

Lost in the Sea of the World: Teaching Culture and History in Vietnamese Literature of Internal Exile and of the Diaspora

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*when I die, take my body to the sea
the ebbing tide will carry it away
across the ocean to the land of my birth
where bamboo hedges remain forever green
--Du Tu Le*

Based on Viet Nam's significant cultural differences from the West and coupled with her long historical struggle for independence, it would be especially problematic to teach Vietnamese literature without first pausing to orient students about her culture and history. Critical components to a successful course in Vietnamese literature must include such contextualization, both internally and externally on the world stage. Without such an orientation, Vietnamese literature would lose much of its meaning to western students, and its reading would be reduced to mere academic exercise. Most American students in colleges and universities today were born after the Vietnam War, and they know little about why Viet Nam came into the American orbit of politics and war. Even during America's war with Viet Nam and shortly after its end in 1975, students were introduced primarily to American literature about the war written by American soldiers who served there. History and political sciences courses attempted to cover the war from their own subject-specific perspectives but, more often than not, those courses were taught from a western perspective, remaining relatively silent about Viet Nam's culture and history because they knew so little about the country and its people. Literature courses therefore become a unique opportunity to teach the culture and history of Viet Nam in such a way that the literature becomes meaningful because it will be contextualized within a broader and deeper framework.

Vietnamese culture is much like the two-faced Janus of Roman mythology whose temple faces east and west to signify the day's birth and dying, and whose doors when closed signify peace and when open herald war. So, too, the Southeast Asian world of Viet Nam claims its opposition through the eastern symbol of yin and yang to signify light and dark,

weakness and strength, female and male. Unlike the western concept, however, Asians understand opposition not as being separate but as belonging together naturally. One supports the other, and the two together create the whole. Viet Nam scholar Neil Jamieson fuses the metaphor, indicating that yin and yang are “complementary dimensions of a single cultural system [. . .] essentially shared by all Vietnamese” (15-16). Whereas western culture insists that it is better to have one rather than the other, i.e., positioning opposites to conflict with each other, the Vietnamese have always understood that to live gracefully within life’s natural rhythms yin must be accepted to appreciate yang. Thus, each principle informs the other and is understood as inseparable, thereby inviting seamless harmony into one’s life through family, country, and nature. To lose one’s bearing is to be cast adrift, lost in the sea of the world.

Vietnamese culture is therefore best understood through its philosophies, from its animistic roots to ancestor reverence and worship, from Confucianism to Taoism, and to its present-day majority Buddhist practice. Viet Nam’s eclectic world view and its recognition of conjoined opposites are represented through its literature which faces two ways: acknowledging the past and beckoning the future. Viet Nam’s temple doors of war today are shut; however, her history has been beset with struggle, its people having endured invasions from neighbors, occupation from people who sailed from the other side of the world to claim her natural and human resources, and wars in which the outcome meant the difference between oppression and freedom. The Vietnamese have sailed the sea of the world through many seasons and situations and have always been acutely aware of what was at stake. To win would mean autonomy and the right to decide their own fate; to lose would mean to be lost in the sea of the world, losing their anchor to everything they value Vietnamese. To understand these principles, one must know Viet Nam’s culture and history to appreciate fully Vietnamese literature.

Historically, Viet Nam endured a thousand-year rule the Chinese imposed on them from 111 B.C.E. to A.D. 939 with sporadic Chinese invasions throughout the following centuries. Viet Nam’s push southward involved her own invasion of the indigenous kingdom of Champa, beginning in 892 to its annexation in 1611, and by 1832 Cham resistance to Vietnamese domination finally gave way (Durand 76). Throughout this period of aggressive southward expansion, various Vietnamese dynasties experienced their own internal political upheavals, including the peasant-led Tay Son rebellion that began in the late 18th century and finally overthrew

the Le Dynasty in 1802 to seat Gia Long of the Nguyen Dynasty. The Nguyen Dynasty, in turn, was eventually weakened and overthrown (its last emperor, Bao Dai, abdicated in 1945 to make way for Ho Chi Minh's Democratic Republic of Vietnam). The Nguyen dynasty throughout its century and a half rule established an unhappy history of being unable to acknowledge and incorporate the pliant, more tolerant yin aspect into its rule. The dynasty's resistant, aggressive yang behavior therefore eventually spelled disaster for the Nguyen rulers (Jamieson 41).

Just as Viet Nam had finally achieved independence from the domination of China and had begun to work through its own internal political problems, the westerners arrived to wreak their own havoc. The Portuguese arrived in 1535 to trade but found the Vietnamese, feeling themselves a superior people, were uninterested in anything western. The Dutch, English, and French who came after fared no better. Then, in 1858 the French attacked Viet Nam, signaling the most complete and devastating change the Vietnamese had experienced to date, and until the mid 20th century they were forced to endure the viciousness of French colonial rule. When the French finally left Viet Nam after the defeat at Dien Bien Phu in 1954, the Americans, just like the French before them, refused to recognize Ho Chi Minh's claim of independence, foolishly installing a French-educated Catholic president, Ngo Dinh Diem, in a Buddhist country. Diem, a strange, standoffish man who spent most of his life in France felt little connection either to his people or to his country. He openly persecuted Buddhists monks, and many Vietnamese (and Americans on television) witnessed the protest and public self-immolation of Thich Quang Duc on the Saigon streets in 1963. By 1965, the United States officially landed its troops in Viet Nam to save the country from itself, but they left in 1975 bewildered over their failure to win over the Vietnamese. Viet Nam at last, after nearly 3 million dead, was left to rule herself, albeit under the yoke of communism.

Vietnamese literature has always been a record of these struggles against various invaders and occupiers: the Chinese, the French, and the Americans. But at its core the struggle has always been about preserving the essence of Vietnamese culture and identity. They did not want to be subsumed under the Chinese, they did not want to be servants of the French, and they did not want American democracy and capitalism. When students understand this centuries-long struggle for Vietnamese autonomy, this creates a recognition that embedded in the literature are a people's determination to preserve their culture against foreign influence, to maintain their connection with Viet Nam's mythological and historical past,

and to nourish their deep desire to retain their spiritual connection with nature. In fact, the Vietnamese are so connected to their land that until recently outlawed by the present communist government they buried their dead in the rice fields so that the spirits of their ancestors could manifest themselves through the rice they ate. Thus, the spirits of the ancestors are not only worshiped at the family altar but also become physically internalized. As a rice culture, the Vietnamese confirm the importance of rice through an abundance of folk tales and over seventy different words to describe rice, exemplified by the verb to eat, “An Com,” meaning “to eat rice” (McLeod 119).

The Vietnamese were very early active in the scholarly life, establishing universities under the Ly Dynasty (1009-1225). The Temple of Literature was founded in 1070 and was dedicated to Confucius. National examinations were established in 1075, and in 1076 a national university was founded. The struggle for cultural identity apart from the Chinese as well as internal independence is reflected not only in Viet Nam’s literature but in the written language system itself. During Chinese domination, Vietnamese scholars employed Cho Nho, the Chinese ideographic system to write their poetry. However, Chu Nho took years to learn, and only a few could master this complex writing system. Because only the well-educated upper classes and the mandarins enjoyed the privilege of reading and writing, folk tales established the means of transmitting culture orally among the illiterate population (as it does in all cultures).

In response to the difficulties of learning Chu Nho, a phonetic system based on Kanji called Chu Nom (southern characters) was developed by the 13th century poet Nguyen Thuyen (Durand 51). However, Chu Nom was also cumbersome to learn, comprising thousands of characters one had to memorize. It was difficult to learn Nom script unless one also knew Chinese. Nevertheless, Nom script created a resurgence of writing because Vietnamese poets were finally able to celebrate their culture and express themselves in their own language.

Many of the Nom poets celebrated the Vietnamese attachment to Confucian behavior codes as well as the connection to nature. The poem “Instructions to Children on How to Behave,” attributed to Nom poet Nguyen Trai (1380-1442), warns against losing sight of the Confucian social order through the misfortunes of war and famine. He exhorts Viet Nam’s children to “behave uprightly and humanely” and to “Have pity on those who run in all directions / Have pity on those who are lost and those who are forsaken” (qtd. in Durand 62). Nguyen Trai cautions that their destiny

depends on which road is chosen: "Follow it, and you will be men / if you do not, you will be rejected by the world" (64). Nguyen Trai's 15th century warning prophesies the difficult road that lay ahead for the Vietnamese through their bitter experience with 19th and 20th century French colonialism as well as the American War of the mid 20th century, which resulted in thousands of Vietnamese becoming lost and forsaken in the sea of the world through the trauma of exile from their homeland.

Viet Nam's most famous Nom poem, *A Tale of Kieu* (popularly known as *Kim Van Kieu* after its three characters), written by Nguyen Du (1765-1820) between 1813-14 during his visit to China as an envoy for the Nguyen Emperor Gia Long, is based on the karmic debt that the heroine owes to mistakes she may have made in a previous life. Although *A Tale of Kieu* borrows heavily from the 17th century Chinese novel, *The Tale of Chin, Yun, and Chiao*, *A Tale of Kieu* is Nguyen Du's own creation and contains a treasure-trove of classical Chinese learning dating from the 10th to the 7th century B.C.E. and contains "some fifty quotations from *The Book of Odes*, the Confucian anthology of verse; some fifty references to other Confucian classics; some sixty translations or adaptations of various Chinese poems; some seventy allusions to Chinese works of fiction; and about twenty mentions of Buddhist or Taoist scriptures" (Woodside, "Introduction," *A Tale of Kieu* xxii). *A Tale of Kieu* is the keystone of the Vietnamese literary canon, and most Vietnamese can recite parts of the poem in relation to some hardship they may be experiencing, creating "a continuing emotional laboratory in which all the great and timeless issues of personal morality and political obligation are tested and resolved (or left unresolved) for each generation" (xi).

In its historical context, Nguyen Du expresses through the trials of Kieu the frustration and powerlessness he experienced in the Nguyen court of Gia Long after the Tay Son rebellion had overthrown the Le monarchs. In cultural context, *A Tale of Kieu* explains misfortune through the Buddhist precept of karma and through the acknowledgment of nature's own yin and yang manifestation that follows the "play of ebb and flow" (Nguyen Du 3) that alludes to the Vietnamese folk wisdom of "sea and mulberry" (169) through which change inevitably and rhythmically occurs when "every thirty years, the vast sea turns into mulberry fields and mulberry fields turn into the vast sea" (169). Through this poem, the Vietnamese acknowledge both their karmic debt to previous errors and to the cycle of human life that is bound within nature's inevitable ebb and flow that delivers fortune as well as misfortune to one's life. While such knowledge is understood in

Vietnamese culture, western students of Vietnamese literature would miss entirely this important contextualization without this folk wisdom.

Although Chu Nom propelled education forward by which the Vietnamese could at last express themselves in their own language through their own poetry, it was nevertheless a difficult system of writing that few could master. The solution, ironically, came from outside by way of the French missionary Alexandre de Rhodes, who developed Quoc Ngu, a national script based on the Roman alphabet. In 1651 Rhodes published two dictionaries, opening the way for anyone who wanted to learn Quoc Ngu (Durand 18-19). Quoc Ngu was ostensibly used by Catholic missionaries to communicate among themselves and the laity. However, because Quoc Ngu was based on the Roman alphabet, the ever rigid yang-oriented Nguyen ruling houses shunned it because they associated it with the foreign Christian religion (Catholicism) and later because they were subjugated under the humiliating rule of the French colonials (18). The Vietnamese poets Nguyen Khuyen (1835-1909) and Tran Te Xuong (1870-1907) called their terrible situation under French domination an “unnatural time, a time when water flowed upward” (qtd. in Jamieson 49), and having their native Nom script lose its favored position to the foreign Roman script added insult to injury. It was not until the early 20th century that Quoc Ngu was fully accepted by the Vietnamese. Rather than taking years of intensive study to master the complexities of Chu Nom, the new Quoc Ngu could be mastered within a few months. Ironically, the western-inspired Quoc Ngu therefore turned the tide, wresting literacy’s exclusivity away from the upper classes and the mandarins and making it available to any Vietnamese person who wanted to learn it.

Undue and overwhelming foreign influence on Vietnamese culture continued to be of grave concern in the following century. Tran Trong Kim in 1929 worried about losing the old, traditional ways to the new, foreign ways, alluding as other poets before and after him to the risk of becoming lost in the sea of the world: “We do not yet have the new, and yet we have hastily abandoned the old; as a result we have lost everything and have nothing with which to replace it. That is the situation of our country today, no different than a ship that has gone into the middle of the ocean and lost its compass” (qtd. in Jamieson 95). Nevertheless, Quoc Ngu gave writers the opportunity to complain about their unbearable situation under French colonialism, and complain they did. While most western readers of Vietnamese literature do not read it the original language, students should

know not just about the literature's subject matter but also about how it flourished through the adoption of Quoc Ngu.

Vietnamese literature developed further through the Realist Movement during the political Popular Front Movement of the 1930s. Realist literature bore witness to the cruelty of French colonialism, such as Nguyen Cong Hoan's novel *Impasse* (1938). The heroes in this novel, peasants Pha and his wife Chi Pha, fall deeper into debt to the local mandarins, who themselves are embroiled in their own power struggle with the French. Chi Pha gives birth to a baby who eventually starves to death, while Chi Pha, "very weak and without stable food, hygiene and vaccination [. . .] was carried away by the cholera devil after a few hours of diarrhoea and vomiting" (213). Their misfortune is caused by severe flooding, water that instead of life-sustaining becomes a harbinger of disease. Pha is forced to sell everything and work for meager meals from his brother-in-law, Du. Pha's only choice is to leave the village, to embark upon the larger landscape of the unknown beyond the closed village system in order to survive. Du in his frustration offers his own observation on life in a village in colonial Viet Nam: "What do we live for? We don't live to eat good things, to wear good clothes, to dwell in good houses, but to endure the exploitation of cruel landlords, the oppression of corrupt officials, the injustice of the rotten system in our villages, and thus in the last resort we have nothing more to face but our utter ruin" (237).

To know this story fully, readers must first contextualize it in Viet Nam's history and understand that the root of the problems the peasants experienced during the 1930s was directly related to French colonial rule. Yet through his misdirected blame on peasant ignorance, most likely because of political caution, Nguyen Cong Hoan places the blame instead on the peasants, citing a rather superficial observation concerning traditional customs, that "in the villages run by decent people, only three years after they did away with the backward custom of feasting, they saved enough money to pave their lanes, to build schools and to do a lot of things of public utility" (5). Despite Nguyen Cong Hoan's shortsightedness (or unwillingness to be completely forthcoming about the plight of village peasants), *Impasse* nevertheless records the breakdown of the Vietnamese social system in which the French corrupted the mandarin system, overtaxed the peasants into starvation, and were unwilling to assist them in time of natural disaster, all of which led to their starvation. In fact, without knowing the history of French cruelties practiced upon the Vietnamese, this story would be stripped of its true meaning and become just another story of simple

peasants who through their own ignorance are unable to improve themselves.

Unlike Nguyen Cong Hoan's novel *Impasse*, which blames the corrupted mandarin system, albeit under French rule, Tran Tu Binh's memoir, *The Red Earth: A Vietnamese Memoir of Life on a Colonial Rubber Plantation* (1964), bears witness to the thousands of Vietnamese who to avoid starvation in their villages went to work on the French-owned rubber plantations during the 1920s and 1930s. Unlike Nguyen Cong Hoan, who avoids blaming the French for the sorry condition in which the peasants found themselves, Tran Tu Binh knows exactly where the blame lies and says so repeatedly in *Red Earth*. Based on his own experience working on the Phu Rieng rubber plantation from 1927-1930, Tran Bu Binh places blame squarely onto the French. The plantation workers are beaten, refused exit to return home, and find themselves slipping deeper into debt and into the clutches of the Michelin rubber company. Forced to labor without respite, the peasants find themselves marooned on an island of rubber plantations, literally lost within their own land. The folklore during that time teaches that the rubber trees grow so well because they are fed off the blood of the Vietnamese. One popular rubber plantation song laments:

How healthy and beautiful are the rubber trees!
Under each one of them, a corpse of a worker is buried
The rubber trees enjoy much better conditions
When they are sick, they rest right away
Eastern doctors, Western doctors busily fuss around them
We can die of exhaustion and of sickness
No coffin will receive our dead bodies (qtd. in *Colonialism Experienced* 43).

The peasants in Nguyen Cong Hoan's novel *Impasse* blame themselves because they cannot read and are therefore unable to protect themselves against the corrupt mandarins. The plantation workers at the Phu Rieng rubber plantation in *Red Earth*, on the other hand, become politicized, having been educated by Tran Bu Binh, who himself was educated by his revolutionary mentor, Ton Van Tran. Tran Bu Binh learns how to teach the laborers to struggle against their colonialist oppressors, which culminates in an uprising. He writes that the director of the plantation "was surprised to see how serious and courageous we were, quite different from the sort of prisoners he normally dealt with. He

admired us” (81). Although the uprising did not change the system, it clearly signaled a shift in the attitudes of the Vietnamese. The struggle at Phu Rieng gave the ordinary Vietnamese worker hope as well as the confidence to demand the most basic of human rights, which forced the French to “satisfy a number of the demands of the workers, including their aspiration to return to their home villages” (80).

Other witnesses to the corruption of French colonialism are two newspaper reporters, Tam Lang and Vu Trong Phung who wrote about peasant poverty during the 1930s: These reportages present a bleak view of the poorest of the poor in Viet Nam whose only solace from their French oppressors after a hard day’s work is a bowl of soup in the evening, their only meal for the day, and their addiction to opium, made readily available by the French who encouraged its use. Everyone was aware of these deliberate practices, and Ho Chi Minh complained openly that the Vietnamese people “are poisoned with alcohol and opium. They are kept in illiteracy: there is one school for one thousand official opium dens” (qtd. in *Colonialism Experienced* 72). Tam Lang, whose real name is Vu Dinh Chi was given his pen name, which means “third man,” from his writer’s group. When he became the editor of a newspaper, he went undercover as a rickshaw puller to find out what their lives were like. After a hard day of pulling his rickshaw for the likes of a “fellow as fat as a buffalo” (63), he asks, “Do we eat to live? Do we live to eat?” (70). Vu Trong Phung writes in “Household Servants” about the poor who are addicted to opium to stave off their hunger that they have “stomachs . . . as empty as their pockets” (142). He learns that the peasants “came from the country because they couldn’t find enough work there to have two meals a day” (143).

The literature of Social Realism toward the end of the First Indochina War (with the French), referred to as “marking time literature” (Durand 132), along with the Heroic Literature of the Second Indochina War (against the Americans) have largely been dismissed by western critics as ineffectual, relying on cardboard figures to espouse communism’s “pure” ideology. Yet these works are an important part of studying Vietnamese literature; without them, there would be no record of struggle against French Colonialism and students of Vietnamese literature would miss the resilience of the Vietnamese character, i.e., the courage it took to speak out against their oppressors.

Despite these criticisms, Vietnamese literature changed direction again to reflect its history, this time in favor of Marxism. In a 1958 issue of *Arts and Letters*, the new literary vision articulated by Xuan Dieu argues that

“a literature that adheres to Marxism-Leninism is the most humane literature, because that is the first literature in the history of mankind which proposes to be in the service of the masses, of the majority, of the workers, farmers, and soldiers” (qtd. in *Understanding Vietnam* 266). The call went out for writers “who are red, completely red, and not just ones with a pinkish tinge” (266). Individualist expression in poetry and literature was now discouraged and often punished; collectivist ideology in Vietnamese literature waxed mundane and unimaginative, yet was rewarded by the Party. Vietnamese writers of talent were unable to realize their artistic potential, their voices effectively squelched by the Communist Party. It was a dry, unproductive period for any serious Vietnamese writer.

It was not until the literature of *Doi Moi* (which means “renovation”), signaled in 1986 at the Sixth Communist Party Congress, that Vietnamese literature once again blossomed and was quickly recognized by the international literati. During *Doi Moi*, novels such as Duong Thu Huong’s *Paradise of the Blind* (1989), *Novel Without a Name* (1991), and *Memories of a Pure Spring* (2000); Bao Ninh’s *The Sorrow of War* (1991); and Nguyen Thuy Thiep’s short story collection, *The General Retires* (1992) garnered international praise. These authors question the depth of the sacrifices the Vietnamese people made during the long years of the First and Second Indochina Wars as well as the direction the communist party has taken, which swept aside the people’s needs in favor of the Party’s demands. These novels must have struck a little too close to home for comfort because *Doi Moi* quickly came to a close, signaled by the expulsion of Duong Thu Huong from the communist party in 1989, her arrest in 1990, and her seven-month imprisonment in 1991. Yet these are the novels that find their way into most western classrooms as an example of artistically accomplished Vietnamese literature. Whereas Duong Thu Huong’s novels are difficult, if not impossible, to locate in Viet Nam, Bao Ninh’s *The Sorrow of War*, and Nguyen Huy Thiep’s *The General Retires*, which address the same issues of loss through long years of war, are openly peddled on street corners to western tourists as fine examples of modern Vietnamese literature.

Bao Ninh’s novel *The Sorrow of War* is loosely based on his own experience in the American War. Bao Ninh, whose real name is Hoang Au Phuong, was a member of the Glorious 27th Youth Brigade that was formed in 1969, and he is only one of ten survivors of its original five hundred members. In *The Sorrow of War*, Kien, nicknamed “Sorrowful Spirit” (16) suffers from survivor guilt. He has nightmares about a battle in the woods of

the Screaming Souls where he punishes himself by “cruelly reviving the images of his comrades, of the mortal combat in the jungle that became the Screaming Souls, where his battalion had met its tragic end” (86). His nightmares and the act of writing about his war experience leave him feeling “unbalanced, an eerie feeling identical to that which beset him after being wounded for the first time” (87).

Kien is the only survivor of the battle. Thus, he must carry the burden keeping close the memory of his lost comrade while simultaneously coping with his guilt for being alive. He writes about his war experience, becoming the voice of and for the dead. Even more burdensome, as a member of the MIA team he is charged with the responsibility of identifying the dead. His commander tells him that “if you can’t identify them by name we’ll be burdened by their deaths for the rest of our lives” (91). Kien speaks for all war veterans, both Vietnamese and American, when he says that he carries “the burden of his generation, a debt to repay before dying. It would be tragic and unjust in the extreme if he were to pass away, to be buried deep in the wet earth, carrying with him the history of his generation” (122). That is why Bao Ninh—through Kien—writes about his war experience, bridging his experience between east and west in an instantly recognizable universal war story.

Nguyen Huy Theip’s title story “The General Retires” in his short story collection *The General Retires* is narrated by the general’s son, Thuan, who realizes that “I didn’t know anything about my father at all. I’m sure my mother knew just as little about him, for his whole life had been devoted to war” (379). While Thuan’s father was away, coming home only rarely, his son had grown up, had studied overseas, had gotten married, and had his own children. Thuan says of the family’s years of loneliness that “At the age of seventy, my father retired with the rank of Major-General . . . My mother was already senile” (379).

The general is out of sync with the lives of his family, who have moved on. While he was away at war, unbeknownst to him the world changed. There are other hints about the general’s internal exile and his inability to grasp the modern world. He finds that “today’s literary styles difficult to appreciate” (361), preferring instead to write letters for people who might benefit from his good word. When he is given the honor of being the Master of Ceremonies at his nephew’s wedding, he becomes “bewildered and miserable” (383) when no one shows him the respect and common courtesies he deserves as a war veteran.

The general worries about the peasants for whom he fought so that they can live in freedom and dignity. The general is living by an older code of honor, a code that supported him through the war and guided his personal behavior, but by a code hardly anyone today understands. He has “retired,” but he finds that in this life he is virtually useless. When he recalls the simplicity of his former life as a soldier, but his son only sees a stranger, he asks, “Why do I feel as though I am lost?” (390).

The general’s “retirement” is a painful story of the disconnection between Vietnamese soldiers who were called away to war and their children who have grown comfortable and do not understand the sacrifices of the previous generation. The general has become an anachronism.

As a young woman during the American War, Duong Thu Huong was a loyal member of the Youth Brigade and a member of the Communist Party. But after the war she witnessed the loss of freedoms for the Vietnamese people brought about by the Party. She began to speak out against these so-called “reforms” in her novels, and was arrested for her efforts.

In her banned novel *Paradise of the Blind*, Hang leaves Viet Nam to work in Russia, adrift in an alien land where she observes that “outside, the sun shone, but here, I could feel the chill of exile under my skin, in my bones” (13). Homesick, Hang listens to a song about the Red River in Viet Nam and says that “The song resonated like the thinnest thread of silver lost in the blue sky. I followed it and felt myself pulled back to the edge of the earth, to a familiar river and a beach of blinding white sand. A ripped sail tossed among the waves, buffeted by the sharp, anguished cries of migratory birds as they prepared for flight” (13).

Unlike her character Hang who endures her exile outside of Viet Nam, likening herself to a “ripped sail tossed among the waves,” Duong Thu Huong is currently exiled within her own homeland, unable to leave Viet Nam because her passport has been revoked by the government. Her literature is banned in Viet Nam, yet she continues to receive acclaim internationally.

Vietnamese authors, from writing under Chinese rule to French Colonialism and through the First and Second Indo-China wars, write from the perspective of internal exile. Their literature chronicles the struggle to maintain personal dignity as well as their culture. They are important reading not only to understand Viet Nam’s history but also because they serve as the underpinning to another kind of literature of exile, that of the Vietnamese Diaspora. It remains perplexing that although Nguyen Huy

Thiep and Bao Ninh somewhat mildly question Viet Nam's direction and the sacrifices soldiers made for their country, their novels are accepted in Viet Nam. Duong Thu Huong, however, lives in internal exile in Viet Nam, forbidden to leave the country. Her novels have found a western audience, but they are not read in Viet Nam.

Many Vietnamese writers after the American War felt that they could not be true to their craft under the constraints imposed upon them by the Vietnamese communist government. They left Viet Nam, and active today is the literature of exile written by the Vietnamese of the Diaspora who eloquently write of their estrangement from and their loneliness for their lost homeland in the uncharted sea of the world. Tran Vu, author of *The Dragon Hunt*, was born in Saigon in 1962 and escaped communist Viet Nam in 1978 by boat with his older brother. They survived a shipwreck and were subsequently placed in a refugee camp in the Philippines. Tran Vu moved to France in 1979 and returned to Viet Nam for a visit in 1994 where he says that he "discovered their mirror image on the other side: an identical community of war veterans, who in the meantime have become ultraconservative, still reenacting their heroic battles. More than twenty years later, my generation still lives with their interminable wars" (139-40).

Tran Vu's novel, *The Dragon Hunt* invokes the ancient creation myth of the Vietnamese people who are descended from the Dragon Lord Lac Long, associated with water; and the immortal goddess Au Co, associated with the mountains. The ancient story is retold by Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh, who himself is an exile living in France. He writes that when Au Co and her sisters visit the earth, Au Co is so enchanted that she tastes the earth and becomes too heavy to fly heavenward. When Lac Long, who is also visiting the earth, discovers her, he asks why she is crying. She confesses her plight and tells him that "lost in a strange land / my tears become a river" (8). Au Co and Lac Long fall in love, and together they have one hundred children. Years later, Lac Long must return to his watery kingdom and they separate, fifty children going with the father to live in the sea, the other fifty remaining with the mother to live on the earth. However, in times of danger and turmoil the children come together to protect one another (17). This creation myth of the Vietnamese people being descended from an earth goddess and a sea dragon fuses the yin and yang aspects of these two natural elements of earth and sea and are repeated in *The Dragon Hunt*.

In the chapter "The Dragon Hunt," Tran Vu inverts this ancient Vietnamese creation myth to accuse himself and his people of destroying it.

He says, "For four thousand years in my native land death was natural, the result of the body's decay. But my generation, oddly enough, seeks it out, while our bodies are still intact" (99). He returns to Viet Nam and languishes with his former military friends on a decaying estate, indicative of the decay of their lives and, by extension, the breakdown of the Confucian social order that once brought rationality and stability to the Vietnamese people.

The unforgivable offense, however, is when Tran Vu and his war buddies go into the mountains on a dragon hunt. There, hidden from the eyes of the modern world, survive the dragons of ancient legend, the descendants of the Dragon Lord Lac Long, the cultural symbol of all things Vietnamese. Tran Vu recognizes the dragons as "the sparkle of legend, the deep mystery of tradition: an ancient beauty, like a family portrait, an heirloom handed down from generation to generation" (124). The dragons, who have thrived for thousands of years in their secret lair, were insulated from the outside world until this doomsday when the very sons of dragons betray them. They are killed and hauled home for supper. Instead of eating rice that ensures future generations through the nourishment of the ancestors, the sacrilegious death of the dragons destroys the creation myth, and Tran Vu now founders alone in the sea of the world.

In another story of inconsolable loss of home, "Coral Reef" is Tran Vu's story of a group of Vietnamese refugees whose boat becomes stuck on a coral reef. As desperate as the refugees are to leave their homeland, it seems as if the Dragon Lord himself reaches out of the depths of the ocean to demand a sacrifice before he will let them go. As the days slide away, one into the other, the refugees begin to die as they wait helplessly for the sea to rise so that the boat can once again be on its way. Tran Vu declares that "fear tightened around us like a noose" (13). Eventually the long awaited tide finally arrives and the boat is set free, but not until dozens die as a blood price to the Dragon Lord.

In a mythological repetition of loss between modern mother and son, ancient Au Co and child, Tran Vu describes his scene of departure: "My body is clammy, icy with terror. Mother stands at my side. I can hear her breathing, halting, rhythmic, heavy with love. She accompanies me to the threshold of my voyage to the other world. I am afraid, but I don't beg her to keep me back with her. Yearning, the dream of a new life, merge inside me, compel me to leave. I yearn for both life and death" (99). Thus, the threads of ancient and modern literature are woven together. Parents are no longer able to caution their children about how to behave. Yin and yang are violently torn apart, and the dark yin side of Nguyen Trai's centuries-old

vision comes true: “Have pity on those who run in all directions / Have pity on those who are lost and those who are forsaken” (qtd. in Durand 62). The Vietnamese people who suffer from internal and external exile—first from Chinese occupation, then from the First and Second Indo China wars, and finally the Diaspora—are lost in the sea of the world, and their final, inexorable punishment, prophecies Nguyen Trai, may be rejection by the natural world. For Tran Vu, the act of getting into the boat and having to leave his mother and homeland behind is death to him. “It’s not that my people have lost all feeling. But they’ve seen too much. Too much death. Dreams are their only hope, the only thing left of lasting value. To them we are lucky corpses” (101).

Throughout the centuries, the literature of Viet Nam has always expressed her people’s culture and created a sense of order out of the chaos of Chinese rule, French colonialism, and the First and Second Indochina wars with the French and the Americans. These historic disruptions have deeply challenged Vietnamese culture and identity, but the severity of these challenges has in the interest of preservation forced the culture to know itself in a deliberate way as few cultures have. Vietnamese literature contextualized in its history and read from these important literary periods that chronicle Viet Nam’s major disruptions presents a meaningful picture of what it means to be Vietnamese. As present day Viet Nam adjusts in the sea of the world, the Dragon Lord Lac Long will always turn his face both ways: toward the land of Au Co where the homeland of tradition anchors the people, and across the China Sea to an uncertain but hopeful future of her children of the Diaspora. As Nguyen Trai prophesies about remaining true to the natural order, “Follow it, and you will be men” (qtd. in Durand 64), meaning, follow it and you will remain Vietnamese and remain afloat in the chaotic sea of the world.

Although this study cannot possibly include all Vietnamese literature, I nevertheless offer a beginning. Many Vietnamese works, once inaccessible to the west, are now available in translation for western readers. Some Vietnamese authors have even traveled to the west to converse with American authors about their work. They read together at conferences, and former enemies are now literary colleagues. As a professor of literature I have learned how little students know about Viet Nam but how much they do want to learn about her history and culture. They are curious and we should be able to satisfy that curiosity. The first lesson is that Vietnamese literature is not all about the war only. American authors such as Wayne Karlin (a Vietnam War veteran) have traveled to

Vietnam and have successfully collaborated with Vietnamese authors to publish collections that include war stories stories about Vietnamese life and culture. Interestingly, war veterans from both sides are the ones who have begun to build these friendships. Once that bridge has been built, then students can cross it to learn about a people who live so far away and yet are so closely mixed with our own history. Nearly one million Vietnamese people now live in America who arrived in the 1970s as refugee boat people, just like the refugees Vu Tran writes about. Many Vietnamese and their American-born children (and now their children) live in Vietnamese communities, and they try to hold fast to their traditions. However, the younger generations are being blended into the cultural mix that is America, finding themselves also afloat in the sea of another kind of world. Vietnamese literature, both historical and recent, offers them a bridge, too, to connect to their culture.

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