* (1988) [The

General Retires] shows the incompatibility between a patriarch's power, which lies in his access to an old social network, and his daughter-in-law's authority, which she gained through her entrepreneurial, but dehumanizing, skills. Like other *phim nghệ thuật* [art film] productions, these films were made with state subsidies. Although that amount was usually only $60,000 US, state sponsorship also guaranteed the films' promotion and distribution among the nation's theaters and their later broadcast on television. As market liberalization picked up speed, however, the state gradually cut most spending on cultural production, which left the already greatly under-funded and small cinema industry in even more dire straits.

Vietnamese cinema in the *Đổi Mới* period has grown significantly beyond the ability of the censors to control every step of production. But film producers have also had to constantly negotiate what themes are permissible. The state has licensed dozens of private and state/private co-owned studios over the past 20 years. By the early 1990s, studios such as Ding Do Video and Nha Trang were producing more than 40 "instant noodle" films annually by the early 1990s—offering a selection of locally made straight-to-video movies that critics decried as "low culture" productions. Within the media industry, the availability of cable services and the import of television shows and blockbusters from South Korea, Japan, Thailand, and other Asian sites as well as Hollywood, and the wide popularity of pirated DVDs offer viewers a huge array of entertainment options and exert tremendous influence on the narrative, stylistic and technical processes of domestic filmmaking. Whereas the older generation of film professionals—from actors to directors—were largely trained in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, the younger generation count among them

several who have been trained in the West and Asia with support from organizations such as the Ford Foundation. Film producers, young and old, have taken on themes about government corruption, poverty and the social costs of economic competition, and the tricky relationships between local Vietnamese and returning diasporic subjects—topics that once were considered taboo.

This is a significant departure from the cinema of old, but it is not altogether a radical critique of the Vietnamese political structure—or the state itself. I would argue that Vietnamese cinema is still largely subject to the watchful eyes of the state; film producers can embed social critiques within their narratives, but those critiques are interwoven with a reiteration of the legitimacy of the state and the Communist Party. With the opening of the market to foreign investors, the government recognized the need for new laws, and eventually passed the Investment Act of 1987, the Sales Tax Act of 1990, the Banking Act of 1990 and other legislation. But it kept a relatively tight rein on the ideological front. The National Assembly passed the Media Act in 1989 after years of public debate, especially in the South. On the surface, the act legalizes the rights of all citizens to freedom of the press and prohibits censorship. But that freedom is restricted to content that 'serves' the state and the people. This is particularly alarming in light of the 1986 Criminal Code that punishes those who work against the socialist system with prison sentences of up to 20 years. And throughout the decades of liberalization, the state has periodically cracked down on what it sees as threats to the cultural integrity of the arts, threats that reflect the interests of the factions in control of the VCP at a given time.

If the late 1980s was a period of dramatic experimentation and testing of censorship restrictions, the 1990s witnessed the reassertion of state power by officials who wanted to make clear that the Party would not tolerate criticism of the state as a whole. In 1991, conservatives within the Party managed to regain a majority at the Seventh Party Congress, renewing the use of revolutionary discourse to call for the '"urgent reorganisation of the media"' and the '"militant role of the socialist press in the fight against sabotage from the enemy camp"'.[98] They managed to push for the renewal of the subsidy system to ensure the production of films that would present a positive image of Vietnam both domestically and internationally. But with the proliferation of film studios and the availability of countless alternatives to officially sponsored media, the state could no longer keep a tight rein on the film industry.

Brief history of Vietnamese cinema

The official beginnings of Vietnamese cinema hark back to the French era, with the first documentary shot by a French observer at Hồ Chí Minh's 'Declaration of Independence' speech ceremony on September 2, 1945, in Hanoi . The state-run Vietnam Film Archives divides the history of the nation's film industry into four periods, which correspond to the major shifts in the country's revolutionary struggles and political economic directions—namely, the First Indochinese War, the Second Indochinese War, the post 1975 years, and the era of market liberalization.[99] During the first two periods, documentaries, feature films and cartoons were largely about the heroism of anti-colonial and anti-imperialist resistance against France and the U.S.

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[98] Qtd in Nguyễn Xuân Thọ, 26.

[99] Trình Diêm Mai, *30 Years of Vietnam's Cinema Art*. This publication was published in 1983, before the official policy Đổi Mới. If one follows this periodization, the Đổi Mới era would be the fourth period.

These productions presented lessons on how to live during wartime, envisioned the construction of a socialist society and 'the new socialist man', and glorified manual work in the fields and factories. The third period was defined by depictions of the country's fight against Chinese aggression in the late 1970s and an expansion of non-war themes that constructed the nation as one inclusive of the former Republic of Vietnam and the cultural diversity of the country's ethnic groups. Under *Đổi Mới*, one of the main objectives of the largely state-controlled cinematic industry has been the projection of a Vietnamese nation that is modern and international.

Those films that have won national and international prizes and have been shown at film festivals worldwide with the state's approval have been of the *phim nghệ thuật* [art film] genre. Shown in theatres for brief runs and then on state controlled television channels, they tend to attract an older audience and those interested in "culture".[100] Some well known films from the 1970s and 1980s paint Vietnamese subjects as victims of foreign aggression unwilling to relent. For instance, Hải Ninh's *Em Bé Hà Nội* (1975) [*The Little Girl of Hanoi*] graphically depicts a city razed by daily air bombings and an entire way of life obliterated[101]. Trần Vũ's *Chúng Ta Sẽ Gặp Lại* [*We Shall Meet Again*] represents the characters' resilience despite the constant threat of death; the film won the Main Prize for feature films at the Karlovy Vary International Film Festival in Czechoslovakia in 1976. And Nguyễn Hồng Sến's *Cánh Đồng Hoang* (1979) [*The Wild Field*] portrays a Việt Cộng couple's family life as well as their work as guerrillas in the Mekong Delta; the film took the Gold Medal

[100] Before the 1980s and even today in rural areas, most people saw films at mobile outdoor theaters, which traveled from town to town and were tended by staff from the state cinema industry.
[101] *Em Bé Hà Nội* can be, in some ways, compared to *Hiroshima Mon Amour* (1959) in the use of the bird's eye view of the results of air raids, and the focus on how the survivors cope in the aftermath.

for feature films at the 1981 Moscow International Film Festival. While the state touted these productions as exemplars of socialist realism, officials were divided on other films. Made by Vietnam's most well connected and reputed director on the international stage, Đặng Nhật Minh, *Cô Gái Trên Sông* (1987) [*The Girl on the Perfume River*] sparked intense debate upon its release for its portrayal of the post-war rehabilitated life of a prostitute betrayed by a former lover, a North Vietnamese spy who becomes a Communist Party official after the war . The film critiqued such officials' post-war lust for power and their abandonment of the ideals of collective struggle. To highlight the ignoble behavior of the male protagonist, someone who denies his past to protect his reputation, the film represents the prostitute as a figure whose moral and physical health regeneration symbolizes the incorporation of the formerly decrepit South Vietnam into the recently unified Vietnamese nation. What made the movie even more damning was that the heroine ends up with a former army officer from the Republic of Viet Nam. Now hailed as a forerunner of the industry's representations of more complex narratives that included the voices of those who had lived in and fought for the South and now had been re-educated as new socialist citizens, this was the most famous case of controversial films from the 1970s and 1980s.

While older Vietnamese, who lived through at least one of the Indochinese wars, are still interested in wartime narratives, these films fail to attract a sizeable audience. This was all too apparent with the dismal box office sales for Đỗ Minh Tuấn's *Kí Ức Điện Biên* (2004) [*Memories of Dien Bien*], which had an unprecedented budget of $900,000 US from the government. On the other hand, the younger

generation has turned to "instant noodle" productions. To the government's dismay, these films—which cost $10,000 U.S. to make, are predominantly shot in Saigon and address urbanization—have actually been much more profitable. Films by directors such as Lề Hoàng (*Gái Nhảy*/*Bar Girls*, 2003; *Lọ Lem Hè Phố*/*Street Cinderella*, 2004; and *Nữ Tướng Cướp*/*Women Robbers*, 2005) and Vũ Ngọc Đãng (*Những Cô Gái Chân Dài*/*Long-Legged Girls*, 2004) depict migrations from the countryside to the city, urban prostitution, drug use, HIV/AIDS infections, the alienation and destitution of city life, and the deterioration of traditional notions of *tình cảm* [affective ties of reciprocity].

In the early and mid 1990s, the Politburo passed a series of Decisions directing ministries to fund projects and missions that would dispel continuing international perceptions of the country as a backward society and war zone populated by characters who are no more than two-dimensional cut-outs representing the treacherous guerrilla, the pidgin-speaking prostitute, the simple-minded peasant, or the corrupt government official. The rest of this chapter will offer a comparison of two films that bring together the construction of a gendered Vietnamese national identity in the age of globalization, and the place of the returning diasporic subject in Vietnamese national history.

The gaze of the national male subject

Đặng Nhật Minh's *Thương Nhớ Đồng Quê* (1995) [*Nostalgia for the Countryside*] is considered a classic by both Vietnamese and international critics. The most famous of Vietnam's directors, Minh grew up in a family of intellectuals and worked as a writer and journalist before becoming a documentary filmmaker in

1963—a common start for feature film directors. Over the span of four decades, he has made 10 films and has served as General Secretary of the Vietnam Cinema Association for 10 years.[102] *Nostalgia* is his seventh production and probably the most screened Vietnamese film on the international circuit, having won many prizes, including the NETPAC Special Mention at the Rotterdam International Film Festival and the Audience Prize at the Nantes and Fribourg Film Festivals.

Set in the mid-1990s, *Nostalgia* questions the linearity of economic liberalization theory and destabilizes nostalgic and Orientalist notions of the Vietnamese countryside as a pastoral escape. The film was made during an era when foreign capital venture firms and organizing bodies such as the International Monetary Fund were pushing the 'little tigers' of Southeast Asia to further liberalize their financial and capital markets and loosen investment rules. Americans flooded into Vietnam shortly after the Clinton Administration normalized ties with its former enemy, scrambling to play catch-up with corporations from Asia, Australia and Europe, whose governments had renewed diplomatic relations with Vietnam much earlier. Within this context, Vietnam was a still 'untainted' hot spot for foreigners—many of whom were in their 20s and 30s and diasporic—seeking to make a quick fortune, enjoy an elite lifestyle, and perhaps even "find themselves" in the "homeland."[103]

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[102] Starting in Fall 2009, he will be on tour in the U.S. to show his latest film, *Đừng Đốt* [Don't Burn, It's Already On Fire], based on the real life story of a U.S. intelligence officer who for 30 years was haunted by the diaries of a North Vietnamese female doctor, Đặng Thùy Trâm. See Võ Hồng Chương-Đài, "Memories That Bind: Đặng Thùy Trâm's Diaries as Agent of Reconciliation", *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 3:2 (Summer 2008): 196-207.

[103] Diasporic Vietnamese are called "Việt Kiều" by the Vietnamese government and population. The term means "overseas Vietnamese"; ironically, it implies and indicts diasporic Vietnamese as

The film *Nostalgia for the Countryside* is based on the short story of the same title by Nguyễn Huy Thiệp. As I discussed in my first chapter, Thiệp had drawn tremendous praise and condemnation for short stories that questioned the truth-telling authority of national historiography and the state's embrace of free market economics. This short story presents a village struggling to maintain a level of subsistence as the country's economy adjusts to globalization, which has left Vietnamese farmers vulnerable to competition from more prosperous and more technologically well equipped rivals. We learn about the village's location within the nation from Nhâm, the 17-year-old male protagonist, who tells stories about various villagers. This story-telling serves to put a face on people who are otherwise seen merely as hired help by visiting urbanites. The villagers' lives are represented as circumscribed by the oppressive countryside and the endless cycle of manual labor.

The local masculine perspective is contrasted with that of the outsider gendered as feminine. A fellow villager's niece, Quyên had as a child left with her parents for Hà Nội and then later escaped from the country by boat. Her presence is minimal, functioning mainly as an interlocutor whose questions prompt Nhâm to tell us about the soaring prices for fertilizer and electricity and the falling prices for agricultural products. Her minimal speaking presence conveys the superficiality of the diasporic subject's relationship to the countryside, her fetishization of its beauty, and shallow understanding of the back-breaking labor the villagers must endure to plant fields that yield miles of pastoral landscape to the tourist's eyes. Contrary to the

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inauthentic Vietnamese. To local Vietnamese, these "overseas" members have obligations to the "homeland" and to their extended families there, but can never be truly a part of it.

conventional gendering of the countryside as feminine, the short story presents the new feminine as the figure of superficial attachment to the land and the figure of apathetic global mobility; she is the diasporic subject who is all too ready to leave after two of the village children are killed in a traffic accident.

In his screenplay for the film, Đặng Nhật Minh rewrites this narrative of locality, globalization and mobility as a tale about the emergence of Vietnam as a new youthful masculine subject who must choose between the steadfastness of tradition and the seduction of modernization. The film adaptation interweaves the story about the village's difficult integration into the global economy with a second story, that of Nhâm's sexual and social maturation, which figuratively maps the post-war country's negotiated entry into global citizenship. While the short story presents Nhâm's observations, but little of his emotional responses to any of the characters, the film uses the techniques of the voice-over and the gaze to develop his interiority and convey his reactions, especially his sexual awakening. In a village burdened not only by poverty but also by the depletion of its men due to war and the lack of economic opportunities, Nhâm comes into manhood through the assumption of endless labor and sexual desire in his interactions with two feminine subjects, who represent tradition and modernity. The two feminine subjects are Quyên, the diasporic visitor, and Ngữ, his sister-in-law who feels condemned to a life of endless labor as she waits for a husband who has likely abandoned her. Within the village, a microcosm for the nation in its "traditional essence", we see a society having yet recovered from the poverty wrought by war, and now also having to endure the exploitation brought on by global capitalism. As the new socialist citizen who must learn to survive in this environment,

Nhâm achieves social and sexual maturation through a gendered construction of desire and labor. While the presence of Ngữ and Quyên are minimal in the short story, they figure prominently in the film.

Đặng Nhật Minh develops a thematic tension between tradition and modernity through a triangulation of gender, labor and desire. He sets up a contrast between Ngữ's character as a symbol of the countryside and tradition, and Quyên as the lighter-skin, cosmopolitan beauty whose appearance on-screen is foreshadowed by a scene of the villagers watching a television show of strutting models in swimsuits. In this scene, the camera alternates between medium shots of the villagers watching the show, which stirs much excitement in Nhâm's uncle Phụng, to close-up shots of the television set, zooming in on a model's bottom as she exaggeratedly sways her hips for both the diegetic and extra-diegetic audiences. This visual of the mass-produced, sexualization of women's bodies establishes two of the film's themes—the titillating commodification and moral corruption of modern society, and the sexual tension and arousal Nhâm will later experience with Quyên and Ngữ. These two feminine subjects, conventional tropes of tradition and modernity, are presented as wholly antithetical to each other, most remarkably depicted in a two shot of the women standing facing each other. Quyên is completely oblivious to Ngữ's disdainful gaze down her body, an expression of her resentment of the diasporic visitor's allure and distance from manual labor. In this two shot, the camera offers a contrast between the diasporic subject's privileged and careless position and that of her burdened counterpart. Between these two versions of the feminine stands the youthful masculine subject, Nhâm, who becomes aware of how his fellow villagers' lives have been

deteriorated by the desire for monetary gain, and who himself acquires the option to choose the unknown, but seductive possibilities of a life outside the village.

The film offers a critique of the exploitation of the Vietnamese countryside by both domestic, urban entrepreneurs and international market forces through a juxtaposition of the masculine as a new national subject and a bifurcated feminine as figures of steadfast tradition and morally ambiguous modernity. The opening scene establishes the director's sympathies for the countryside, a symbol of tradition, with close-ups of rice stalks and a medium shot of a villager walking in the fields, as opposed to the typically panoramic and emotionally distant shots seen in postcards and other exotic images of the countryside as an idyllic landscape. However, this trope does later appear in the camera's wide angle pan of the green rice fields as Nhâm walks home at the end of another day of arduous work, pausing to look at the surrounding mountains and upwards at an airplane gliding through the skies. This scene locates the new masculine subject within the traditional source of Vietnamese national identity formation—the countryside. The film continuously reifies and splits that position of Vietnamese "essence" through its construction of a new masculine subject who goes out into the world with wisdom and a feminine subject who will maintain the home and the integrity of the pastoral. This is emphasized in the concluding scene when Nhâm is called up for army service, leaving Ngữ to bear the burden of the agricultural work. In the last sequence of shots, the film cross-cuts between medium shots of Nhâm riding away from the village in the back of an army truck and of Ngữ preparing the next rice planting. The film ends with the camera zooming into an extreme close-up of her face as she bends down to transplant the

young rice stalks, having chosen to return home rather than pursuing her husband in the city, which is depicted as chaotic, commercialized and teeming with morally deviant people.

In contrast to the fidelity of tradition, symbolized by Ngữ and the planting cycle, the modern is disruptive and even dangerous. Signs of modernity's shallowness and threat to traditional society are most obvious in the recurrence of the "sexy", mass-produced images of barely clad women: the fashion show on television; the poster in the café where the truck driver gets drunk shortly before he kills Nhâm's 13-year-old sister and her cousin in a traffic accident; and the poster in the city café where a couple running a prostitution ring sit, preying on young women newly arrived from the countryside. In the first café, the poster hangs closely above the truck driver's shoulders, and he turns to bid the image of the woman farewell before he drunkenly stumbles out. In the second café, a two shot frames the couple on the left side and a poster of a couple in amorous embrace on the right, followed by a scene in which the madam directs the man to accost Ngữ. The moral degradation of the modern and its commodification of all relations also are eroding traditional masculinity, represented by Nhâm's uncle Phụng. Feeling ashamed that his fellow villagers have seized on his extramarital affair as an opportunity to deride him, he laments his lot as a poor man. This framing of gender relations in terms of modernity's emphasis on monetary worth masks the naturalized male privilege that underlies that traditional masculinity.

The film foregrounds the masculine perspective by continuously moving back and forth between the directorial gaze and Nhâm's gaze. This privileging of his perspective and that of the omniscient narrator has two important functions. First, it

develops Nhâm's maturation as a process of self-awareness. The directorial lens gives way to Nhâm's gaze in several key moments, all involving his apprehension of Ngữ and Quyên. In one of the first scenes, the spectator identifies with Nhâm as he watches his sister-in-law combing her long hair and pulling it up into a bun. This scene takes on overt sexual meaning with the motif's repetition at the train station when Nhâm first sees Quyên from the back, her long hair tossing gently as she turns to face him, leaving him speechless. She too puts her hair up later when she goes swimming—all the while shown to the viewer through Nhâm's eyes. In these scenes, neither woman seems aware of his gaze. This lack of awareness on the part of the female characters is symptomatic of the way the film privileges the male character as the figure capable of introspection and transformation. These encounters and the flashbacks to the train and swimming scenes as sexual fantasies build up to Nhâm's physical climax when Ngữ hugs him in a moment of utter loneliness and despair over her husband's absence, and he realizes, "Tôi biết từ ngày nay tôi đã trở thành người lớn" [I knew from that day I had become an adult].

The centrality of Nhâm's perspective has a second, equally important function: it wholly challenges the balance of power in the socio-economic disparity between the diasporic subject—an embodiment of mobility and cosmopolitanism—and the local Vietnamese village population—which seems stuck in a backward, agrarian lifestyle. The film highlights the local, male consciousness with the use of the voiceover and representations of the village intellectuals as male. In contrast to Quyên's pursuit of education to obtain a well-paying job, Ông giáo Qúy, a retired teacher, tells her that learning is about *intellectual* maturation: "Đi học để có trí thức để sống đời mình cho

có nghĩa" [One studies to acquire intellectual growth so that one can live a meaningful life]. She receives another lesson from the high school teacher, who questions her nostalgia for her childhood home and dispels her illusions about the simplicity of country life. Through the omniscient gaze, we see them end a night celebrating the village harvest with what is mostly a one-way conversation in which he tells her of the villagers' dire circumstances: their sacrifices for past wars and continued military recruitment campaigns; the high prices they have to pay for imported fertilizers; their exploitation by urban middlemen; and the adverse effects of globalization on rice exports. But the teacher has to stop abruptly when he steps on a pile of dung, to Quyên's amusement, and the gaze moves to the perspective of Nhâm, hidden in the dark background. This switch conflates the camera's gaze with that of the young man, who represents Vietnam's younger generation—half of whom were born after the end of the Vietnam/American/civil war. This flourish, arguably, has two purposes—it suggests the director's desire to explore and include the voices of the younger generation, while at the same time showing the youthful naiveté of that perspective in relation to the more mature voice of the older male figures, who are stand-ins for the director-as-intellectual. Đặng Nhật Minh reverses the Orientalist association of stagnation with the local and change with the global, by constructing the local, masculine as ethical nation-in-transformation and the diasporic, feminine as stuck in time.

The film's privileging of Nhâm's perspective and that of the omniscient narrator makes possible a masculinist critique of the fetishization of the Vietnamese countryside as a place stuck in time by presenting Nhâm's life as a *bildungsroman*

replete with irony, an awareness of the self. In *The Predicament of Culture*, James Clifford discusses how Western anthropology created an Other by positing itself as an agent capable of irony while representing the Other as unaware of their place in history. Yet, according to Clifford, the Other has their own ironic awareness, and consciously performs culture for the Western outsider . I find this insight pertinent to Minh's critique of the diasporic gaze and his assertion of the local male subject's consciousness. In fact, the director represents the diasporic character Quyên as the one unaware of the ironic; instead, she is the one being watched. In the swimming scene mentioned earlier, Quyên had asked Nhâm if he has any aspirations. He tells her, "No," but in the voiceover, he says: "Em có nhiều ước mơ lắm nhưng chị chẳng hiểu" [I have many hopes, but you would not understand]. This gap between their desires and realities—his maturation and hopes for the future and her search for the past—undermines Quyên's easy return to a "homeland" that is no longer the place she had left. In fact, the film refuses to validate the diasporic, feminine subject's observations and instead represents the local, male subject as the repository of truth, intellectual consciousness and critical perception of the socio-economic disparities developing in the globalizing of the Vietnamese economy.

The diaspora as "media capital"

Contemporaneous with Đặng Nhật Minh's *Nostalgia for the Countryside* (1995), an unprecedented number of foreign films were shot on-location in Vietnam in the 1990s. The Vietnamese government's official endorsement of a free market economy, announced in its policy of *Đổi Mới* [Renovation] in 1986, had led to an acceleration of foreign investment in the country. The state liberalized its hold on the

cinematic industry by allowing foreign directors to shoot on-location as long as the Cinematography Department's Censorship Bureau approved their script and had a censor on site with the authority to veto directorial decisions. Two types of foreign films were set and shot in Vietnam during the 1990s: historical dramas such as Régis Wargnier's *Indochine* (1992) and Phillip Noyce's adaptation of Graham Greene's *The Quiet American* (2002); and post-war, contemporary stories such as Trần Anh Hùng's *Cyclo/Xích Lô* (1995) and *À La Verticale de L'été/The Vertical Ray of the Sun/Mùa Hè Chiều Thẳng Đứng* (2001) and American Tony Bùi's *Three Seasons/Ba Mùa* (1999).[104] While foreigners of non-Vietnamese heritage were interested in making epic features centered on the presence of the French and Americans in Vietnam, directors of Vietnamese lineage chose to foreground the use of Vietnamese actors, Vietnamese language and Vietnamese daily life as the material for their films. "I wanted to bring to the screen what I saw there [in Vietnam] and to give voice to the people that I met and became friends with and care about," Bùi said.[105] A decade later, Vietnamese American Charlie Nguyễn's *The Rebel/Dòng Máu Anh Hùng* (2007) brought those two strands together with a third genre, creating a historical drama and martial arts film directed, produced and starring diasporic Vietnamese.

Diasporic Vietnamese directors in the U.S. work within and against multiple histories and discursive fields. One discursive field they must engage with is that of the global film industry and its overlapping circles—Hollywood, Asian American, the

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[104] The exception is Trần Anh Hùng's *L'Odeur de la Papaye Verte/The Scent of Green Papapya/Mùi Đu Đủ Xanh* (1993), which is set in 1951-1961, but is not a historical drama. The Vietnamese Cinematography Department's Censorship Bureau refused to let him shoot on location, perhaps because the film was set during the recent civil war and his request was before the relaxation of censorship.
[105] Rob Blackwelder, "Return of the Native".

international film festival circuit, Vietnamese. Another is their own personal, familial and diasporic history, the most volatile of which is the recent civil war and the mass exodus that has produced Vietnamese American communities and the highly binary discourse of anti-communism. Cultural products coming out of France and the U.S. have largely depicted Vietnam as a land of mystery and colonial paradise divorced from historical conditions. Jane Winston notes how constructions of "Indochina" and "Vietnam" came to signify for both French and American audiences an object of desire ready for consumption and possession.[106] In the case of the French, the discourse of colonial and postcolonial times has shaped and reshaped "Indochina" as a land of exotic and erotic fantasies of delectable food, breath-taking landscapes and passive, sexually available women. In such cultural works, there is little critical examination of the history of colonization; as Panivong Norindr observes, the French return of interest in the region is a symptom of "colonial blues," the French cultural nostalgia for a lost empire. In his view, this yearning for the "golden age" particularly applies to cultural representations of Indochina. Whereas cultural works have questioned the role of the French in Africa, works about Indochina continually efface the conquest and loss of that region through the metaphor of romance (Norindr 131-132).

Where Hollywood is concerned, there has been an abundance of masculinist films on Vietnam featuring war as its main theme.[107] As John Carlos Rowe wrote of U.S. cultural works produced in the 1970s and 1980s, "['Vietnam'] continues to be *the*

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[106] Jane Bradley Winston, "Introduction", *Of Vietnam: Identities in Dialogue*, 1-16.
[107] Susan Jeffords, *The Remasculinization of America: Gender and the Vietnam War*.

war of information, interpretation, and representation…It is the most chronicled, documented, reported, filmed, taped, and—in all likelihood—narrated war in history, and for those very reasons, it would seem, the least subject to understanding or to any American consensus" (197). Ironically the American meta-narrative of Vietnam focuses on Americans—those who fought in the war, those who opposed it, and those who decided the military deployments. Vietnamese characters are no more than two-dimensional cut-outs: stealthy guerrillas, cunning opportunists, pre-modern simpletons and sexual objects. [108] We see these representations repeated in numerous films from various decades, such as Francis Ford Coppolla's *Apocalypse Now* (1979) and Oliver Stone's trilogy *Platoon* (1986), *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989) and *Heaven & Earth* (1993).

After the war, an exodus of "boat people" brought another wave of "Third World" natives to the metropolis. In this reversal of the expansionist trajectory of U.S. empire-building, Vietnamese Americans working in the film industry also have had to negotiate the history of Asian American identity formation, a history marked by exclusion and erasure. Fighting against that history, some activists, scholars, and artists have chosen to emphasize the "American" in "Asian American" as part of an anti-racist struggle to claim their place within the national body. Others argue for shifting the focus of study from the nation to the diaspora as both an anti-imperialist intervention and a fresh tool for the evaluation of other centers of cultural, economic and political formations. Such differences have created rifts in Asian American

[108] Michael Anderegg, ed., *Inventing Vietnam: The War in Film and Television*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991.

scholarship and activism, as can be seen in Sau-ling Wong's critique of diaspora studies as privileging class, depoliticizing ethnicity, and prematurely decentering the nation as the grounds of contestation.[109]

In his study of Asian American film and video, however, Glen Mimura finds the concept of diaspora a necessary tool for examining the contradictory and multiple layers of "collective memory, survival, and rearticulation of divergent, repressed, or displaced cultural discourses" that cannot be understood using the center-periphery model of modernity at the heart of a nation-based theoretical model (11). Rolando Tolentino argues the ideological differences within Asian American studies—the emphasis on American and nation versus on the Asia Pacific region and the history of the migrant before arrival in the U.S.—are complementary. He examines Filipino/a American media arts as a nationalist discourse that highlights Asian and transnational identity formation in its resistance to racist Hollywood images, and how newer works can interrogate the discourse against which the earlier ones engaged (51-86). This strategic use of theoretical models allows for multi-perspective readings that account for different contexts in which transnational films circulate, especially as filmmakers become increasingly mobile in their search for capital, labor, film festival venues and target audiences.

Thirty years after the first wave of boat refugees, a Viet Wave has emerged as the post-war generation of Vietnamese, both in the "homeland" and in the diaspora, is eager to create its own version of pop culture and globalized modernity, the equal of

[109] Sau-Ling Wong, "Denationalization Reconsidered: Asian American Cultural Criticism at a Theoretical Crossroads".

those that have developed out of Asian metropolises such as Seoul, Taipei, Singapore, Tokyo, Shanghai and Hong Kong. This Viet Wave of directors and producers is mobilizing capital from the dominant film industries in the diaspora, the nouveau riche in Vietnam, and investors in Asian metropolises. While the Vietnamese state-owned film studios have seen a brain drain due to drastic cuts in state funding and a lack of private investors, diasporic Vietnamese and other foreign directors and producers are building new studios and Vietnamese-speaking crews and casts from local as well as overseas talent.[110] To save costs, filmmakers working in Vietnam are flying in experts from nearby Asian countries and going to Asia, not the U.S., to do post-production editing. In the post *Đổi Mới* era, filmmaking in Vietnam is transnational, a cultural and commercial network of overlapping and multiply circulating local, Asian and Western sources of capital and labor.

Diasporic filmmakers play a powerful role in the neoliberal transformation of the Vietnamese cinema industry.[111] In his study of transnational Chinese cinema, Michael Curtin theorizes the concept of "media capitals" to examine the economic, cultural, and technological flows that are involved in the transnational production and distribution of Chinese films and television shows. This concept attends to the complex negotiations of capital, labor and audience reception at the local, national, and global levels that cannot be understood within the framework of the nation-state alone. I find this concept useful in theorizing the diasporic Vietnamese film industry as a "media capital" that is nationless, and yet continually moves between and among

[110] Pham Ngoc-Minh Khoi, "Vietnam mulls ways to shore up sluggish state film studios".
[111] Mariam Lam examines the relationship among cinema, sex tourism and post-socialist neoliberalism in Vietnam. See "Bar Girls and Macho Dancers: Sex Tourism and the State in Vietnamese and Philippine Cinema".

nations as directors and producers mobilize capital, labor, and technology from various locations to make films that are marketed as Vietnamese, Asian American, foreign, or indie, depending on the screening venue—whether it be a local Vietnamese theater; an international film festival in Cannes, Venice, Bangkok or Tokyo; diasporic Vietnamese communities in the U.S, France, or Australia; or Asian American film festivals such as Los Angeles Asian Pacific Film Festival or San Francisco International Asian American Film Festival.

A bloodline of heroes

Charlie Nguyễn's *The Rebel/Dòng Máu Anh Hùng* (2007) is a historical drama and martial arts film that brings together American, Vietnamese, French and Asian cultural references. I argue that the recurring theme of travel, movement and transformation in the film can be read as a metaphor for the circuits of travel that the film and its filmmakers negotiate globally, in particular the Pacific Rim region. The film is the product of a family affair: Charlie's younger brother Johnny Trí Nguyễn wrote the original script, which was revised by Charlie and Dominic Pereira; Johnny plays the lead male role and choreographed the fighting scenes; and the production company Chánh Phương Films was established in 2003 in Saigon by Charlie's sister Tawny Trúc Nguyễn and her husband Jimmy Nghiêm Phạm with help from the Nguyễn siblings' uncle, the established Vietnamese actor Nguyễn Chánh Tín, who stars as the male protagonist's father. With the largest sound studio in Vietnam, Chánh Phương Films aims to make movies targeted at both the local and international

markets, and create a cinematic powerhouse the rival of those in China, Hong Kong, Korea and other Asian media capitals.[112]

Having left Vietnam in 1982, the Nguyễn siblings' decision to return to Vietnam was borne out of socio-political and racial-ethnic reasons. Trained in various martial arts, Johnny worked for years as a stunt double and minor actor in Hollywood. He returned to Vietnam, where he now lives, to make movies in which Vietnamese would be the main actors, onscreen and off. Instead of competing with firmly established studios in Hollywood, the family can produce the kinds of movies they want to with their own studio in Saigon. *The Rebel* was their first box office hit in Vietnam, and the most expensive, locally based production at the time, costing U.S. $1.5 million. It made its world premiere at the 2007 Vietnamese International Film Festival in Irvine, California; opened in theaters in Saigon and Hanoi two weeks later; won the Grand Prize at the 2007 Asia Pacific Film Festival in Los Angeles; and was one of the two submissions from Vietnam for Best ASEAN Film at the 2007 Bangkok International Film Festival.[113] The film's circuit of travel around the Pacific Rim underlies the producers' strategic goal to build a repertoire of works that will appeal to the Vietnamese, diasporic, independent and global commercial markets.

This convergence of markets and media capitals in the formation of diasporic culture can be seen in the film's indexing of multiple genres and discourses. Working within the discourse of Vietnamese nationalism, *The Rebel* appeals to both the

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[112] "Jimmy Nghiêm Phạm—Người Việt kiểu truyền thống" [Jimmy Nghiem Pham—A traditional, overseas Vietnamese], *Zing*, May 26, 2008, http://news.zing.vn/news/phim-viet-nam/jimmy-nghiem-pham-nguoi-viet-kieu-truyen-thong/a19425.html, September 14, 2009.

[113] Thu Thuy, "Vietnam sends two films to Bangkok festival", *Thanh Nien News.com*, June 29, 2007, http://www.thanhniennews.com/entertaiments/?catid=6&newsid=29527, September 14, 2009.

communist state, Vietnamese audiences, and diasporic Vietnamese audiences in its themes of anti-colonial revolution and filial piety. The film opens with a patriarchal figure, the leader of a rebel group, in 1922 French Indochina, writing letters urging his fellow Vietnamese to rise up. The narrative unfolds as Cường, a French-schooled Vietnamese working for the Sûreté, begins to question his allegiances and ends up rescuing the daughter of the rebel leader, Thúy, from prison and switching sides to join the rebels. His sadistic superior Sỹ follows them as they escape from Saigon and head north to the rebel stronghold; he expects his success will enable him to replace the retiring French head of Sûreté, Dêrue. The trajectory of the narrative—from Saigon to the revolutionary seat in the North, from the urban capital of colonial capitalism to the rural and natural landscape of the peasants and proletariats—reifies the centrality of the North as the legitimate origins of nationalist rebellion and collective consciousness. This representation of historical movement affirms official, communist historiography without provoking protest from vehemently anti-communist groups in the diaspora; colonial resistance is a theme all nationalists can approve.[114] While the theme of anti-colonial consciousness is popular in both Vietnam and the diaspora, stories set during the recent civil war between the communist North and the republican South are still forbidden by the current government, as seen in its banning of Vietnamese American Hàm Trần's *Journey From the Fall/Vượt Sóng*

[114] On the use of the discourse of anti-communism in California as a tool of diasporic community formation, see Thuy Vo Dang, *Anticommunism as Cultural Praxis: South Vietnam, War, and Refugee Memories in the Vietnamese American Community*.

(2006), a film about the post-1975 reeducation camps and a family's escape from Vietnam by boat.[115]

The Rebel represents Vietnamese nationalist history as a succession of masculine subject positions, from the Confucian patriarch to the Westernized son. The centrality of lineage is clearer in the Vietnamese title of the film, *Dòng Máu Anh Hùng*, which can be translated as "A Bloodline of Heroes" or "A Heroic Bloodline". To establish the son's loyalty to the nation and yet distinguish the new masculine subject from the old, the film draws on the Vietnamese cultural trope of woman as symbol of faith and sacrifice. The theme of filial piety, as seen in Cường, Sỹ and Thúy's desires to make their dead mothers proud, has a long history in Vietnamese culture, and a common reference is the 18th century, canonized epic poem *The Tale of Kieu*. A story about a woman who unknowingly gets sold into prostitution to pay her father's debts, the poem became a vehicle through which Vietnamese intellectuals in 1910s and 1920s Indochina debated the politics of collaboration (Tai, *Radicalism* 109-113). *The Rebel* draws on the authority of the poem's gendering of loyalty by aligning the new modern man, Cường, with the feminine: the rebel Thúy, his mother and her mother—a matriarchal lineage marked by faithfulness to husband and nation.

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[115] This convergence of national and diasporic politics and commercial considerations is an important factor diasporic Vietnamese filmmakers have to keep in mind, as seen recently in a controversy involving an art exhibition sponsored by Vietnamese American Arts and Letters Association in January 2009, called *FOB II: Art Speaks*. A photograph featuring an image of Hồ Chí Minh and the Vietnamese communist flag had rallied a group of very vocal and angry protestors in California. The protestors had demanded that VAALA apologize to the local community for organizing the exhibition. Pressured by his investors to do so, filmmaker Hàm Trần, a Board Member of VAALA, wrote an open letter criticizing the exhibition. Due to the rift that this series of events created among the Board members, he resigned a few months later. I wrote about this controversy for *BBCVietnamese.com*. See Võ Hồng Chương-Đài, "Những tiếng nói ám ảnh cộng đồng" [Vietnamese American Community Haunted by Silenced Voices], *BBCVietnamese.com*, April 22, 2009, http://www.bbc.co.uk/vietnamese/culture/2009/04/090522_fob_review.shtml.

The film repeatedly associates the new masculine subject with the feminine through the use of photographs, memories, and the contrast between black and white mise-en-scene and lighting. The opening scenes introduce this contrast of masculine subject positions through a framing of the rebellion's patriarch sitting in a small room lit by dark lighting, wearing a black Confucian robe. The next scene shows Cường wearing a white, Western suit awashed in morning light; the scene closes with a profile of him fading out as a photographic image of his mother fades in. This succession of images suggests a shared and ruptured history between the subject positions of the revolutionary patriarch and the Westernized son. In his examination of Marguerite Duras' writings, Norindr argues that her use of memory is a literary device to reconfigure the colon within Vietnamese history under the French.[116] Building on that understanding of memory as an act of reconstructing and re-imagining the past, I read *The Rebel*'s use of memory, photographs and stylized lighting as mise-en-scene that opens up a space for an alternative masculinity. On the meta-level, this insertion of a Westernized masculine subject is a metaphor for the return of the diasporic subject to the Vietnamese nation, and Vietnamese history.

This foreshadowing of the inheritance of revolutionary work from the patriarch to the son, whose fidelity is to the memory of his mother, is made much more explicit toward the end of the film. Cường has exchanged identities, from Sûreté officer to rebel sympathizer, and he and Thúy are heading to the rebel stronghold in the North. During a moment of confidence in the countryside, in which the narrative of history is

[116] Panivong Norindr, "Geographic Romance: 'Errances' and Memories in Marguerite Duras's Colonial Cities," in *Phantasmatic Indochine*, 107-130.

reduced to individuated desires, Cường confides to Thúy that he only wanted for Vietnam the advancements of civilization that he saw in France. She agrees French colonialism has brought great advances in the form of modern cities and infrastructure, but says they have been at the cost of unbearable oppression. Whereas communist historiography condemns collaborationists under the French and American-backed Republic eras, the film suggests that the desires of collaborationists and revolutionaries are not so different. I would add that, on the meta-narrative level, the film is inserting the returning/diasporic son into Vietnamese historiography as a loyal subject of the nation, a subject who was forced to flee because of political differences, but has returned to the "homeland" to help it integrate into the current stage of global modernization.

The film's epic treatment of revolution and history-making also engages with French colonialist discourse, in particular what Norindr calls "geographic romance" and colonial benevolence. Until the 1990s, few French films were made about Indochina, and those that were were heavily censored propaganda for French colonialism (Rollet 37-38). Carrie Tarr notes the persistence in the 1980s and 1990s of "France's unwillingness to confront its colonial past and post-colonial present" (79). A French film of particular interest for my reading of *The Rebel* is Régis Wargnier's *Indochine* (1992), which exemplifies the conventions of French heritage films, a genre that includes period films and those that recall the "golden age" of French cinema. In its romanticization of France's imperial past, *Indochine* recycles a common repertoire of colonial/neocolonial images of exotic landscapes and native customs. The film portrays a protective and loving relationship between a French mother and her adopted

Vietnamese daughter, a metaphor for La Mère-Patrie's benevolence in bringing *la mission civilisatrice* to Indochina. Wagnier's film, too, is centered on a French-educated Vietnamese subject-turned-revolutionary, and her journey from Saigon to the North with her lover. History provides an epic backdrop to the more central story of individual romance and family drama (Rollet 37-46).

The similarities between *Indochine* and *The Rebel* are striking, especially in the narrative use of the journey northward—and the movement from urban to rural, from colonial spaces to isolated village, from public history to private desires, from collaboration to revolutionary action. Whereas *Indochine* represents French colonialism in Vietnam as a benevolent project, figured in the protective maternal figure, *The Rebel* inserts the presence of the elite, French educated collaborationist class into the narrative of anti-colonial revolution and nation-building. In both films, the protagonists/lovers witness the "hidden" world of forced plantation labor, and the privileged, French educated protagonist is stirred to rebellion. Visually quoting touristic images and its filmic predecessor, *The Rebel* contains a scene of Thúy rowing a canoe in a standing position while Cường sits, nursing a wound he had suffered in killing Sỹ's right-hand man. That scene is repeated in the closing, with Cường rowing while Thúy scatters the ashes of the rebels and villagers who had died fighting the French. As the camera moves from close-ups of the protagonists to panoramic views of Hà Long Bay, a popular tourist site and national monument that has been designated a World Heritage site, the film visually presents the new masculine subject within the space of national origins and the rightful inheritor of history.

In addition to resignifying Vietnamese and French colonialist cultural influences, *The Rebel* also engages with the martial arts genre. What was first associated with Bruce Lee in the West, this genre has captured audiences worldwide through a combination of epic-style cinematography and complexly choreographed and executed fight scenes. These *wuxia* films, martial arts adventures set in ancient China, have propelled independent-film directors into national and international stardom and commercial power, a phenomenon that took off in the U.S. with Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000). *Wuxia* films are powerful nationalist tableaus, presenting a glorified image of history in both its epic storytelling and visual preference for panoramic scenes.[117] Of particular interest for my analysis of *The Rebel* is Zhang Yimou's *House of Flying Daggers* (2004), which is also a story about a member of the police state who assists the rebel leader's daughter in fleeing prison and escaping northward to the rebel group's stronghold. In making Vietnames films, Charlie and Johnny aspire to create a cinematic powerhouse the equal of the Chinese industry, as exemplified by filmmakers working in the *wuxia* genre.

As diasporic Vietnamese sons who have come back to the "homeland", they are familiar with a national history often narrated within the nation and the diaspora as "a thousand years of the Chinese, a hundred years of the French." The strong similarities between *House of Flying Daggers* and *The Rebel* place the diasporic Vietnamese film within this long history of cultural influences from China. Vietnamese culture has often been portrayed as a bastardized version of Chinese culture, a criticism that Vietnamese intellectuals lodged against *The Tale of Kieu* as

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[117] Stephen Teo**,** *Chinese Martial Arts Cinema: The Wuxia Tradition*.

part of intense debates during the early 20th century on whether to hold onto Neo-Confucian influences or adopt French concepts of modernization. *The Rebel*'s adaptation of the *wuxia* genre is undeniable. In addition to pointing to the multiple national film traditions from which *The Rebel* descends, I also read this quoting as an assertion of diasporic Vietnamese identity in a long national history that is often narrated as one of resilience, of a national people who managed to retain their language and their folkloric traditions despite "a thousand years of the Chinese, a hundred years of the French."

Conclusion

Vietnamese cinema in the post-socialist era offers important alternatives to official historiography in its ambivalent treatment of globalization. Films in the late 1980s and 1990s were created in the context of the failure of agricultural and industrial collectivization, the fall of most Communist Bloc countries, the state's embracing of market liberalization and its renewal of trade and diplomatic ties with countries where the Vietnamese diaspora has settled after the mass exodus of 1975 following the end of the Vietnam/U.S. War. One of the taboo issues that these films touched upon was the relationship between the local and diasporic subjects, and their politically fraught history. Unlike the state-sponsored nationalist narratives of old, Dang Nhat Minh's *Nostalgia for the Countryside* represents an alternative national subject through the use of gender. The film constructs an alternative male subject through the gendering of the diasporic subject as female. This use of gender enables the film to subtly indict the state's embrace of neoliberalism as an exploitative collaboration between foreigners and domestic urbanites, and to implicate the

diasporic subject within that neocolonial project. A decade later, with the demise of the state film industry and the return of diasporic filmmakers, crews and casts in large numbers, Vietnamese cinema is dominated by private investment and collaborations between locals and foreigners. This sea change in the industry has also brought about very different representations of national and diasporic subject formations. *The Rebel*'s representation of historical and personal lineage draws on the themes and imagery of national traditions that have become transnational in the circulation of people and cultures—blurring the line between the national and the transnational, national historiography and colonialist nostalgia, the independent and the commercial. The film's multiple genres—historical drama, martial arts and romance—bring together literary and filmic influences that register with Vietnamese, diasporic and foreign audiences at varying levels of recognition and misrecognition. The film's quoting of multiple national traditions and cinematic styles constructs the nation as a heterogeneous space determined by histories other than communist, national history. Whereas the feminine is used to distinguish between the national and the diasporic subjects in *Nostalgia for the Countryside*, in *The Rebel*, the feminine legitimizes the formation of an alternative masculinity that is the inheritor of national, anti-colonial history.

CHAPTER FOUR

Dissonance and Disorientation in Post-911 Vietnamese American Visual Culture

Having started this study with an examination of literary criticism and literature produced in post-1975 Vietnam, I moved onto films made by national and diasporic filmmakers. I discussed the rise of the visual as a site of national historiography and social contestation in Vietnamese domestic and diasporic cultural production. I argued that the growing popularity of the visual in Vietnam is integrally tied to the acceleration of global investment in the country and the neoliberal transformation of society and culture. Once controlled by the Vietnamese Communist Party-led state, the film industry has become a site of national and transnational negotiation of labor, capital and images. The national cannot be understood without consideration of the transnational and the diasporic, as seen in the growing presence of diasporic filmmakers in Vietnam, and their endeavors to stake out a place in the Vietnamese film industry and Vietnamese national imaginery. In their circuits of travel around the world, especially the Pacific Rim, this Viet Wave of domestic and diasporic filmmakers is asserting its own version of cosmopolitan modernity the equal of more established Asian metropolises.

In this chapter, I examine another aspect of the visual—photography and installation video—and focus on the Vietnamese diaspora in the U.S. as the location of critical discourse. This analytic trajectory from Vietnam to the U.S. seems to reproduce understandings of modernization as a journey from the "Third World" to

the "First World", from the margins to the metropolis. However, my project as a whole intervenes in that institutionalized epistemology in several important ways. In moving from the nation to the diaspora, I am retracing the post-1975 journey of more than a million refugees who fled Vietnam due to persecution for wartime affiliations and economic distress. This part of Vietnamese national history remains a highly contested period, and the Vietnamese government still refuses to acknowledge the traumatic effect of its campaign to "reeducate", dispossess, and remove from all positions of power those officers and families in any way associated with the former Republic of Vietnam.[118] The diaspora provides an important location of critique of the Vietnamese state's efforts toward erasing that history. At the same time, that history cannot be understood without consideration of the role of French colonialism and U.S. imperialism in what was then known as Indochina—not only the pre-World War II colonial project, but also the French attempt to reclaim Vietnam until its defeat by national liberation forces at the Battle of Điện Biên Phủ in 1954, and the U.S. refusal to aid anti-colonial independence struggles as it sought to establish itself as an imperial power.[119]

Diasporic Vietnamese art offers a site of critique of that multiply layered history by addressing Vietnamese national historiography, French colonialism and U.S. imperialism in its use of media that been intimately involved in the making of colonial modernization and global capital modernization. In my examination of Pipo Nguyen-

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[118] As an example, at a conference called *Agent Orange: Landscape, Body, Image*, the former Vice Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee in the 11th National Assembly of Vietnam, Tôn Nữ Thị Ninh asserted that South Vietnamese had been overly "paranoid" about persecution by the communist government, and it was due to their paranoia that they fled the country in droves. *Agent Orange: Landscape, Body, Image*, University of California, Riverside, May 8, 2008.

[119] Mark Phillip Bradley, *Imagining Vietnam and America*.

duy's *East of Eden: Vietnam* and Hong-An Truong's *Explosions in the Sky*, I argue that their use of photography and installation video art calls into question the medium as well as the image as a tool of nationalist warfare and colonizing missions. In my analysis of these works as sites of multiple discourses and historiographies, I put in conversation the analytic tools of U.S. Ethnic Studies, Postcolonial Studies, Transnational Feminism and Area Studies. The diasporic subject is both a minority in the U.S. and a transnational displaced from the "homeland". In theorizing this nexus of multiple identities and identifications, one can draw upon tools used in the analysis of U.S. domestic exclusionary policies, tools foundational to U.S. Ethnic Studies, to critique national, colonial and imperial projects. In putting these fields into conversation, I argue for thinking about nations—Vietnam, France, and the U.S.—not as coherent bodies with natural borders, but rather as mutually constitutive and implicating geo-political bodies. By establishing this lateral conversation among "minoritized" academic discourses, I argue for replacing Vietnamese nationalism, French colonialism or U.S. imperialism as the main focal point of critical inquiry, and argue for thinking about all three together and for attending to the ruptures that are revealed in their overlaps.[120]

The marginalization of Asian American visual culture

Within mainstream society and within the academy, visual culture produced by artists of Asian descent in the U.S. is one of the least known and little studied subject, despite a history of prolific work and acclaim. This is particularly ironic because, as

[120] For a discussion on the productive use of putting into conversation "minoritized" academic disciplines, see Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih, *Minor Transnationalism*.

Gordon Chang points out, art has always been a significant part of the lives of Asian Americans. The non-verbal aspect of the medium makes it more easily accessible to non-English speakers than do other forms of culture. History shows it is an integral part of personal and community activities such family celebrations, holiday festivals, art clubs and curio shops. During internment, Japanese Americans drew upon the arts as a source of personal and communal sustenance by organizing art classes, workshops and exhibitions.[121] As early as the 1850s, Chinese immigrants in San Francisco opened photography studios to serve their community; Chinese men could send pictures of themselves to their families in the homeland, or have superimposed images of themselves with pictures of their wife and children that were taken in China. Benjamen Chinn and Charles Wong were among the first enrollees at the California School of Fine Arts when it opened in 1946, Chinn being of the first class and Wong three years later. Their photographs of the mundane details of daily life in Chinatown put in relief the exoticizing dimensions of those taken by Arnold Genthe and others, photographs of Chinatown as a mysterious microcosm of China.[122] Although they were subjected to racism and social ostracism, Asian American photographers were well known among their colleagues, as can be seen in reproductions of works by Japanese Americans such as Kentaro Nakamura and Shigemi Uyeda during the 1920s

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[121] Gordon Chang, "Emerging from the Shadows: The Visual Arts and Asian American History", in Chang, Johnson and Karlstrom, ix-xv. Mark Dean Johnson notes that the artists included in this art history would not have identified as Asian American, a term that was not coined until 1968. The editors use the term to establish continuities between the present and the past, and to foreground the importance of race and ethnicity in the study of art and culture in the U.S. See "Beyond East and West: Artists of Asian Ancestry in America", in Gordon, Johnson and Karlstrom, xvii.

[122] Arnold Genthe, *Genthe's Photographs of San Francisco's old Chinatown*.

and 1930s in magazines in Germany, Japan, England and France.[123] Against a history of exclusion from art institutions and sources of funding, Asian Americans formed their own organizations to advocate for their members and to provide peer mentorship. Schools founded in the 1920s such as the modernist Chinese Revolutionary Artists Club in San Francisco, the Seattle Camera Club, and the Los Angeles-based Japanese Camera Pictorialists of California were the predecessors to organizations founded in the spirit of the Civil Rights Movement, such as the Basement Workshop in New York City, Asian CineVision, Asian American Arts Alliance, Pan Asian Repertory Theatre, and Visual Communications, some of which are still in existence.

There are socio-political and institutional reasons why Asian American visual culture has been largely absent from mainstream culture and from the academy. Mark Dean Johnson argues that the history of anti-Asian immigration legislation and anti-miscegenation laws in the U.S. restricted the formation of families, and hence prevented the formation of an important source of art preservation. Wars and displacement between the U.S. and Asia, earthquakes, internment during World War II, and periodic attacks by mobs and forced transit are other reasons why little remains of the original works and publications of Asian American art.[124] The practice of racialization has been integral to the institutionalization of art history within the academy as well. Against a legal history that cast Asians as "aliens" and forbid all but a few from American citizenship until the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, the mainstream art establishment viewed artists of Asian ancestry as forever foreign,

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[123] Dennis Reed, "The Wind Came from the East: Asian American Photography, 1850-1965", in Chang, Johnson and Karlstrom, 141-167.
[124] Johnson, "Beyond East and West", in Chang, Johnson and Karlstrom, xxi.

even if they were born in the U.S.[125] Trained to think about American art as a continuation of the legacy of European art, critics have historically labeled artists of Asian descent as premodern, too "ethnic", too literal, especially when they explore displacement, persecution and exile. On the other hand, if they do not represent what the mainstream considers "Asian" sensibilities and themes, then their work is incomprehensible to the mainstream audience.

Scholars have argued that this history of anti-Asian exclusion also led to the marginalization of visual culture within Asian American Studies. The discipline grew out of the Civil Rights Movements of the 1960s, which were concerned with asserting the rights of racialized minorities, their contributions to the nation and their long history in the country. As ethnic studies departments formed across the country, scholars recovered these erased histories by delineating a bottoms-up social history that focused on the labor of minorities in the making of the nation. Art was often seen as elitist, and disconnected from social and labor history—this despite a history of art being very much tied to the formation of Asian families and communities. This work of excavation to legitimize minorities' claims to America also led to a preference for scholarship focused on U.S. domestic subject formation, rather than transnational ties and cultural works that referenced Asia. All of these forces prevented the development of analytical tools to theorize what constitutes Asian American art within the academy,

[125] The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 undid the national origin quotas of the Immigration Act of 1924, and did not limit family reunification. Contrary to legislators' predictions that the new legislation would not change American demographics, because only 1/10 of 1 percent of Americans were of Asian ancestry, the number of ethnic Asians has grown from 500,000 to 14 million today, constituting 4 percent of the U.S. population. On the effect of that population boom on Asian American artistic consciousness, see Helen Zia, "Asian American: An Evolving Consciousness", in *One Way or Another: Asian American Art Now*, 10-14.

tools that could be used to critique mainstream understandings of American art and to differentiate it from Asian art.[126]

Working against the grain, Asian American artists did not wait for the institutional recognition of their work. Just as their predecessors had formed their own clubs and schools to share their technical, aesthetic and analytical skills, Asian American artists who came of age in the Civil Rights Movement recognized that they had to form their own infrastructure and to provoke discussions about the intersection of art, race, and access to resources. One such organization was Godzilla, a collective formed in New York City in July 1990, by artists and activists Ken Chu, Bing Lee and Margo Machida. In her short history of the collective's approach to "the politics of art", former member Karin Higa tells us:

> They understood that power within the field of culture aligned along axes of privilege where making art was only one part of the equation. Access to dialogue, venues for display, and engaged critical response were essential components of an arts ecology. The absence of any one part halted the cycle. (22)

The group discussed cultural race politics, the need for a library or archive of works by Asian American artists, well informed art criticism, alternatives to mainstream venues, the need for institutional support, and the creation of an Asian American museum to gain representation beyond APA Heritage Month.

The work of raising awareness of the relationship among art, race and representation would lead to access and resistance. Troubled by the neo-conservative backlash of the Reagan-Bush presidencies and the welfare reform agenda of the

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[126] See the essays in Chang, Johnson and Karlstrom, eds., *Asian American Art*; Chiu, Higa and Min, eds, *One Way or Another*; and Elaine H. Kim, Margo Machida and Sharon Mizota, eds., *Fresh Talk Daring Glances: Conversations on Asian American Art*.

Clinton Administration, the mainstream American art world explored multiculturalism and identity politics in the 1980s and early 1990s, and welcomed shows featuring minority artists into the most elite of art institutions. The most well known and controversial was the 1993 Whitney Biennial, which became known as the "political" biennial, derided by critics for being concerned with race rather than art—as though the two are mutually exclusive. Audiences and critics had mixed reactions to the first ever show at Asia Society Galleries on art in the U.S. by Asian immigrants, *Asia/America: Identities in Contemporary Asian Art*, which was curated by Margo Machida in 1994. Some critics and artists felt it was driven by identity politics and a discourse of victimization and not "real" art, others saw value in the show being supported by a well known New York City institution. Machida points out that these binary reactions hinged on a framing of Asian American identities as the negation of mainstream norms, rather than multiply inflected identities that are shaped by and shape understandings of nationality, culture, religion, class, sexuality (Machida, *One Way* 15-20). As critics working in other media have argued, rather than engage in a circular argument that relies on the fallacy of empiricism and claims to authenticity, Asian American visual culture had to challenge the "politics of representation" by making visible the infrastructure, discourses and activities that deny them access to representation.[127]

The Asian body: Pipo Nguyễn-duy's portraits and landscapes

[127] On "the politics of representation" in other areas, see, for example, Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora", in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory*, 392-403; Peter Feng, *Identities in Motion*; and Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter*.

Consciousness of the body and how it is perceived inform Pipo Nguyễn-duy's understanding of art and its cultural significance. Born in Huế, Vietnam, in 1962, into an upper class, politically connected family, he grew up with war as a daily part of life. Huế was the country's last dynastic capital and a focal point of intense fighting during the civil war due to its location in the central region and its stature as a bastion of political and cultural power. Nguyễn-duy escaped from Vietnam in 1975, separated from his father; he soon joined his mother, who had remarried, and his two sisters in Monterey, California. After college in the U.S., he studied Tibetan Buddhism in India for a year, worked as a fashion model in New York City in the 1980s, became interested in photography and pursued it formally afterwards. Before Vietnam, he had planned to study in Paris, and would revisit those aspirations later during an artist residency at Giverny, the home that the French impressionist painter Claude Monet designed, influenced by Japanese aesthetics regarding nature and space.

Nguyễn-duy's art actively engages with a multiply located history shaped by the Vietnamese civil war, French colonialism, Asian aesthetics and U.S. domestic politics. His interest in redeploying the power of colonizing images extends to his exploration of the medium of photography itself in such enterprises. The successor of the sixteenth-century *camera obscura*, the first cameras were invented in the nineteenth century—the era of the European colonization of Asia, the French conquest of Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos and the formation of Indochina, and the expansion of the U.S. westward with the labor of Asian immigrants and other racialized groups. This also was the era of the Industrial Revolution and the birth of modern art in Europe and the U.S. These global changes and the rise of the urban as the nexus of

intellectual and economic power brought about seismic changes in the arts as well. The Industrial Revolution and the increased ease of travel that enabled colonization and scientific explorations of the world led to new questions about the relationship between Man and Nature. In European and American art, the eighteenth-century Romantic fascination with landscapes was now joined by questions about the effect of technology on time, space and composition. In its ability to capture split second movements of animals and humans, the camera revealed actions and realities not discernible to the naked eye. This prompted intense anxieties among artists as to their ability to capture the "truth", which now seemingly could only be accessible with the use of technology, and not human faculty.[128]

Nguyễn-duy's early works appropriate classic Western iconography and narratives to question European and American histories of modernity and institutions as structures of truth-making. He uses self-portraiture to resignify iconic images taken from the Bible, the European literary canon, Italian and Northern Renaissance painting and 19th century American Wild West photography. For the series *Assimulation* (1995-1998), he photographed himself as Dante, Adam and Eve, Susannah and the Elders, and Medusa, among other subjects, to raise the question of what happens when bodies—which through endless repetition have become the symbols of universal beauty and enlightenment—are marked by race, sex and gender. His use of body poses and facial expressions influenced by Kabuki theatre alludes to the intricate presence of Asian aesthetics in Western art. For the series *AnOther Expedition* (1998), he made an installation comprising cyanotype prints of flora and mountings of test tubes

[128] Hugh Honour and John Fleming, *The Visual Arts: A History*, 567-570, 582-586.

containing water samples taken from Monet's Garden. This imagining of the Asian colonizer in the symbolic sanctuary of Western high art exposes the connections between European modernism and colonialism, in this case the colonial-era scientific collection of flora and fauna from other parts of the world. Nguyễn-duy turned his attention to American colonizing projects with *AnOther Western* (1998-2002), a series of staged photographs of himself as gunslinger, Siamese twins, giant and dwarf, and other archetypal Western characters. Humorous and dignified, the images simultaneously play upon the artifice of these figures of authority and aberration, and reinscribe the Asian immigrant as an active force in the making of the American West.[129]

While these earlier projects are largely focused on the individual body and the rise of the modern, the later works are about the national, the diasporic and the transnational. Post-911, Nguyễn-duy extended his explorations of the body from the individual to the nation, re-examining the relationship between the natural body and a world shaped by war. The U.S. invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq and the current dilemma of whether to withdraw, increase or maintain troop presence has led many observers and critics to compare this Second Persian Gulf War to the Vietnam War—not least of which because the battle once again is between difficult-to-detect guerrilla forces and the highly advanced technological forces of imperial might.

It is within this context of transnational warfare that Nguyễn-duy looks back on the national landscape and how it has been constructed as a symbol of life and

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[129] *Pipo Nguyễn-duy*, December 12, 2008, http://www.piponguyen-duy.com/index.html, September 12, 2009. See also Margo Machida, *Unsettled Visions: contemporary Asian American artists and the social imaginary*, 86-98.

death, freedom and desolation. The on-going series *The Garden* (2004-Present) depicts abandoned greenhouses that Nguyễn-duy accidentally came across, about a 45-minute drive north of Oberlin, Ohio. The series comprises a selection of photographs taken of the same greenhouses at various hours and seasons. These "objective" portraits of man-made spaces of decay are informed by the principles of the Italian Renaissance and French Impressionism in the use of the one-point perspective, attention to the effects of light, and the recording of the same object repeatedly.

Turning from the national to the transnational, from the West to the East, Nguyễn-duy went back to Vietnam to create three ongoing projects: *Two Million Steps* (2001), *A Motorcycle for Bi* (2005), and *East of Eden* (2002-Present). Whereas the earlier projects employ the close framing of portraiture to draw our attention to the body as an overdetermined ideoscape of race, sex and gender, the projects shot in Vietnam use medium- and long-shots in their contemplations of the unknown effects of the land on the body.[130] Nguyễn-duy made *Two Million Steps* during his first visit back to Vietnam; the photographs depict him at former war/tourism sites. Dressed in a black, somber-looking Mandarin outfit and wearing a lift jacket, Nguyễn-duy's body bears up the markers of both his pre-exodus life—the elite, upper class—and his postwar, displaced status—the refugee. In these more distant framings of the portrait, however, the artist creates a tragedy-comedy that reinscribes the "boat refugee" not as a victim of war, but as a consumer of war relics and natural landscapes. Images of him running across a barren field dominated by a rusting armored tank ("Khe Sanh") or of him sitting in a swan-shaped "love boat" painted with the Stars and Strips ("Perfume

[130] The term "ideoscape" was coined by Arjun Appadurai. See *Modernity at Large*.

River, Hue") employ humor to reveal the disjunctures between home and memory, displacement and diaspora. *A Motorcycle for Bi* (2005) is more documentary in style and presentation, recording fleeting images that Nguyễn-duy took during a road trip along the length of Vietnam thirty years after the civil war. Riding a motorcycle, the quintessential form of transportation in present-day Vietnam, Nguyễn-duy took pictures of his driver, Bi, as well as of people they encountered along the road to create a collaborative project about community and reconciliation.

More than the other projects, *East of Eden* (2002-Present) brings together the U.S. and Vietnam, and the national and the diasporic, in its use of location, aesthetic traditions and thematic concerns. It is a series in two parts, the first shot in the U.S. and the second in Vietnam. The project is in conversation with several artistic vocabularies and traditions—the Garden of Eden, the Hudson River School, European High Culture, and the Vancouver School of postconceptual art.[131] The Garden of Eden as a symbol of life and virtue has a long history in European and American art. Described in the Book of Genesis, it bears the fruits of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. European artists spanning from the Medieval Ages to the Renaissance and Baroque eras to the modern age have alluded directly or indirectly to the Garden of Eden in their visual contemplations on the power of institutions such as the Catholic Church or the impact of Industrialization on the countryside. Such interest in the land as a symbol of man's nature crossed over to the U.S., and was most fervently embraced by the Hudson River School. Key figures such as Thomas Cole, Asher B.

[131] I would like to thank Việt Lê for suggesting I look paintings by the Hudson River School and the photographs of Jeff Wall, a photographer associated with the Vancouver School.

Durand and Homer Dodge Martin transformed the European Romantic depiction of landscapes as spaces of ancient ruin and created a wholly new school of landscape painting as the expression of national freedom.[132] This construction of the land as the spiritual as well as the physical manifestation of the New World came at a time when Manifest Destiny was the political doctrine that justified the westward expansion of America and the conquest of indigenous and Mexican lands.

Nguyễn-duy revisits this celebratory history not by returning to moralistic depictions of good and evil, but by placing bodies in unmarked or unknown landscapes. Without canonized history as the extra-diegetic frame, the photographs in East of Eden are much more ambiguous than those of his earlier projects that confronted European High Culture. Stylistically, this series shares affinities with the post-conceptual art exemplified by the Vancouver School, which began in the 1980s. Although not a formal group, the photographers and video artists associated with this style had come of age in the 1970s and 1980s, influenced by the counter-culture of the New Left. Interestingly, they would go on to develop a style that they saw as the continuation of the legacy of the modernists, a resistance to political analysis that would turn the work into a didactic object rather than a beautiful image. The most well known of these post-conceptualists is Jeff Wall, who recreates outdoor scenes he has seen by staging them as a director would on a studio set. Influenced by the lighting techniques of cinematography as well as those of such Old Masters as Eugène Delacroix, Diego Velázquez and Francisco Goya, he saw the illuminated advertisement as the modern successor to their large scale paintings. Like them, he

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[132] Judith Hansen O'Toole, *Different Views in Hudson River School Painting*.

was interested in composition as staged shots, and in capturing that moment of dramatic tension before an unknown outcome.[133]

Nguyễn-duy's *East of Eden: Vietnam* brings together the influences of various traditions to create ambiguous photographs that cannot be understood within existing narratives about Vietnam. Instead of the panoramic sweep of European and American landscape painting, the photographs use human-scale perspective to emphasize the relationship of the body and the land. "The Lotus Pond", the central piece in the Vietnam part of the series, depicts a man standing up to chest-level in a lotus pond and holding a girl who is floating on her back.[134] The photograph's composition recalls countless depictions of The Pietà, the most famous being Michelangelo's (1499), an image of divine sacrifice; John Everett Millais' "Ophelia" (1852), the Shakespearean heroine who suffers the verbal abuses of Hamlet, seemingly falls into madness, and dies for unknown reasons; and W. Eugene Smith's "Tomoko Uemura in Her Bath" (1971), an image of Ryoko Uemura posing with her deformed daughter in a bathtub to show the world the effects of mercury poisoning.[135] These images refer to various causes of death, and in quoting them, "The Lotus Pond" asks the viewer to contemplate the effects of war on the land and the body—the possibility of poisoning in modern warfare by chemicals such as Agent Orange, the extent of psychological

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[133] Craig Burnett, *Jeff Wall*; and Jeff Wall, "'Marks of Indifference': Aspects of Photography in, or as, Conceptual Art", in Gaiger and Wood, 145-164.

[134] See Pipo Nguyễn-duy's website for an image of "The Lotus Pond", http://www.piponguyen-duy.com/eoeinprogress.html#.

[135] I would like to thank Sam Lee for referring me to G. Eugene Smith's "Tomoko Uemura in Her Bath" (1971). The image can be seen at http://www.acjournal.org/holdings/vol10/s_special/images/bowers/image027.jpg. John Everett Millais' "Ophelia" (1852) can be seen at http://www.cazbo.co.uk/ThePainting/ThePainting/LargerPiccy.jpg. Michelangelo's "The Pietà" (1499) can be seen at http://www.rome.info/pictures/art/michelangelo/michelangelo_pieta.jpg.

trauma, the damage done to families by the loss of children. At the same time, it is not clear that the child is dying or even suffering, or what is her relationship to the man. She could be enjoying a moment of peace in the arms of her father or uncle or a non-relative. This sense of serenity is reinforced by the diagonal viewpoint downward, suggesting another worldly presence. The pyramidal composition also infuses spirituality in its allusion to the Pietà. Instead of being firmly on the ground, however, the man and child are in water, blurring the boundaries between the human body and the natural body. The pond setting references Christian images of baptism and resurrection, and further suggests an ambiguous and inseparable connection between life and death.

In its appropriation of the visual vocabularies of European and American art schools, *East of Eden* redeploys traditional gender representations as well. In referencing the Pietà, Ophelia and the Uemura mother-and-daughter, "The Lotus Pond" draws on a femininized aesthetics of death and suffering. This alignment with the feminine stands in marked contrast to the masculine, hard and vigorous bodies of men and women favored by the heroic aesthetics of Vietnamese socialist realism, masculine bodies that still are reproduced in billboard images throughout the country, and on public banners hung on lampposts and buildings during every national holiday. At the same time, the feminine of Nguyễn-duy's photographs is not loaded with excess, an excess conventionally used to dramatize the abject and the pitiful, the female and the "Third "World".

The feminine is suggested rather than present in the series. Of the eight photographs that were shown for the September 12, 2009, exhibition at Sam Lee

Gallery in Los Angeles, two are of a man and child, two are of girls, and four are of men with amputated limbs. With the exception of "The Lotus Pond", Nguyễn-duy took these photographs in during the summers of 2005 and 2009, accompanied by one of his young teenage sons. These visits could not have been without personal significance in its echoing of Nguyễn-duy's memories of his last days in Vietnam, before he had to flee and leave his father. I am not so much arguing for an autobiographical reading of the photographs as I am suggesting that the representation of the masculine is conceived in terms solitary and in relation to children, who are often associated with women, rather than in terms heteronormative.

This nonconventional representation of gender and sexual can be seen in "Saigon 2009", which shows a man reclining on a concrete park bench, his left leg amputated at the knee and his crutches leaning against the bench on the right side of the frame. The reclining pose recalls Titian's "The Venus of Urbino" (1538) and the numerous Odalisque paintings in the nineteenth century by Jean Dominique Auguste Ingres and others. In appropriating this Titian pose in their depictions of the Odalisque, a figure who came to represent the sexual excess of the Orient, European painters created an image of the Oriental woman as one who uses her sexuality to ingratiate herself to the benevolence of the Western traveler so that he may rescue her from the barbarism of the Oriental man. The Oriental woman's promiscuous sexuality is conveyed by her direct gaze at the viewer, the sensuous depiction of her naked body, and the luxury draperies and architecture of her surroundings. "Saigon 2009" upends this excessive sexualization of the Orient. Not only is the man's gaze not directed at the viewer, his eyes are barely seen under the cover of his cap as he reclines easily,

enjoying a cigarette. He seems oblivious to the presence of a viewer, if not altogether indifferent. The luxurious surroundings are those of a public park rather than the private bedroom chambers of the Odalisque. The excessively green and abundant growth of the trees and flowers stands in marked contrast to the sparse accoutrements of the man. Unlike the highly stylized bodies that Nguyễn-duy performed for his earlier projects, the masculine bodies of the *East of Eden: Vietnam* series are much more oblique and ambiguous in their references to the tropes of national and colonial history-making.

An absurd retelling: Hồng-An Trương's *Adaptation Fever*

While Nguyễn-duy frequently quotes from canonized aesthetic vocabularies to critique discourses and structures of power, Hồng-An Trương questions these institutions by looking at what is in them. She is particularly interested in the archives and film footage as sites of truth-making. In my examination of her video installation piece *Adaptation Fever*, I argue that she exposes the constructiveness of these official sites of history-making by putting into conversation unexpected and jarring combinations of pop culture and archival materials, spatial and temporal locations, and colonial era footage and transnational subjectivity. *Adaptation Fever* is a looped video comprising four short pieces: "The Past is a Distant Colony" (2007), "A Story in the Process of Self-Alienation" (2007), "It's True Because It's Absurd" (2007), and "Explosions in the Sky" (2006). All of the footage came from the National Archives in Washington, D.C., and historical documentaries made in the U.S.

When she started the project in 2002, Trương, a Vietnamese American artist, was planning to do a photography project based on interviews with priests and nuns in

Vietnam and their experiences during French colonialism and the subsequent civil war. Initially interested in examining how colonialism, through the institution of Catholicism, works as an othering process, Trương found the stories did not subscribe to official delineations of political and cultural affiliations as seen in anti-colonial and nationalist mobilization campaigns. Official South Vietnamese Republican and U.S. liberal histories narrate the flight of thousands of Catholics from the North to the South after the splitting of Vietnam as evidence of the totalitarian communist state, in contrast to the free South. Trương, however, found the interviews revealed ideological overlaps and ambiguities in the day-to-day lives of the priests and nuns who shared the communist concern for workers' rights and whose displacement to the South led not to a free life, but to oppression and suspicion from the Republican state.

Adaptation Fever foregrounds the use of framing and juxtaposition to draw our attention to the constructiveness of colonial, imperial and nationalist ideologies and the archives as the nation's depository of truth. The video installation uses footage of everyday life shot in Vietnam from the 1910s to the 1970s; life in France in the early 20th century; and the Battle of Điên Biên Phủ in 1954, an event that marked the end of French colonialism in Vietnam and the escalation of U.S. military involvement in the ensuing civil war. By putting into conversation images of "official truth" shot in different locations and times, Trương redeploys colonial and imperialist images as tools of reflection and critical inquiry into their history, discursive usage and transmission.

"The Past is a Distant Colony" (2007) is about the process of looking at oneself and not seeing what one thought of oneself. Trương drew on Lacan's concept

of the mirror stage to represent self-alienation as a splitting of the subject and her reflection. The video comprises images that reflect each other; the two frames of reflection are themselves framed by a black frame so that the viewer is always aware that one is always seeing a self that is framed. This constant process of alienated reflection is a metaphor for the formation of the subject through the process of colonization.

"A Story in the Process of Self-Alienation" (2007) is about nation-building through story-telling and myth-making. The video uses footage of official processions celebrating Hồ Chí Minh and contains a voiceover of a female narrator singing a nostalgic song that children sing on the last day of school to bid their friends farewell and to anticipate their meeting again the next academic year. The footage and the song represent the different ways that community and nation must be continually reproduced and maintained through institutions of official memory-making, particularly through seemingly apolitical, citizen-forming institutions such as the school and the archives.

"It's True Because It's Absurd" (2007) came out of a story that Trương's mother had told her about seeing a boy pick up a gun and accidentally shoot his mother. The incident, the mother's telling of the story, and the failure at telling, provided the narrative for Trương's exploration of the process of nation-building through the use of war footage and war stories.

The last piece in the looped video is "Explosions in the Sky" (2006), which combines film footage of the Battle of Điên Biên Phủ with a soundtrack of Simon and Garfunkle's "The Sounds of Silence" sung in Vietnamese and English. The piece is

about cultural translation and cultural slippage, the translation of an anti-war song into Vietnamese in the 1990s, and its redeployment by Trương, again as an anti-war song.

I will focus my analysis on "The Past is a Distant Colony" and "Explosions in the Sky", and propose a reading of the whole series as an "event" that intervenes in nation and narration, which themselves are "events."[136] The Derridian concept of "event" represents experience as that which happens at a particular moment in time. That particular moment in present time brings together memory of the past and anticipation of the future. With the past and the future framing it, the event is remembered, and this remembering makes it repeatable and yet not. The memory can never faithfully repeat the moment. Alain Badiou argues an event refers not to the act, but to that which comes afterwards, the after-time when the order of knowledge is upended and a flash of recognition appears. Damian Sutton talks about the scientific event of photography in the history of art, and its use by modern regimes of governmentality to record official observations in institutions such as the archives. At the same time, Sutton argues, photography was also the artistic event of science because "[p]hotography was already outside itself looking in; it always constituted a heterogeneity, a break with itself" (13). Photography, in its ability to repeat the event, revealed it as multiple viewings of the same, the present ever looping onto itself, an always already repeated play of the moment. That possibility of repetition called into question claims to fidelity and reliable knowledge. With digital technology, the reproduction of the modern is infinitely easier and unknown. Unlike analog, the digital allows for the use of found materials, its retrieval from remote sites, and the artist's

[136] The phrase "nation and narration" comes from Homi Bhabha, ed., *Nation and Narration*.

control of the processes of production, distribution and access. Textually, multiple images can be viewed on the same plane as with the use of a split screen.

In my analysis of *Adaptation Fever*, I would like to use the concept of the event metaphorically, reading the video art as an event in the making of Vietnamese history, a history of the nation from the diaspora. "The Past is a Distant Colony" (2007) revisits archival footage and asks why they were shot. The piece revolves around two particular images, one of a Vietnamese woman turning her head around and one of two Vietnamese boys making the sign of the cross. Borrowing from Lacan's concept of the mirror stage, Trương made the images as doubles of themselves, images that continuously reflect each other. A black bar splits the doubled image, and a black frame surrounds them, calling the viewer's attention to the presence of the frame as an interpretative device. In splitting the subject from herself, the black frames also suggest a space emptied of meaning, a space of unknown subject formation. This double vision, the woman's look of trepidation, the boys' timid gestures, portray the process of colonial subject-making as one of alienated reflection and mimicry.

The making of the modern was an enterprise of intimate cultural references and colonial expansion. In its title, "The Past is a Distant Colony" refers to spatial distance between France and Vietnam, and the temporal distance between the time of Vietnam under French colonial rule and the time of her excavation of the visual tools of empire-making. Most of the footage is set in Vietnam: Catholic priest, nuns and followers, plantation workers, the French colons, and street scenes of Saigon. Approximately two-thirds of the way through the piece, there is footage of life in France—vaudeville personalities such as Josephine Baker and lines of showgirls,

French tourists looking at "Oriental" art, architectural landmarks such as the Arc de Triomphe, and the wide boulevards of modern Paris. By juxtaposing images of colonial-era Vietnam with these postcard images of a glorious and cosmopolitan metropolis, Trương represents French nation-building not as the natural advancement of civilization, but as one that built its political reputation and relied for its economic resources on the exploitation and racialization of other lands and peoples.

In "Explosions in the Sky", the last piece in the looped video, Trương unsettles nationalist histories, assumptions about visuality as truth, and nostalgic memories of pop culture by combining film footage of the Battle of Điện Biên Phủ with a soundtrack of Simon and Garfunkle's "The Sounds of Silence" sung in Vietnamese and English. If the event is a moment in time with a past and a future, "Explosions in the Sky" is the event that simultaneously memorializes and anticipates a Vietnam in-transition from French colonialism to U.S. imperialism and civil warfare. The video's acceleration of the visual and conjoining of different temporal zones disrupt the linear and unitary conceptions of time and space, precepts of modern colonialist regimes and realist art. The unitary boundaries of the footage in time and space are punctured by the multiple temporal and spatial framings of the extradiegetic frame—the time and space of the Battle of Điện Biên Phủ, the time and space of Trương's seeing of the footage, those of production, of the installation, of each viewing, the song's production, its being sung in peace protests in the 1960s, its broadcast in war-time Vietnam, its translation in the 1990s, its re-translation into English by a Vietnamese speaker, the after-times. These puncturings and overlaps undermine the marking of the battle as the end of French colonialism in Vietnam, and point to the continuity of

colonial/imperial geo-politics and the historical ties between French colonialism and U.S. imperialism, and the intimate overlaps of political economic discourse, technology and culture.

The aestheticization of war footage as a succession of black and white flashes points to the ambiguous pleasures of viewing and remembering. The horrors of war become visual pleasure, flashes of brilliance in the night, with a soundtrack as accompaniment. The flatness of the images, in its refusal to differentiate between positive and negative spaces, light and darkness, and the continual presence of the frame, question the construction of reality and truthful sight in war footage, which are shot in real space and real time. The flatness of the images call our attention to the artist's manipulation of archival materials, and their authority as historical records of French colonial enterprise, Vietnamese nation-building, and U.S. "benevolent" tutelage.

If the archives represent the official records of the nation, the inclusion of pop culture calls into question the making of collective memories and nation-states. The use of Simon and Garfunkle's "The Sounds of Silence" as the soundtrack in "Explosions in the Sky" insists on an examination of the connections among French colonialism, Vietnamese internal politics, U.S. imperialism, and Cold War geo-politics. The video's rapid succession of flashes in the sky seem never-ending, each flash a repeated and yet slightly different version of the previous. Against that illusion of unitary space and time, the song continually loops back onto itself in its exploration of darkness and light, silence and protest.

Slippage occurs not only through time and space, but across the media of the visual and the audio. Temporality and space are multiple and mobile as they move among the coordinates of the footage, of the viewers watching it, and of the song. The slippages in time, space and language register with varying degrees of comprehensibility and incomprehensibility for different viewers and listeners. For Trương, the translation of the song into Vietnamese and the Vietnamese speaker singing it in English offers an ironic moment for thinking about the American involvement in Vietnam, and the cultural residue of what happens in war. Her redeployment of the flashes of "vision", "neon light", "naked light" expressed in the song's call to action enables her movement back in time in anticipation of the escalation of U.S. involvement in Vietnam after the Battle of Điên Biên Phủ. The translation of the lyrics into Vietnamese and back into English, its transnational displacement from 1960s America to 1960s Vietnam, and forward to 1990s Vietnamese America and beyond, present a multiply appropriated vehicle for reflection on the reach of U.S. imperialism, the post-war formation of diasporic Vietnamese communities, and the ambiguous power of art to incite protest and critical inquiry.

With the acceleration of time and the compression of space offered by digital technology and the intense flows of global capitalism, video art, as an artistic event in science, offers new possibilities for questioning the truthfulness of official record-keeping and nation-making. However, its aesthetic appeal, the rapture of the visual, is always subject to re-appropriation and commodification by nationalist discourses and global capitalism. Trương's video art *Adaptation Fever* points to the ambiguous

redeployment of visual pleasure and historical memories by foregrounding flatness, repetition and incomprehensibility. Pipo Nguyễn-duy's *East of Eden: Vietnam* also critically calls upon the ambiguous in its staged quoting of iconic visual vocabularies and their modern incarnations. As he turns from Europe to the U.S., from the U.S. to Vietnam, from European High Culture to American landscape painting, and from post-conceptual aesthetics to socialist and post-socialist aesthetics, he calls our attention to how the image is always already a site of social and institutional structures of being. In challenging the power of such images in their repetition, he exposes the body and the land as sites neither of pathetic suffering or triumphant knowledge, but as spaces of contemplation and consideration of the unknown.

CONCLUSION

This project traced the transition from socialist realism to post-socialist aesthetics and its relationship to historiography and nation-building. In Chapter One, "Vietnamese Literary Criticism and the Re-evaluation of the State Project of Modernization", I started with an analysis of Vietnam literary criticism and literature in the post-1975 period and the forced reunification of the North and the South. In my analysis of Vietnamese literary criticism and literature in the mid 1970s to 1990s, during the transition from collectivization to an open market economy, I argued that writers and intellectuals used these forms of writing to capture the vanguard position of truth-telling previously occupied by the state in the discourse of socialist realism. The most prominent among them was Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, who retold stories about historical figures and literary giants to destabilize nationalist historiography, as represented by the literary canon and the archives. His use of gender further drew a distinction between the new masculine of his observation-based realism and the prostituted, feminine of state-sanctioned cultural production and history-making.

In Chapter Two, "The Legacy of the Revolutionary Memoir and Gendered Epistemic Violence in the Era of Liberalization", I examined the appropriation of the revolutionary memoir, a foundational tool of literary canonization and nation-building, in the *Đổi Mới* war novels. I argued that a new subject emerges in the remembering of the war in literary representations of its violence and the question of reconciliation

between the North and the South. Nguyễn Trí Huân's novel *Chim Én Bay* [Swallows in Flight] is an important text for its setting on the central region rather than the North, and its insertion of a female subject in the pantheon of national, revolutionary heroes. However, his representation of female subjectivity reproduces and recodifies the convetion of the woman as rape victim and symbol of the countryside as the seat of rebellion. Bảo Ninh's Nỗi Buồn Chiến Tranh [The Sorrow of War], on the other hand, rejects the heroic altogether. In refusing to follow the prescriptions of socialist realism and its investment in heroic iconography, Bảo Ninh looks to different spaces—the jungle, the past, the world of ghosts and dreams—to question the celebratory and suffocating veneer of the "reality" mandated by socialist realism. Both Huân and Ninh revise the genre of the memoir by excavating interiority as the site of social consciousness.

In Chapter Three, "New National and Global Imaginaries: Transformations of the Vietnamese Film Industry", I moved to the visual and foreground the connections between the domestic and the diasporic. Although literature has the most established genealogy in Vietnamese culture, film and visual art have come to play a much more important role in the post-socialist era as private investment continues to pour into the country, and diasporic Vietnamese return in large numbers to shoot films on-location and to open art spaces. Thirty years after the first wave of boat refugees, a Viet Wave has emerged as the post-war generation of Vietnamese, both in the "homeland" and in the diaspora, is eager to create its own version of pop culture and globalized modernity, the equal of those that have developed out of Asian metropolises such as Seoul, Taipei, Singapore, Tokyo, Shanghai and Hong Kong. This Viet Wave of mostly male

filmmakers and artists are mobilizing capital from the dominant and ethnic Vietnamese industries in the diaspora, the nouveau riche in Vietnam, and investors in Asian metropolises. In the post-socialist era, filmmaking and art production in Vietnam is transnational, a cultural and commercial network of overlapping and multiply circulating local, Asian and Western sources of capital and labor.

I tracked the transformation of the Vietnamese film industry from a state enterprise to a transnational, global "media capital". In my analysis of Đặng Nhật Minh's *Thương Nhớ Đồng Quê* [Nostalgia for the Countryside], I argued he uses gender to represent an alternative national subject in opposition to that of the state. The film constructs an alternative male subject through the gendering of the diasporic subject as female. This use of gender enables the film to subtly indict the state's embrace of neoliberalism as an exploitative collaboration between foreigners and domestic urbanites, and to implicate the diasporic subject within that neocolonial project.

A decade later, Charlie Nguyễn's *The Rebel* [Dòng Máu Anh Hùng] represents historical and personal lineage by drawing on the themes and imagery of national traditions that have become transnational in the circulation of people and cultures. This convergence of histories and cultural vocabularies blurs the line between the national and the transnational, national historiography and colonialist nostalgia, the independent and the commercial. The film's multiple genres—historical drama, martial arts and romance—bring together literary and filmic influences that register with Vietnamese, diasporic and foreign audiences at varying levels of recognition and misrecognition. The film's quoting of multiple national traditions and cinematic styles

constructs the nation as a heterogeneous space determined by histories other than communist, national history. Whereas the feminine is used to distinguish between the national and the diasporic subjects in *Nostalgia for the Countryside*, in *The Rebel*, the feminine legitimizes the formation of an alternative masculinity that is the inheritor of national, anti-colonial history. In the transformation of the Vietnamese film industry, questions of national belonging and neo-colonialism figure prominently, and are commonly negotiated through representations of gender and sexuality. This is brought into particular focus in the figure of the diasporic subject, who embodies the contradictions of the local and the global, the ostracized and the desired, the familiar and the suspect.

In Chapter Four, "Dissonance and Disorientation in Post-911 Vietnamese American Visual Culture", I examined photography and installation art as sites that articulate the ambiguous power of art to incite protest and critical inquiry. With the acceleration of time and the compression of space offered by digital technology and the intense flows of global capitalism, installation video art offers new possibilities for questioning the truthfulness of official record-keeping and nation-making. However, its aesthetic appeal, the rapture of the visual, is always subject to re-appropriation and commodification by nationalist discourses and global capitalism. Hồng-An Trương's video art *Adaptation Fever* points to the ambiguous redeployment of visual pleasure and historical memories by foregrounding flatness, repetition and incomprehensibility. Pipo Nguyễn-duy's *East of Eden: Vietnam* also critically calls upon the ambiguous in its staged quoting of iconic visual vocabularies and their modern incarnations. As he turns from Europe to the U.S., from the U.S. to Vietnam, from European High Culture

to American landscape painting, and from post-conceptual aesthetics to socialist and post-socialist aesthetics, he calls our attention to how the image is always already a site of social and institutional structures of being. In challenging the power of such images in their repetition, he exposes the body and the land as sites neither of pathetic suffering or triumphant knowledge, but as spaces of contemplation and consideration of the unknown.

An Assemblage of Fragments: History, Revolutionary Aesthetics and Global Capitalism in Vietnamese/American Literature, Films and Visual Culture examines questions about truth production in political and global economic regimes, and how those questions are negotiated through representations of gender and sexuality. The project explores the reading and re-reading of history through literary criticism, short stories, novels, films and visual culture produced from the 1970s to the post-911 era in Vietnam and in the diaspora. I examined the constant appropriations and re-appropriations by writers, filmmakers and artists in challenging Vietnamese national, French colonial and U.S. imperial discourses. These constant maneuverings required the excavation of history to carve out, reproduce or chisel away at in slight variation existing power relations. These representations provoke questions about the construction of history and collective memories, the relationship between gender and sexuality and national identity, and neoliberal celebrations of mobility and individual freedom.

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