

A Note on Vietnam War Poetry

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Abstract

From the response to Vietnam War (1955-75), especially its atrocities including the long-term effects of chemical weapons, it is clear that the total experience, immediate and long-term, was most unusual. Moreover, for the Vietnamese, it was national survival and identity. For the Americans, an attempt to stem the spread of Communism. A third factor was the different reaction in part religious/spiritual/cultural in the attitudes to death and destruction in which duty and doing the right thing mattered. This is reflected in the poetry written by both sides in the works of Vietnamese poets, Pham Tien Duat, Nguyen Duy, Huu Thinh and Van Le, and Americans, John Balaban for example. With the final piece, it emerges that all cultures, whatever their form, ultimately share the same substance consisting of universal values that transcend war, geography, culture and politics.

Keywords

Vietnam War, war poetry, universal values, spirituality, comparative literature, culture

For Vietnam, the war that ended forty-two years ago, in April 1975 with the fall of Saigon, since renamed Ho Chi Minh City, had a special, enduring significance. It restored her legacy; it enabled her people for the first time in their modern history, to free themselves *in toto*, with finality; it finally and fully unite her; it opened the way for her people to design, consolidate and pursue their destiny.

Like all who know the discomfort of having powerful neighbours, there are perennial challenges directly relating to national integrity, peace and prosperity. Each of these takes time to achieve. Disruptive. Moreover, they are interrelated. Remember that the Vietnamese had known colonial oppression under the Chinese and French Empires, for a thousand and a hundred years respectively.

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This deep, sustained testing of soul and psyche in quite different epochs created a tremendous combination of national will, strength and resilience, guardians which still thrive. They must. The past makes us what we are; the past and present make us what we need to be. For smaller nations that is seldom, if ever, easy or straightforward. The essential dynamics are to some degree influenced by others, through contiguous presence, disguising a rough, pushy neighbourliness, or the projection of military power via proxy allies, ICBMs and fleets of warships. And there is the promotion and/or interpretation and imposition of dissimilar, contrasting, competing ideologies and their institutions. These relate, for example, to styles of government and notions of individual freedom. Events in the Middle East in the last ten years encapsulate some of the coalitions of ambitions, ideas, strategies and alliances involved. Specific instances would include the “Arab Spring,” “Regime Change” and “International Community.”

Apart from the short border war with China (Feb-Mar 1979), and the skirmishes that followed, the final liberation had – for all practical purposes – come in 1975. Cause and consequences of even this brief, limited conflict reflect the intertwined complexities which a quick google reveals.² While not as obvious here as in the larger wars, the various names that are given indicate the diversity of interests and motives.

The **Vietnam War** (Vietnamese: *Chiến tranh Việt Nam*), also known as the **Second Indochina War**, and also known in Vietnam as **Resistance War Against America** (Vietnamese: *Kháng chiến chống Mỹ*) or simply the **American War**, was a Cold War-era proxy war that occurred in Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia from 1 November 1955 to the fall of Saigon on 30 April 1975. This war followed the First Indochina War (1946-54) and was fought between North Vietnam – supported by the Soviet Union, China and other communist allies – and the government of South Vietnam – supported by the United States and other anti-communist allies. (“Vietnam War”; bold in the original)

Generally, wars have two sides. This is obvious. But what is not always fully appreciated is the fact that wars of national liberation have a singularity of purpose, a holistic driving vision, at times desperate in spirit: win to survive, reconstruct and construct; lose and be dissolved into the dark corners of history, remembered in footnotes at best. Losing is not an option. In contrast, the opposing forces are coalitions of the kind referred to above. They contrast disadvantageously to the overarching vision and will of a people tightly focused to reunite and free themselves from the yoke of foreign domination. That Vietnamese *will*, and what it energised, enabled them to overcome the technical

² See “Sino-Vietnamese War,” “To What Extent was the 1979 Sino-Vietnamese Border War about Cambodia?” and “Vietnam: Draft Resistance - University of Washington.”

superiority of the French, and the Americans, because the latter's actions were rooted in interests, not ultimate national survival. While definitely a setback, losing was not fatal to either France or America as their wellbeing, their comfort zone, lay in continental Europe and North America. Thus justification – and motivation – driving their wars lacked any sense of ultimate survival. The moral high ground providing justification for their wars, contained serious architectural faults which soon surfaced, especially in the case of the Americans, to question their legitimacy, thus undermining their purpose. For the French, it was a matter of colonial continuity, a restoration. For the Americans it was stopping the spread of communism and to promote their brand of democracy. Consequently, there was more room in the latter for debate and disagreement. The thinking which contextualised the whole question of conscientious objection, notably went far beyond WWI considerations. Unlike almost any other war in which the Americans participated on a significant scale, especially the extensive commitment of American combatants, turned into divisive national issues. Consequently, the draft was not popular, and led to various strategies and deceptions to avoid it (“Vietnam: Draft Resistance”).

Perhaps it is worth reminding ourselves that there has always been an element of nobility in war. And that nobility is usually accompanied by valour. We recall how in the past wars were at times settled through the single combat of champions; or how wars were fought outside cities, to prevent their destruction and save lives. Or how there were moments when conflict was set aside to celebrate and share an occasion as where German and British troops called a truce to celebrate Christmas in 1914 (“Christmas Truce”). This sentiment of sharing that accepts the equality and sanctity of life beyond the politics of division that cause war, is perhaps most poignantly expressed in Wilfred Owen’s “Strange Meeting”:

Then, as I probed them, one sprang up, and stared
 With piteous recognition in fixed eyes,
 Lifting distressful hands as if to bless.
 And by his smile, I knew that sullen hall;
 By his dead smile I knew we stood in Hell

 ‘I am the enemy you killed, my friend.
 I knew you in this dark; for so you frowned
 Yesterday through me as you jabbed and killed.
 I parried; but my hands were loath and cold.
 Let us sleep now....’ (*Poetry Foundation*)

In death are we equal made. This acceptance is factual. The lines that lie between the two parts of this quote ironically celebrate life by noting how war wastes: “the

undone years/The hopelessness.... Courage was mine, and I had mystery;/Wisdom was mine, and I had mastery” (*Poetry Foundation*).

And as we remember the positive and sustaining, we also remember that there are other parts of the human psyche that are dark and destructive, wars can bring out the worst in human nature. We recall the Batang Kali Massacre (“Batang Kali Massacre”), the My Lai Massacre (“My Lai Massacre”), the happenings at Abu Ghraib (“Abu Ghraib”) and the Jallianwala Bagh massacre.³ Yet, such instances make the nobility which war can bring out all the more remarkable. Not only for their intrinsic value, but also the instruction they have, the consolation they bring to assuage the terrible horrors of war.

We think of those who had reservations about the war but nonetheless were drafted, and those who were genuine conscientious objectors but nonetheless went to Vietnam. Some wrote poems. This Note will look at a few of them together with poems by Vietnamese. The reason for my interest is the deep humanity these poems grow out of, like beautiful flowers that sprout from death on the battlefields. They incarnate and broadcast little yet great moments of the human spirit rising above the most tragic adversity. It is these qualities of saving grace that lift man above his own destructiveness, that are the great hope of and for humanity.

Every culture at its core has a set of values. They are virtually universal, generally shared. But, and it is a *big* but, their actual realisation, their translation from the abstract to the concrete, varies from culture to culture, far more radically than they vary from one epoch to another within an individual culture. This is a reminder that we should not mistake *form* – the way of expression, the label, the name – from *substance*, the constituent elements being expressed. The distinction is illustrated by how, in their practice and application, laws and governance differ, at times appear to contradict, in nations each claiming to be democratic. How power is brokered and the “will of the people” gets engaged are seldom the same in practice. Such awareness helps us recognise and appreciate the values and sentiments we share despite appearances. And there is a complementary point. Different *forms* may denote the same *substance*. The primacy of the state as a key value may be described as “the state before all else,” “nation first” and “dictatorship of the proletariat.”

The dilemma of understanding must be resolved before we can come to terms with those painfully new, disturbing experiences we cannot name and

³ It doesn’t take a war to bring out this dark side of human nature, a fact revealed in the Jallianwala Bagh massacre (13th April 1919), in which a British General, Reginald Dyer, heinously killed 400 innocent people and injured 1200 more by shooting on a political gathering of Indians. See Wolpert for further details. Rabindranath Tagore, Asia’s first Nobel Laureate, renounced his Knighthood the same year as a protest against this bloody incident. See Quayum.

therefore cannot manage. Our coping mechanisms prove woefully inadequate. John Balaban whom I first met in Penn State in 1979, puts the challenge squarely:

I knew the axioms of Dante, for instance, that the proper subjects for poetry are love, virtue, and war. But how do you write about that war with its cluster bombs and white phosphorus and napalm? How do you write about people who in fact were noncombatants but simply happened to be in the way, or about villages that were, because they were in the free-strike zone, fair game for anything that might be dropped on them? That, I think, is the central difficulty for anybody who has tried to write anything about Vietnam. (Balaban, "Carrying the Darkness" 80)

Balaban considered and tried a number of ways: writing a novel, a memoir, poetry, hospital work and helping to rehabilitate burned and otherwise injured children bringing a few hundred of them to the US for attention. It struck him in 1971/72 that helping to clear the misconception of the Vietnamese as "nonhuman or barbarian" was more effective than the work he was doing, important as it was. A poet who also knew the language, he could let "the Vietnamese... speak for themselves in the vast literary tradition that they have held for so many years" (Balaban, "Carrying the Darkness" 81). He saw the folk poetry, the *ca dao*, as excellent for his purpose. Transmitted orally for more than a thousand years, it was a still deeply rooted, living tradition, iconic, representative, technical, sophisticated; drawing its subjects from the accumulation and full range of life and contacts.

For hours I taped people who knew poems by heart. They knew the poems from childhood. That became the last way that I was able to somehow overcome the atrocity of the war, by simply providing something else that existed within the context of that atrocity – the long-standing humane and literary tradition of the Vietnamese. (Balaban, "Carrying the Darkness" 81)

While they are a rich storehouse, the vitality of the *ca dao* enables it to articulate the terrible impact of war on the life of the people. For those readers whose experience of war is limited, brief in the experience of its destructiveness, relative short period of conflict, a brief and limited witnessing of its destructiveness, the enormous dislocation throughout Vietnam of a 24/30/365 conflict prosecuted by an enemy using agent orange, napalm, cluster bombs, dumb bombs, guided bombs, fuel air bombs,⁴ is impossible to imagine, to grasp in any degree comparable to the experience of they who lived, suffered and maimed by it. The actual loss of father, mother, brother, sister, hand and leg is reality. Their physical, psychological, economic and other impact is virtually impossible to fully

⁴ And there was the "daisy cutter," 6,800 kg., which flattened an area large enough for a helicopter to land.

comprehend. Yes, we can imagine. We can watch re-enactments. But they are not, and never the same.

For me, the face of war consists of a few images: the sound of air raid sirens, burning oil tanks at the 11th mile Upper Bukit Timah, the sound of field guns, dog fights, low flying planes, the evacuation from Mandai with the family splitting up, a few bloated corpses at the junction of Outram and New Bridge Roads, bombed buildings along Rochore Road. In fact, the worst of the War were the Sook Ching Massacres mounted on the Chinese, after Singapore surrendered. World War II (1941-1945) was never close and personal. I have experienced civil commotion, racial and religious riots were worse. While tragic, they are hardly a footnote when compared to what happened in Vietnam.

Paradoxically, this gap between my limited experience of war and the enormously long and extensive suffering of the Vietnamese in that final war has encouraged me – and others I am sure – to read its poetry with a stronger spirit of exploration than usual. We quarry to know, and to know better, both the poetry by Vietnamese and Americans.

Poetry is about people, and people are defined and moved by values. Vietnamese values emphasise the importance of family and community, duty, honour, respect, loyalty, harmony. They permeate and structure society and nation. With variations in emphasis and prioritising, they are equally American values, equally Singaporean values.⁵ They are the basis for appreciating, understanding and judging action, of perceiving and cherishing the common humanity we share.

The equivalent of such values that lie at the core of every society is what I find most remarkable in some of the Vietnam war poems, written by both sides. But because of their common humanity, they cease to be sides as, ultimately, there is only one which sees each and every situation steadily and whole, distinguishing right from wrong, venerate life and lament wrongful death, describing all with all the means available. There is only one end: the celebration of the goodness of the human spirit even in the most adverse circumstances. When Balaban cries

O Lord, I go into a land where napalm
makes men dance a crazy jig; where
Nero sets his sights by human flares.
I ask for clear water, good earth and air.

(Balaban, *Vietnam Poems* 8)

he reaches into his religion and personal collective of cultural and literary inheritance which T.S. Eliot, for one, outlined in his “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1919) which is still useful despite later calling it the most juvenile of his

⁵ See “White Paper on Shared Values,” 1991, item 52.

essays. I do not think it is over-reading to say that for some of us “go into a land” echoes ironically that going into “the promised land” God had covenanted with His chosen people. But instead of milk and honey, there is napalm. This hot suggestion of burning, this “punishment,” recalls a parallel, the Roman emperor’s killing of Christians as human torches whom he believed – in one version – were responsible for the fire that virtually destroyed the imperial city. So the prayer in the last line is all the more poignant, in its asking for the basic elements to start a new life, a new world, a new Vietnam.

The excitement and power of poetry is its capacity to generate maximum meaning, most effectively by implication, allusion, collocation, connotation and other devices. But to do that in another language, applying English to Vietnamese events, in a semiotic possessing a sophisticated literary environment formed by a thriving classical and popular traditions, is a remarkable challenge; remarkable for the challenges and the prospects of interesting metaphorical possibilities. The first four stanzas of Balaban’s “The Dragonfish” inscribe a richly packed scene: a marshy delta with pools and ponds. Men are fishing for “mudfish, carp and *ca loc*.” There are five old tombs; dallying ducks; “darting” F – 105’s; an open drain discharging garbage; a dog and rain. The scene that forms is dynamic because as the poem picks its way among the poet’s observations, they are dramatised or enriched: the fishermen “step and stalk the banks; hurl;/stand, then squat heron-like.” Of the tombs, he writes “Ghosts/ of landlords click their tallies there.” Virtually every phrase is busy. Rich as it is, the poem is raised higher in the two concluding stanzas:

Far out in deserted paddies
more cratered than the moon,
guerrillas of the Front hide themselves
beneath slabs of rain-eaten tombs:
patient are they as lampwicks

In squalling waters, North and South,
fishermen dredge, draw, dragnet up
a heavy fish, a dragon fish,
a land in the shape of the dragonfish. (Balaban, *Vietnam Poems* 15)

First, the war is linked to the landscape through the jet and the guerrillas. Its devastation leaves more craters than on the moon. The fields are deserted. They require daily labour not possible in turbulent times. In this poem at least, Vietnamese are patient and of the earth; Americans fast and of the air. Another division, another difference. The concluding stanza is replete with such suggestive resonances. We recall Balaban’s prayer for clean earth, good air... which would restore the land, the “squalling waters” in the delta image the turbulence of the times, the conflict, an idea strengthened by “North and South.” The fishermen

who embody the life-force “dredge, draw, dragnet up” – the alliteration emphasising the enormous significance of their action. While “heavy” multiplies our response, the greater impact is that the dragon fish, while fish, is “a land in the shape of a dragonfish”; Vietnam North to South. As we read and submit to it, remaining alert, the poem adds to a body of meaning linked to final making of the nation. It is an ancient thought renewing itself.

There were other American poets, among them Leroy V. Quintana, Fred Marchant, George Evans, Lamont Steptoe, W.D. Ehrhart and Kevin Bowen. Those of their poems I have read in anthologies broaden the range and depth of American response to that final war but none has the weaving of Balaban’s work. It was not soldiering, however professional, and not substantially combatant to combatant. Were it so, and had excluded the extensive killing and maiming of ordinary men, women and children, there would have been some sense of parity, a broad fairness. Virtually all express varying degrees of reservation about the war.

This questioning is not there overtly in Vietnamese war poems. Moreover, when you defend nation, its survival and seek its final boundaries, the one overriding question is not why but how. Totalities of person, family, village, town, province, their all in all, are drafted, committed, sacrificed. As microcosms poems of the moment – they are not occasional – are more ample, recalling and thus celebrating life even as it is being destroyed. Perhaps a possible explanation of their breadth and depth, even on the micro level of image, phrase and lines, a more ample application of sensibility, is because a people, a civilisation were at war. While the facts of war are starkly present, life has to go on.

Trucks arrive from where the bombs fall,
returning in convoys.
When we pass friends along the trail
we shake hands through broken windscreens.

No windscreen. No headlights either.
No tarpaulin, floorboards falling to pieces,
the truck keeps rolling ahead – South:
if there’s a heart in the truck, it’s enough. (Pham Tien Duat 70)

And entirely matter-of-fact summary of the supply line “rolling ahead” stopped suddenly by “South,” a stark reminder of the actual and ideological destinations, the unliberated, unfulfilled national ambition. The crucial human factor for final success provides a coda: there is a “heart” in the truck. It drives the truck and the cause. This subtlety is present in almost all the poems, at times a sustained, progressive part of its discourse. Meaning by implication, resonance and allusion to symbolic content, both latent and manifest.

Commitment to what is considered right and proper, is a supreme, pervasive quality underpinning every aspect of life, from the most intimate and personal to public duty. It is cultivated from childhood to maturity, starting with exposure to songs, nursery rhymes, cautionary tales, celebrations and ceremonies. These and the more formal aspects of learning are gradually fed into upbringing. They are absorbed to create national traits, the Vietnamese national character.⁶ These core values, derived in the main from Confucianism, are loyalty to the family, respect, duty, harmony, honour and education – in all its aspects – which enhances them. The process ensures that our values, their dictates, are resilient even – at times especially – in tragic circumstances. It constructs that tremendous national will I mentioned earlier. Tradition, history, established patterns of attitude and behaviour are important. Consequently, there is much in the way we conduct ourselves in the family; village is carried by us and adhered to wherever we are. The values prime and underpin all we think and do. It explains the depth, width, reach, the allusive resonance of Vietnamese poetry. Connotation works simultaneously with denotation, adding layers of interest, drawing the reader further into the poem.

Nguyen Duy's "New Year Fireworks" has five four-line stanzas, of which the first four start with "The whole city seems..." (Nguyen Ba Chung 298). Each word is loaded, especially the last, for "seems" controls ambiguity. Which is the reality. Or are there two which it brings together. Tet, the New Year, the most important celebration in the Vietnamese calendar, is not the same after January 31, 1968, when

some 70,000 North Vietnamese and Viet Cong forces launched the Tet Offensive, a coordinated series of fierce attacks on more than 100 cities and towns in South Vietnam. General Vo Nguyen Giap... planned the offensive in an attempt both to foment rebellion among the South Vietnamese population and encourage the United States to scale back its support of the Saigon regime. Though U.S. and South Vietnamese forces managed to hold off the Communist attacks, news coverage of the offensive... shocked and dismayed the American public and further eroded support for the war effort. Despite heavy casualties, North Vietnam achieved a strategic victory ... as the attacks marked a turning point in the Vietnam War and the beginning of the slow, painful American withdrawal from the region. ("Tet Offensive")

Like other names of places made notable by the war – North, South, Cam ran Bay, My Lai for example – Tet is horror and destruction, sacrifice, in which almost every family in the whole nation lost a son, daughter, mother, father, Grandfather,

⁶ See "Asian Culture Brief: Vietnam," for short, useful comments on these values. The notes offered on Communication and Common Non-verbal Gestures are reminders specially, for those from vernally aggressive cultures.

Grandmother, children. Many were maimed, many to a degree that to some death would have been kinder. The poem is dated “Midnight, New Year’s 1992” almost 25 years after the offensive. Each of the first lines end with “explode,” “fire,” “smoke” and “crack open” respectively. Each describes and recalls in the same instant, and in a logical sequence, the celebrations and the offensive. Here are stanzas one, two and five:

The whole city seems to explode.
Fireworks thunder in the distance.
An old man with a stick and bag
sobs quietly by the train station.

The whole city seems to be on fire,
the sky suddenly streaked with flares.
A woman picks through the garbage,
shrivels up beneath a bridge.

....
Smoke rises, explosions rumble.
What battle has just passed through?
A man on a wooden crutch sits by the river,
dreaming of home...

Still on the four stanzas, their second lines expand upon the first, locking in the description, and preparing for the punch of the next two lines to seal in the stanza. The focus is the devastation, the breakup of the family. The tragic isolation of man, woman and child; the terrible life they are forced into. The poem speaks with a clear, firm, uncompromising voice. Each stanza is a montage, a panel of meaning, complete in itself but moving and developing the whole experience. The “quiet” of stanza one and the “dreaming of home” stress an acceptance of the Tet experience, a closure which I believe is made possible by values of the Vietnamese.

Those values and its consequent culture and its spiritual, emotional and psychological environments, are depicted, energised in Huu Thinh’s “Waiting”:

Twenty years each night putting on her bright brocaded dress,
Still so full of life and yearning, thought my brother, he is unaware.
My sister is not like the snake who sheds his old skin under every tree’s
shadow.
But without him, she lives like the odd relative at the festival.
In the midst of the family’s laughter, she is lonely.
In the cold night, her one hand must warm the other.
She hears gun fire from the distant militia post.
At meals she still eats alone.... (Bowen and Weigl 95)

There are at least three main pivots around which the lines and their unfolding, incremental meaning move. The first is the bonding of the man and woman, the couple, the lovers. Their fidelity and hope. They have plighted their troth. Their love is all-embracing, a fact that suffuses the poem. Whether they are lovers in a physical relationship is never implied. It would be surprising if they were, given a conservative society. Secondly, her fidelity and hope. They combine into a power that expresses in significant ways. For “Twenty years each night putting on her bright brocaded dress,/Still so full of life and yearning.” A faithfulness formed by a reality now a memory turned into a tragically beautiful habit. She “is not like the snake who sheds his old skin under every tree’s shadow.” So she keeps her repetitive world alive. Its underlining sadness cannot be touched, let alone relieved despite the love and care of those who cocoon and protect her: “In the midst of the family’s laughter, she is lonely.” It is difficult to conjure a description more utter and emblematic and more final than the next line: “In the cold night, her one hand must warm the other.” Must. But while the world she keeps herself in protects, it shuts out the brute reality of the war. Those around her are fully aware. He,

With those other youths who will never return
 he’s heard, and the plants and grass have heard,
 that the leaves so lived him, they volunteer to be his camouflage,
 though they can never make him as cool as she does under her shade,
 though they can never make him as warm as she does under her hair.
 (Bowen and Weigl 95)

They know: “we who still live/don’t dare say they are the lucky ones,” for they are “in the midst of so much suffering,/we can’t look at the gathered stack of guns.” The same people treat the lonely “widow” – if she could be so called, for such is her attachment to him, and there is “the ring loose around her withered finger” – with the most careful consideration; “out of love and respect, the villagers call her miss” (95).

Such attitudes, care and support are the gifts of one’s culture, still alive and comprehensive and alert, and ready to engage. While there is death, destruction, the breaking up of families, the wholeness of supporting village life, a belief-system that venerates whose innate structure extends to the worship of the departed, enables a gathering that includes them. The sharing in ritual and ceremony a reality, brief but renewable, and with a potency that should not be underestimated. A beautiful poetry instance is Van Le’s “The Incense Smell on New Year’s Eve,” which I quote in full, without comment, given its suggestive clarity:

My family wakes at midnight, New Year’s Eve.

Lamps blazing, my wife lights the joss-sticks.
Spirits of our ancestors
Whirl like dense smoke from the altar.

Like the silent wall, my children sit still,
Listen to my wife's inaudible call to the spirits.
I feel as if my throat is being choked,
Memories of past days and years come rushing back ...

...
Let's gather here where no one will be lost;
The scent of joss-sticks will lead the way.
Let's drink a cup of wine together;
Together let's celebrate spring.

The incense still burns in the urn.
My family stays up through the night.
Wind rustles leaves at the gate.
For a moment I hear my friends' footsteps coming home ...

(Bowen and Weigl 79)

This is not a conclusion. There can be none when there is such rich poetry to read and meditate upon. Even in translation, for a great deal of the poetry and poems come through. For this we thank the translators, the poets whose work in this area complement their own poetry.

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