

Reflection #1: Vietnamese Folklore as Didactic Literature

Upon perusal of these Vietnamese myths, I was struck by their vague familiarity (I had never heard these stories before, yet I felt a strange nostalgia while reading them—perhaps via some sort of hereditary memory) and also, paradoxically, their stark foreignness. I think these set of two opposing, visceral reactions is a product of my heritage; I am a Vietnamese-American person who was raised by parents who tried fiercely and futilely to prevent our cultural identity from slipping between the floorboards. For me, Vietnamese still feels like an adopted language. So when I read these myths, I feel a tension—as if I am remembering or rediscovering a part of my culture, but also as if I am a detached academic observing a completely foreign culture. It is through this mirrored lens that I interpret these myths—their epistemological foundations, their didactic nature, and their deeply personal Vietnamese-ness.

Firstly, the knee-jerk reaction from the Western academic in me says that Vietnamese mythos is simple: these myths exist to explain natural phenomena. The story of The Giant Fish explains how the Mountain of the Dog's Head came to be; the story of The Nine-Tailed Fox explains how the West Lake formed, and The Genie of The Mountains and The Genie of The Waters explains the perennial struggle between the inhabitants of the Red River delta and raging floods.

But the other part in me contends that Vietnamese folklore is not so simply described as a collection of origin stories about how lakes, rivers, and mountains came into existence. That is too superficial a reading. Rather, perhaps these myths contain more insight into the Vietnamese psyche; they are anthropological studies of Vietnamese values.

The fact that many of these stories begin with violence reveals much about Vietnamese culture. The Dragon King ousts the Giant Fish by decapitating it; the story describing the clash between earth and water is personified as the Genie of The Mountains and The Genie of the Waters fighting each other with armies and lances and harpoons. The story of Giong is one of a three year-old child becoming an Achillean warrior. The backdrop of many of these Vietnamese myths is war.

Yet war is not depicted as savage or primitive in these myths. Violence is not a vice here, as I have repeatedly been taught in American schools; instead, violence is the necessary forge from which emerges a nation. And when violence is used as a tool by the good to triumph over the evil, it is heralded as *strength*. The main characters in many of these myths are characterized by such strength. The Dragon King has “herculean strength”; the Genie of The Mountains moves entire mountains to protect his princess; Giong's power and size allowed him to save his nation from invaders. Further, the *one* story that involves themes of love and family ends with King An Duong Vuong summoning the resolve to commit the ultimate violent act: killing his own daughter because it is *necessary*.

And so these myths can be seen as didactic. These myths teach us that violence and strength can be virtuous when they are used to protect your nation. Love and Family are “soft” values and should not be put before the nation itself. For instance, King An Duong’s loss of the Snail Fortress is due to love for his daughter, whereas Trong Thuy is victorious because he put the aims of his nation before his love of his wife. Furthermore, in the story of the Dragon King, the King divorces his wife so he can rule the land and find a home for the ancestors of the Viet.

The lesson in these myths is that true strength is required to be absolutely loyal to your state; there is nothing above this loyalty. This message of intense nationalism emanates palpably from these stories. It is a message that resonates with Vietnam as a country that has always been resisting against foreign influences and invaders. And it is a message that is so foreign to me as an American university student; we are taught from an early age that unyielding loyalty to one’s nation has caused atrocities worldwide. We are taught to question and critique absolute structures; we are taught to seek out and eliminate nationalism, lest it be masquerading as tyranny.

Yet, here is this tension, again. My Western education has taught me to question the values taught by these myths. But I can see traces of these values—the stubborn loyalty, the pride, the ferocity—in the way my mother talks about the Vietnam War, in the way father behaves in an argument, and in the way my family is.

Reflection #3: Zen poetry as Prescriptive Philosophy

My initial reaction to reading “Teachings From Ancient Vietnamese Zen Masters” is one of familiarity: I feel as if the approach here to finding *The Way* is starkly similar to Rene Descartes’ approach to understanding the nature of being. For instance, Cartesian epistemology, as delineated in Descartes’ *Meditations*, begins with the breaking down of all presupposed truths; Descartes says that we must first assume the external world does not exist, that our thoughts may be implanted by a deceiving demon, and that there is no absolute truth other than the *Cogito*—“I think, therefore I am”. Only then does Descartes build back reality, as we know it.

The Zen poetry here evokes a similar mode of thinking. Reading the poems forces me to re-evaluate my presupposed ideas of the world. I thought I knew how to sit, breathe, and make friends. However, the poems break all knowledge down first—we must approach these teachings by assuming we do not know how to sit, or breath, or think. Only then can we relearn how to truly live and find *The Way*.

The first poem is, on face, a poem about how to sit. On a deeper level, it is a poem about how to meditate and be one with one’s own being. The three levels of sitting are sitting in union, sitting in peacefulness, and sitting without fetters.

After reading this, I immediately attempted to execute the way of sitting and breathing as mentioned in the commentary of poems 1 and 3: “with eyes half open, don’t count, don’t follow, just feel the breaths” (4).

I will not claim that I achieved the level of Zen meditation described here. But I did feel differently; when I began feeling my breathing—distinct from *thinking* about my breathing—I felt immensely calm. As the translator puts it, “when mindful of your breathing, you are also mindful of your mind. When mindful of your bodily movement, you are also mindful of your mind” (2). Strangely, I lost track of time, and, when looking back my computer screen, saw that three minutes had passed. I think the translator describes it well: “later, you will see your mind becoming one with your body” (2).

Coming from a background of Western education, I recognize that the teachings espoused in Zen poetry directly conflict with those advanced by great Western thinkers such as Aristotle and Descartes. Both these thinkers believe in *dualism*—that there is a mind-body problem; the mind, they assert, operates in a different realm of reality than the body. Yet, the idea in the Eastern philosophy found here is that the mind is *one* with the body.

The most appealing aspect of this Zen poetry is not the philosophy embedded in each line; rather, it is the clearly prescriptive way the writing is presented. Every poem is a lesson that explicitly instructs how one should live one’s life. To me, prescriptive philosophy is way more useful than descriptive philosophy. Descartes can spend 100 pages rigorously proving that we exist outside our own minds, but that does nothing to tell us *how* to live in the real world. The poems here, however, tell me specifically how I should love and think and be a good, fulfilled person.

Reflection #5: Ho Xuan Huong as a Proto-feminist

Reading Ho Xuan Huong's English-rendered poems was a strange experience, to say the least. Firstly, there is much to say about how the poems are translated. The translations as a whole feel anachronistic, culturally transplanted, and generally colloquial. However, this impression found in the English rendering seems to thematically match Xuan Huong's style of poetry—many of these poems are the rejection of contemporary norms espoused by Vietnamese patriarchal society. In this way, both the translation and the content of the poems serve to emphasize the impression that Xuan Huong was a progressive, advancing such modern ideas that today could be interpreted as feminist.

For instance, the translations use anachronisms. To name a few: the word “helter-skelter” (The Condition of Women), the turn-of-phrase “Kings and lords just love this thing” (The Paper Fan), the line “Well, fine. It's really okay” (Girl without a Sex), and the use of informal second person (Picking Flowers). These phrases are distinctly English and distinctly colloquial. This type of language would not seem out of place among conversations with my friends. Yet, these phrases come hand-in-hand with other lines that employ antiquated (and thus, time-appropriate) vernacular such as “maidenhead” or “footbridge”. Why the mix?

A cursory interpretation of this odd diction is that the translator was ineffective or incapable. However, this is likely not the case. A more charitable interpretation is that the translator intentionally begins with contemporary word choice and values, but upends our expectations by infusing the poems with casual, modern language. Perhaps the intention here is that by mixing the old style of words with jarring newness, he can use the poems' form to impress upon us a sense that Xuan Huong's poetry is truly progressive.

Supporting this point—that the translator took great effort to make sure the poems' form and word choice were intended to evoke a sense of modernity—is the poems' content. For instance, many traditional Vietnamese values are critiqued in these poems.

For example, many poems venture to talk about the taboo. The oft-lauded profession of being a monk is questioned in “Quan Su Pagoda”, which coyly speaks about the cost of abstinence that monks undertake. “The Condition of Women” laments the burden that many housewives bear: childcare, satisfying husbands' sexual urges at a whim (the line “sliding onto your stomach, his little son still howling at your side” implies an unwillingness on the woman's part), and housework. These family values, celebrated by Confucian principles, are questioned here, and replaced with the idea that women should have some form of agency to do what they want to do.

It is here that Xuan Huong's poetry gets interesting. Many of her subsequent poems are intensely erotic (the many flower/bud metaphors; the entire poems “Swinging”, “Weaving at Night”, “Three-Mountain Pass”). These poems are shocking when first read. But we must question why we are shocked; perhaps it is because we are unaccustomed to a female poet so openly and vigorously expressing the feminine sexuality.

Here is Xuan Huong's triumph—she shocks us with her visceral eroticism and then immediately makes us re-evaluate the patriarchal structures that have conditioned us to be so shocked.

“Love Man, Love Woman” was one of the most interesting documentaries I’ve seen. As a straight male from a country as progressive as the United States, I have largely taken for granted the struggles faced by the lesbian, gay, transgendered, queer community—both here in the United States and elsewhere. It is easy to not recognize the extreme privilege that comes with having a societally accepted sexual orientation; straight males are simply not persecuted because of their sexual identity in professional and social circles. This documentary really opened my eyes to the types of established institutional structures that inhibit free sexual expression—and why that is such an enduring moral problem.

My experience acknowledging the plight of homosexuals is fairly limited. On such a progressive campus as Yale, I have had many gay friends who have educated me about the various injustices that institutionalized discrimination has effected on them. At Yale, the campus culture is very much amenable to this discussion. Homosexuality is accepted here, and I am proud to say Yale is open-minded enough to reject bigotry ahead of the curve. However, homosexual individuals elsewhere may not be so lucky.

In the United States, is not only the systematic oppression of gays that is alarming (for instance, the laws that prevent gays from marrying), but also the social stigma that comes with outing oneself. You need only look at the news to understand how far this problem extends. Last week, Missouri defensive end Michael Sam came out as gay. As soon as he declared his sexuality openly, NFL executives speculated that his orientation would cost him in terms of draft picks. Entire locker rooms full of adult, professional athletes vehemently talked about how uncomfortable homosexuals in the locker rooms would be, declaring locker rooms are a “man’s place”.

Outside the United States, it is even worse. This documentary really shows the current social status quo in Vietnam. For instance, so oppressed are homosexuals in Vietnam that they have had to create an entire religion to justify their sexual preferences. The Dong Co—homosexual men who dress up as female spirit mediums in order to liaison with other men—have thus become a popular means of expressing gay sexuality.

Vietnamese society cannot currently understand homosexuality. So instead, they have forced gay individuals to create a supernatural explanation for their sexual preferences; a man can’t simply love a man. Instead, he must dress himself up as a woman, and pretend his relationship with other men is a religious experience. The first problem of this is that it is a blatant equivocation of gender and sexuality. So entrenched are heteronormative paradigms in Vietnamese society that the *only* way it is acceptable for a man to love a man is through a straight way—if he pretends to be a woman first. Further, this gender identity/ sexual identity equivocation is highlighted when the main character of the documentary explains that Vietnam’s gender binaries are intensely rigid: a man must be characteristically a “man’s man”, and a woman must necessarily be “sentimental and feminine”. He goes on further to say that these binaries are so oppressive that many gay men prefer to be “prostitutes than men. They’re willing to play such a role for liberation”.

My initial reaction, I’m ashamed to admit, was that these men were oddities. I did not understand the cultural climate that forced men to become spirit mediums—I thought it was a bit strange. I remember laughing to myself when first seeing them on the screen in class—their costumes and mannerisms were just so foreign to me. I understand now

that people like me are part of the problem. I understand now that the problem is so much more basic than governmental institutions or fancy-sounding phrases that Yale students use to describe these kinds of injustices, such as “cis-het privilege” or “patriarchal microaggression”. These are elevated concepts—ten-dollar phrases for a very simple (but very difficult to solve) problem: our mindsets.

The problem is a perception problem that gay men and women are out of the ordinary. Thus, “society makes them rejects”, and sets about trying to cure them. But as the main character of the documentary articulates so well, “What have [homosexuals] got to get cured for?”

Reflection #7: "Love and Honor"

"Love and Honor and Pity and Pride and Compassion and Sacrifice", the first of Nam Le's short stories, is the most beautiful piece of writing I've read this year.

Never in my experiences with reading the hundreds of required texts in my first two and a half years at Yale have I encountered a modern, Vietnamese-American writer. I had hitherto only read the dead, white intellectuals of the Western Canon. Naturally, reading Nam Le has given me a sense of high intellectual and emotional fulfillment.

To say I love this story more than anything I've ever read at Yale is to say Nam Le speaks not only to me, but *of* me, in "Love and Honor". I am the writer who stays so far away from creating "ethnic lit" for fear of exploiting the experiences of "my" people—about whom I know almost nothing. I am the Vietnamese-American with a wise, world-weary father, about whom I too know almost nothing. I never introduced my white ex-girlfriend to my father. I pretend to enjoy drinking Scotch. My father drinks Heinekens. I am proud, and young, and naïve.

Nam Le cites Faulkner in the middle of his story: "we should write about the old verities. Love and honor and pity and pride and compassion and sacrifice." And so in my poetry, I've written about these things. Before this year, I wrote about everything except my ethnicity; I believed, too, that Faulkner was right—the implication being that ethnic literature was a feeble imitation of true, good writing because it was most natural. My friends, like Nam Le's friends, too praised my versatility in writing—saying that they loved me poetry *precisely* because I didn't write about my race or exploit all the baggage that came with being Vietnamese. That would be too easy.

Then, last year, I wrote a poem for my grandmother, who had just been admitted to the hospital for heart problems. The poem was by far the most difficult and time-consuming poem to write, and is what I believe to be my best poem; I remember being unable to write until I sat down with my father—much like Nam Le did in the story—in order to understand my and my father's own heritage, and how that DNA wove itself into my writing.

I remember the first draft of my poem. It was all aesthetic. It was all poetic technique and evocative imagery. But much of it wasn't true. I had manipulated the details of my relationship with my grandmother to make the poem more poetic. When I showed my father the poem, he told me—almost exactly like Nam Le's father tells him when the former is presented with the latter's draft called "Ethnic Story"—that I had mistakes in my poem.

We talked about the mistakes and eventually, I ended up deleting the poem and rewriting it. In "Love and Honor", the story ends with Nam Le's stumbling on his father in a park burning all the type-written pages of his story.

The issue of authenticity here is perhaps the most troubling struggle creatives encounter: must a work of art be factual, or merely truthful?

I think this is the biggest problem facing Vietnamese-American writers: our generation is the first to be uniquely positioned that our command of the English

language is at a native level, yet we are so estranged from Vietnam that we know nothing of our heritage. This is the reason why I think there is not much Vietnamese-American ethnic literature published. It is because we first refuse to write about our ethnicity, because we either think it “too easy” or exploitative. Yet, when we do write about our ethnicity, it is disingenuous and inauthentic because we are so ignorant of what it truly means to be Vietnamese. In this case, we risk shaming our fathers through our inaccurate reinvention of the Vietnamese identity; in doing so, we risk our fathers metaphorically “burning” of our work.

Good Vietnamese-American ethnic literature requires two things: the ability to write beautifully in English, and the courage to learn deeply about one’s heritage by conversing with your parents and their parents about Vietnam—this is something that is remarkably difficult for Vietnamese-Americans today, myself included.

Reflection #9: “Daughter from Danang”

This documentary was an incredibly heart-wrenching, albeit well-made piece of television. As a Vietnamese-American who has only know America, I found myself identifying with Heidi’s goal to get back in touch with her Vietnamese heritage and family. However, at the end of the documentary, I was horrified when I witnessed her choice to never communicate with her Vietnamese mother again; I was heart-broken at the pain Heidi had caused her mother. And so my gut-reaction to Heidi, after the credits started to roll, was one of extreme dislike.

Yet, after spending some time reflecting on the documentary, I have taken some time to try to understand Heidi’s reaction. Although I consider myself way below average in terms with knowledge of Vietnamese culture and values, I was still raised by Vietnamese parents. I was always told that family comes first no matter what. This is a major contributing factor to why I’m choosing to work where I’m working—so that I can hopefully provide for my parents someday. Heidi does not have that background. She had no way of knowing that the customary thing for well-off family members to do is help out their less fortunate relatives.

But she could have easily prepared for this trip. She could have met with people familiar with Vietnamese traditions. She could have researched Vietnam a bit more. She could have watched documentaries, or read books. At the end of the day, I feel as if Heidi was wholly ignorant of what she was about to see. It felt like her visit to Vietnam began with hollow intentions; she wants so desperately to “reunite” with family, but does not know what responsibilities the concept of “family” actually entails. Is it fair to defend her by saying that taking care of your poverty-stricken mother is a uniquely Vietnamese tradition, and that her reaction was simply culture shock? Is the concept of familial compassion that alien in America?

My judgment of Heidi oscillates. One moment I condemn her as nothing more than a cold, emotionally aloof tourist in Vietnam. Yet, I keep finding myself asking if that’s a fair assessment of her. Heidi *was* raised in a household where her Vietnamese identity was completely erased; her aunt casually describes her as “a white American—there was no orient in her”. Further, along with this erasure of culture is a subtle racism that permeates Heidi’s social sphere; we hear Heidi’s relatives jump into caricature accents (“no speaka da English good”) to almost comical effect. Moreover, the American experience emphasizes self-sufficiency, so when Heidi’s Vietnamese family asks for money, she reacted in a way that her upbringing prompted her to. It may be possible that Heidi was just benignly ignorant because of social factors outside her control.

Although I may have to reserve judgment on Heidi, there are two things that are clear to me. One, my judgment and reaction to Heidi are informed by the fact that Heidi’s mother reminds me of my own grandmother. The way she speaks is nearly verbatim the way my grandmother speaks (“I very love you”). As such, I heavily sympathize with the mother and it breaks my heart that the mother understands at the end of the documentary that she will never see her daughter again. All the mother knows is “how much [she]

loves her”, regardless of the money. The only thing she wants is to spend time with her daughter—a feeling that is not reciprocated. And that breaks my heart.

And so this brings me to the second thing that is clear to me: this is a piece of television. It is a crafted work. The mother, perhaps, is *portrayed* as the victim. She is never seen asking for money, and her scenes are only those showing compassion. Heidi’s scenes, on the other hand, play into the stereotypes of an ignorant Southern girl and American arrogance abroad. Her incidental comments about Vietnam come off as mildly racist. Her American relatives’ scenes reinforce this belief in us, as viewers. Heidi’s ending speech is not conflicted, as her feelings must certainly be; all that is shown on film is her repeating “I can’t...I’m so mad...I can’t wait to get out of here, escape from this world”. Appropriately, we have a very polarized reaction to her.

Call me a cynic, but I believe that all of this is intentional to some degree. PBS edited the film in such a way that the people in the documentary are not complex humans anymore. Heidi is a dispassionate, ignorant American. Heidi’s relatives are poor Vietnamese who ask for money. The mother is a grieving, faultless woman for wanting to have her daughter love her back. That is all. They are characters within a work, with singular motivations, edited with our reactions in mind.

Reflection #10: Journey from the Fall

Journey from the Fall is and has been a wholly educational experience for me. My knowledge of life before my parents escaped to Vietnam is very limited. My mother had to escape on a boat. She had to endure the struggles of many boat people. She never really told me the specifics of what happened though. Sometimes my grandfather talks about old Vietnam. He has never, ever brought up anything about re-education camps; I didn't even know they existed until very recently. My attitudes toward her life before, therefore, are simply one of ignorance.

I believe the agenda of the movie is to correct this type of ignorance. I think people like myself do not truly understand the atrocities perpetrated on prisoners of war. As such, the movie is a greatly educational experience.

On an artistic level, the film is incredibly well made, and this carefulness in craft serves to emphasize the film's agenda to re-educate moviegoers of the horrors that happened in these camps. For instance, the recurring theme of American public perception of re-education camps (and thus, the effectiveness of the Vietnamese propaganda machine) versus the reality is reinforced in the film's cinematography.

The opening scene depicts a soldier happily reuniting with his family while relaxing, Caribbean music plays in the background. Then, the film jarringly cuts to Long getting dragged, presumably after being beaten, to his solitary confinement cell while the same pacifying music continues to play in the background. The disconnect between the pleasant background music and the brutal reality mirrors my own disconnect between how I (and I would assume, most people of my generation) perceive my parents' life before they came to America, and what they actually faced.

The movie, I believe, is crafted around this central theme of outside perception vs. first-hand reality. The scene where Long's family escapes on the boat is striking. For example, the camera pans over the boat travelling through beautiful Vietnamese seascapes and scenery, belying the wretchedness (and retching) inside the boat. I think the argument in the movie is that it is one thing to suffer, but it is another thing entirely to suffer while no one knows and no one can help. I think this is the difference between suffering and despair.

We see despair in many of these prison scenes where Long is at the point of losing hope. He seems to have lost the will to live when threatened with death, claiming that "death is nothing. The day Saigon fell is my memorial". He is almost nonchalant, after witnessing the gruesome landmine explosion that killed Trai, when speaking to Trai's sobbing wife. He is expressionless when the North Vietnamese officer in charge of the camp tells him to form a team to clear the landmines from the team, which is a suicide mission.

Yet, the film does not carry this tone of despair. When Long finds proof that his family made it to America, he expresses raw joy, something that hasn't been shown before in the movie. This hope is exemplified when he

explains to his cellmate, “to get to life, you must cross death”. At the climax of the movie, Long effectively sacrifices his own life in order to not kill a North Vietnamese peasant, stooping down to the Viet Cong’s level. Contrasting his previous sentiment that “death is nothing”, Long is filled with a life-affirming power that comes from the hope to see his family again—or at least to grant that opportunity to his fellow escapee. This knowledge keeps him going. And so the antidote to despair is hope for a better future, and knowledge to sustain that hope. In a macro sense, this movie emphasizes that we, as modern day Vietnamese-Americans, must have full knowledge of the history of our people if we are to hope for a better future.

This movie is one of the reasons why I am so glad I took this class. This class functions much like the movie itself. It is a process of benevolent re-education; to even begin learning about our own Vietnamese-American heritage, we must first understand what our parents before us have gone through—however difficult that may be to stomach.