
NOT A WAR

Suggestions from a college reading course in fiction and poetry
from Vietnam and Vietnamese Americans

By Dan Duffy

Last winter I taught a course at Yale in recent literature from Vietnam and Vietnamese people. Except for one poem, one short story, and one essay, all the assigned readings were from 1986 and afterwards. Within Vietnam, this is the period of social and economic reform, called *doi moi*. In the U.S., this is the time of emergence of young Vietnamese authors writing in English.

I wasn't teaching a period, though, or a national canon, or Asian American culture. I was teaching recent authors as literature. Each week the students read a pair of stories or a few essays or half a novel, and wrote two pages in answer to a given question. Four students, literate in Vietnamese, volunteered to read the translated assignments in the source language as well. They prepared their own brief translations and wrote commentary on the style of the original author and the choices made by the English translator. In class I elicited from each student his or her studied opinion.

The close reading on which class meetings were based is an accessible method for taking texts seriously, to dodge using works of art to teach narrative history or essentialist culture. The approach was made popular by I. A. Richards in *Practical Criticism* before I was born and has been a procedure in good secondary and college classes ever since. ➤

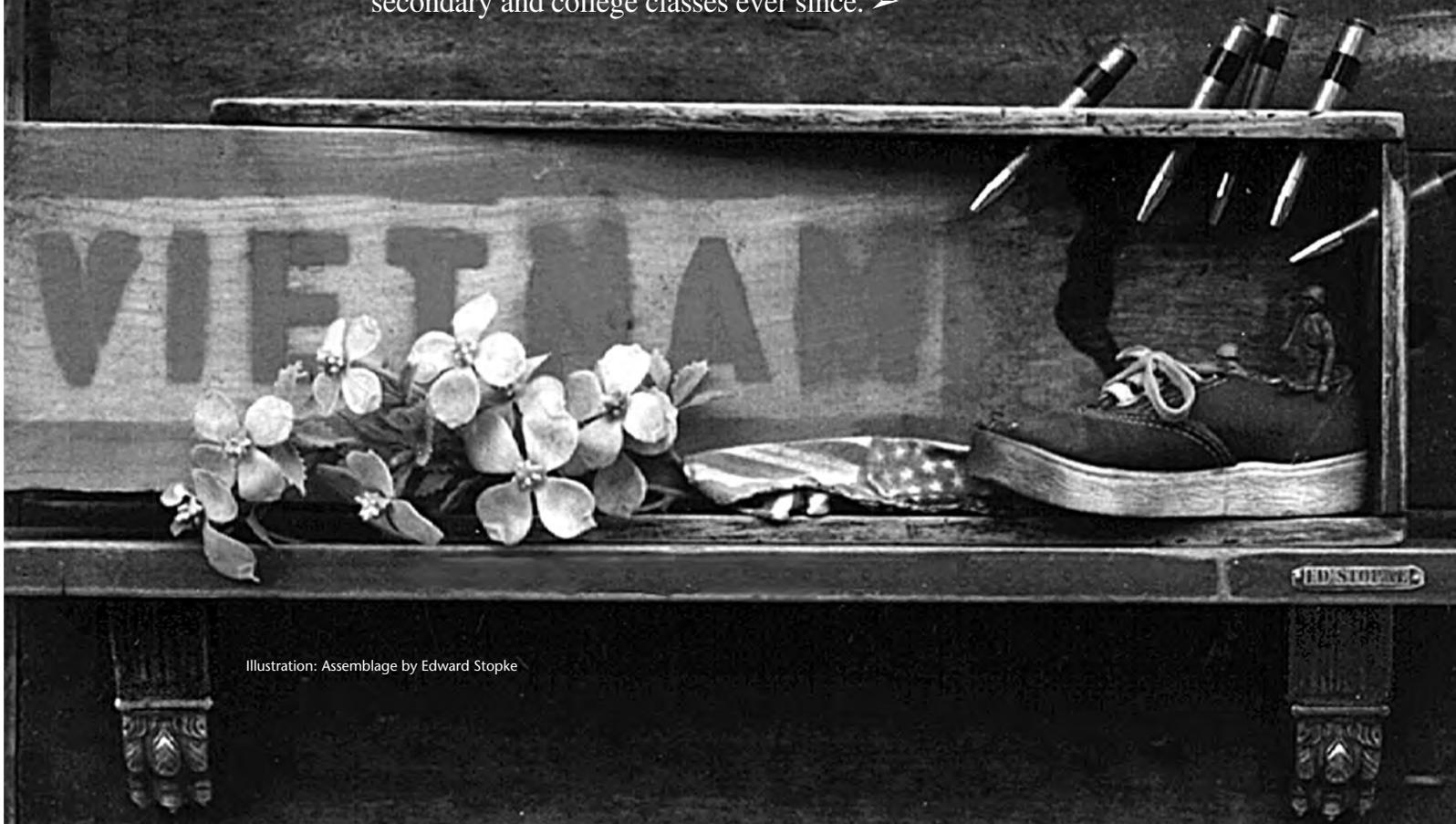


Illustration: Assemblage by Edward Stopke

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*Over mountains and rivers of the South
reigns the Emperor of the South.*

*As it stands written forever
in the Book of Heaven.*

*How is it then that you strangers
dare to invade our land?*

*Your armies, without pity,
shall be annihilated.*

The one poem from before 1986 that the students read was also the basis of my only lecture, at the first class meeting. Given above, it is the fourth poem in a book called *Vietnamese Literature*, published in English in Vietnam, with the legend that these lines are a curse delivered in the eleventh century by one Ly Thuong Kiet, an armed bureaucrat from outside of what is now Hanoi, against some troops that arrived from the direction of what is now China. He went out the next day, so the story goes, and killed them all.

There are good talking points in this poem for introducing Vietnam. Note that Ly Thuong Kiet refers to his leader as the Emperor of the South. It is important to know that Vietnam is just south of China, and that many in the leadership bear that constantly in mind.

There are points to discuss in the edition itself. For example, no individual translator is credited, which is a sign of the deliberately self-effacing nature of the revolutionary cause. I know that one translator was Dang The Binh, a valuable man known in Hanoi as the only American college graduate in the North during the war. He was working in a team with Huu Ngoc, a former political re-education officer in the French war, under Nguyen Khac Vien, a Party intellectual who had been recalled from his underground work in France to start the Foreign Languages Publishing House to play to world opinion in the struggle against the Americans. Great human resources were lavished on this translation.

For what? This book was issued in 1979, from Hanoi. Four years after Saigon fell in 1975, one year after the official reunification of the country in 1978, Ly Thuong Kiet's curse in English is the voice of triumphant Vietnamese nationalism in full cry. After expelling the foreign invaders and unifying the

country, it made sense in Hanoi to open a book called *Vietnamese Literature* with this boast, an ancient threat fulfilled.

Now read this:

*The Southern Emperor rules the Southern land.
Our Destiny is writ in heaven's book.
How dare ye bandits trespass on our soil?
Ye shall meet your undoing at our hands!*

That is the second poem in *The Heritage of Vietnamese Poetry*, published in English in the U.S. It is another version of Ly Thuong Kiet, of course. Look at the archaisms. This is the Arthur Waley approach to ancient Eastern literature, to make it quaint, in contrast to the Ezra Pound method employed by the Hanoi team: to make it new.

The American translator, Huynh Sanh Thong, came to the U.S. for an education at the same time as Dang The Binh, but remained. *The Heritage of Vietnamese Poetry* came out, as the great achievement of an individual translator, in 1979. After the Republic of Vietnam with which he had been associated had fallen, he worked in English to a different end than the Foreign Languages Publishing House, not so exactly to proclaim the strength of Vietnamese culture, but to pass on its heritage to other nations and perhaps to the children of the exiles overseas. Where the Hanoi version confronts the foreign invader, the one from New Haven is a charmer, currying favor for Vietnamese literature from foreign hosts.

The two different English poems, both of them earnest translations of the same text, served at the beginning of the course to alert the students that choice of word and the goals of the translator might be at work in the translated readings that would follow.

THE WAR AND TWENTY YEARS LATER: Le Minh Khue

After my introductory lecture, the students were on their own, reading. I gave them a pair of short stories by the contemporary Hanoi author Le Minh Khue, and asked them to write two pages: which story is best? I did not give them the following background until after we had discussed their responses in the next class.

"Distant Stars," the only short story in the course from before 1986, was published in 1971. The author was a journalist for the People's Army of Vietnam. Shortly beforehand, she had worked as a youth volunteer on the Ho Chi Minh Trail, and her story focuses on three young women who live on the trail, exploding ordnance and filling in holes, flirting with the truck

drivers and daydreaming about pleasant days in Hanoi. It is a rare bird: an artistic success of socialist realism. It circulated widely in the country during the war, and came out in English from the Foreign Languages Publishing House just afterwards, as propaganda. It has recently been translated again, as art, for an American literary press.

“Last Rain of the Monsoon” is from the same author, twenty years later. She is a fiction editor for a publishing house now, and her story is about engineers, men and women, at work at a job site. The time is well after the war, but the subject is the same: people who keep trying to have a life filled with meaning by love, though that seems as unlikely in the new market economy as it was on the Ho Chi Minh Trail. The two stories appear side by side, with an introduction and a biographical note, in my *North Vietnam Now: Fiction and Essays from Hanoi*, along with most of the course reading from Vietnam.

On the question of which story is best, the class split evenly, as they were to do over and again. Some wrote of the idealism of the women mending trail in “Distant Stars,” of the self-sacrifice and close relationships of the sapper squad. Others, put off by the brutal circumstances of the story and the sheltered naiveté of the soldiers, preferred the complex portrait of adultery, mid-life anguish, and acceptance in “Last Rain of the Monsoon.”

This disagreement crystallized over one student’s report on the Vietnamese text of “Distant Stars.” The story ends, “She was here, brave, gentle, from the same city as me and standing with me on this night on a hill covered by bomb craters near the front. We understood each other and felt completely happy.” The student translator remarked that “completely happy” does not adequately render the Vietnamese. “*Hanh phuc*” suggests to her the joy of having a proper and orderly life: a good job, a good home, a good family in good health, with romantic love at its core. The critics of the story leapt to point out that to write of the happiness of teenage girls who squat in the mud and detonate 2,000 pound bombs is to show bad faith, cluelessness, or, at best, ghastly irony.

After we talked it over, I told the class that in fact many soldiers around the world remember such circumstances as the most balanced and connected, *hanh phuc*, moment of their lives. I also pointed out that whatever sincerity or accuracy “The Distant Stars” carries, it certainly was at one time an instrument of propaganda for the Vietnamese war effort. Now it is a story, something to read and discuss.



Le Minh Khue, the author of “Distant Stars,” which appears in her anthology of short fiction, *The Stars, The Earth, The River: Short Stories*. Photo courtesy of Curbstone Press.

MIDTERM: What Virtue is Most Precious and Most Rare?

We carried on like that for several weeks, then I asked the class to review their reading so far. The midterm question comes from a set of fables, *The Winds of Hua Tat*, by the celebrated *doi moi* author Nguyen Huy Thiep. These ten stories, set in an exotic highland village of the Black Thai minority people, use folkish narrative conventions familiar in every literate country. In “The Happiest Celebration,” the beautiful and clever daughter of the village chief promises to marry the young man who can answer the question, “What virtue is most precious and most rare?”

I tipped my hand to the students, of course, because they had read what the princess decided. After rejecting bravery, wisdom, and wealth, she chose the young man who offered sincerity. Some students chose different virtues, but most wrote about issues of being true to oneself and to others, with examples from the reading.

The students found Nguyen Huy Thiep’s own work opaque to analysis. *The Winds of Hua Tat* are wisdom tales, assertive and capricious, not fiction rich in character development. One student, gifted at reasoning, took a fine-tooth comb to the values by which the princess judges her suitors, and didn’t get very far.

By contrast, several students sank their own teeth into Duong Thu Huong’s *Paradise of the Blind*. This novel focuses on three women bent by fate, in particular, by injustice in the land reforms of the early 1950s. As young Hang, now an export worker in the Soviet Union, shuttles from Leningrad to Moscow to care for her uncle, a corrupt cadre who shattered her family, she thinks back through the careers of her frail mother and monstrously resilient rich-peasant aunt, in a reverie fragrant with the specialty dishes of the Northern countryside. There are ready issues of sincerity to consider in the family’s relations to one another, and, most of all, within the narrator Hang as she chooses her own way in the world.

Nearly every student wrote about *Paradise of the Blind*, but most of the other readings also had to do with deception and faithfulness within the family, and attracted discussion as well. Two of the best essays treated Phan Thi Vang Anh’s “Pantomime,” whose narrator torments her father with her special knowledge of his secret love affair; and “The Indian,” diplomat Ho Anh Thai’s tale of a Hindu who keeps a promise to his mother never to abandon her bones, even as he travels the world.

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The students worked in reference to a few supplemental readings I provided: Lionel Trilling's 1970 essay, "Sincerity," which is a commentary on Polonius' speech, "To thine own self be true . . ." in *Hamlet*, and a similar poem, "What my mother once told me," by Phung Quan, from the ill-fated Literary Humanism movement of Hanoi after the Dien Bien Phu victory. Another critical resource, Harvard historian Hue Tam Ho Tai's essay "Duong Thu Huong and the Literature of Disenchantment," proved helpful to them. An intellectual historian who uses literary texts as evidence, Tai elucidates the relationship between socialist realism and critical realism, issues negotiated by Duong Thu Huong in making her art sincere.

THE REST OF THE READING

After spring break, we read Vietnamese American authors, mostly from my anthology *Not a War: American Vietnamese Fiction, Poetry and Essays*. I had selected the readings to trip up any hasty definition of this group: there was work that didn't have a single Vietnamese person in it, work translated from Vietnamese writing in America, and work by authors whose Vietnamese ethnicity is problematic. The effort proved to have been one of those critical thickets I had grown for myself, which the class laughed off. They just wanted good things to read.

Explicit discussions of ethnic identity left the class cold. Vo Phien's epistolary essay "On Being Vietnamese American," drew sharp criticism. Written in 1976 by the famous anticommunist man of letters, newly in exile in California, it complains about the hard fate of an artist with roots deep in a small country, competing in the big American market. My students, a tough bunch, all called this whining. I disagree, but found no way to convince them from this brief text. I regret not assigning Vo Phien's American novel, *Intact*. In a customary trope of Vietnamese literature, the novelist represents the nation of Vietnam in terms of a young woman, here a virgin torn from her lover in Saigon, musing on her life in a series of refugee camps and new homes across the Pacific and the U.S. With the rich images of his fiction to discuss, I think we might have gone deeper into Vo Phien's thought.

The class warmed up to some transgressive humor by Khoi Luu and Andrew Lam, who both came to the U.S. as children. I gave the class two essays by Luu, and two stories by Lam, and asked for a two-page answer to the question: which writer is more funny?

The class split, again. All those raised by Vietnamese immigrant parents found Luu hilarious. In

"Hearts of Sorrow? The Lighter Side of the Vietnamese American Experience" and "Remembrance of Things Slapped," Luu kvetches like a Catskills comic about the folkways of the Vietnamese American set: parents who discipline the children with feather dusters, children who threaten to drop a dime on mom and dad for child abuse, students who wonder whether it is quite necessary for every child in the family to become a physician. "Oh, I am so angst," says one of Luu's characters, because being Vietnamese American is "like, so difficult." In the view of Luu's own persona, "we-are-refugees-we-used-to-eat-dirt-damn-I-love-America."

The rest of the class read Luu's essays with interest, but without the anxious recognition that provokes laughter. Andrew Lam's stories, however, broke them up. They break me up. In one, "Grandma's Tales," a boy and girl drop their immigrant grandmother in the deep freeze when she dies. Their parents are in Vegas, and the young people don't know the proper rites. But Grandma rises from the dead, twenty years younger and speaking English, to party San Francisco and vanish into the dawn with a Latin American novelist. Lam's humor boldly deflates a windbag of ethnic fiction, the wise old grandmother who passes on family lore from the old country, a sentimental convention that can stand in for somebody actually writing an intelligent story. As the narrator concludes, "Grandma had done away with the easy plot for tragedy, and life after her was not going to be easy any more."

CLASS VISITORS, AND THE FINAL PAPER

Luu and Lam live in Illinois and California, respectively, but three of the authors we read live close by New Haven and were able to visit the class. Barbara Tran and Christian Langworthy came down from New York City. The class had read selections from Tran's series "In Different Languages," poems that imagine a Saigon she never knew. Similarly, Langworthy's poem "How Can I Interpret the Events of My Youth, Events I Do Not Remember Except in Dreams" introduces his short story about an orphanage that might or might not have something to do with wherever it was in Vietnam he came from. Tran and Langworthy read these poems, and talked about their goals and the life of writing, much as any visiting artist does with students. They emphasized the role of imagination in their work, and made a point of reading to the class other poems that did not have anything in particular to do with Vietnam, or the general issues of being Vietnamese American.

Both of these poets are editors with the Asian American Writers Workshop, where Tran is preparing a

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collection of Vietnamese American writing for publication later this year. I encouraged the class to quiz her about this process, because the assignment for the final essay was for each student to write an introduction to his or her own anthology of Vietnamese writing; or to write a proposal to a publisher to edit such a book. I had them read Linh Dinh's new anthology *Night Again: Contemporary Fiction from Vietnam* and write two pages on his taste. Dinh visited from Philadelphia to discuss that anthology and a new project on Vietnamese folksongs and proverbs.

The final papers were superb. One woman proposed a book of food, with stories about eating arranged in the order of a proper Vietnamese menu, expanded with actual recipes for the food described in the different stories and poems. Another proposed a collection of humor, giving a thoughtful analysis of the possible markets for such a book. A third called for an anthology that would elicit new writing from young Vietnamese people in America, as he was impatient with what we had read in the course. The class clown, a sharp critic, surprised me with a sober scholarly proposal, a thoughtfully researched introduction and table of contents to present the national tradition of literature in Vietnam. Other students suggested complete anthologies drawn from the course reading, and justified their choices. All the papers showed what I was looking for, a thoughtful engagement with the texts we had read together, and independent thinking about what Vietnamese literature might be.

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but a piece
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more

The above is snatched from "Shrapnel Shards on Blue Water: for my Sister Le Thi Diem Trinh," by Le Thi Diem Thuy, which I used in my first class lecture along with the Ly Thuong Kiet translations, and as the frontispiece to my new collection. I thrill to Diem Thuy's sentiments because I agree with her. Vietnam is

a piece of us, a part of the modern world. There have been wars there, of course, many many of them, but no one has to look at Vietnam that way all the time.

It may be less clear that few are obliged to present Vietnam as a culture, a history, or even a literature. If you use the individual works above as vehicles for teaching those topics, you might run out of intelligent things to say. To teach the modern academic tradition in English on Vietnam, use scholarly articles. I tried to teach my course as I was taught the *Aeneid* when I was small, by men who knew a lot about the poem, and Virgil, and Rome, but who used their skills and knowledge to direct me towards the text. In reading literature from Southeast Asia, the anthropologist Alton Becker calls this practice "modern philology." Last winter I read some literature by my contemporaries, with a bright group of young people. I would like to leave it at that, and wish you similar pleasures. ■

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