

BOOK REVIEWS

North Vietnam Now

Fiction and Essays from Hanoi

VIETNAM FORUM 15

Edited by Dan Duffy, with introductions and capsule biographies

NEW HAVEN: YALE UNIVERSITY COUNCIL ON SOUTHEAST ASIA STUDIES
YALE CENTER FOR INTERNATIONAL AND AREA STUDIES, 1996.
BLACK AND WHITE PHOTOGRAPHS
275 PAGES

The *Vietnam Forum* and *Lac-Viet* are two publications that came out of the Southeast Asian Refugee Project which was initiated by the Yale Council on Southeast Asia Studies in 1981. Both series feature literary works on Vietnamese history, folklore, economy, and politics. Coming under new editorship in the early '90s, both *The Vietnam Forum* and *Lac-Viet* decidedly shifted their emphasis to more contemporary writers and themes.

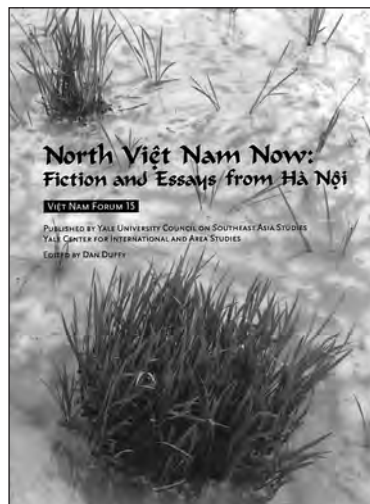
This 1996 issue of *North Vietnam Now: Fiction and Essays from Hanoi* presents a most eclectic collection of works by Vietnamese writers who live, or used to live, in North Vietnam, specifically Hanoi, as well as some fiction and nonfiction from non-Vietnamese, mostly North Americans, who are familiar with Hanoi.

The first half of the book lends itself to fiction (short stories) from an array of North Vietnamese authors. The best of the bunch comes from the well-known author Nguyen Huy Thiep, with his cluster of stories entitled "The Winds of Hua Tat" (Ten Stories in a Small Mountain Village).¹ These ten stories—they are essentially fables—come wrapped in a magical-realism that deals with the myths, superstitions and mysteries of the mountain folk of Nguyen Huy Thiep's youth. There is, for example, the tale of "The Abandoned Horn," a telling of how an ancient, forgotten horn was once used to kill a plague of "strange black worms." Or how about "The Happiness Celebration," the story of a young woman's search for a husband who had "the virtue that was most precious and most rare."

Not only do these tales offer students a reader-friendly introduction to ancient Vietnamese folklore and myth, but also, and perhaps more importantly, it is a good first encounter with Vietnamese literature. That the writer is Nguyen Huy Thiep, one of Vietnam's most gifted storytellers, is certainly an additional treat.

On the other hand, Le Minh Khue's two stories, "The Distant Stars" and "The Last Rain of the Monsoon," take a hard look at the realities of twentieth-century Vietnam. Le Minh Khue is an important writer whose delicate narratives focus on people struggling to make emotional connections, people groping for a moment's stability. Whether they be three women whose job it is to detonate unexploded bombs along the Ho Chi Minh Trail, or the beautiful engineer who must decide between her husband and son and another man, Le Minh Khue's characters are desperate to find a small peace in a chaotic world.²

At the end of this first section of short fiction is Linh Dinh's essay, "The Cat Sits on a Palm Tree: An Introduction to the Folk Poems, Proverbs and Riddles of Vietnam." Although the poetry Linh Dinh translates is not specifically North Vietnamese per se, his material on



Ca Dao poetry— what it is, its origins— is, once again, excellent introductory material for those students who know very little about the literary traditions of Vietnam. His folk poetry translations, especially the puns and riddles, are fun reading and beg to be compared with their Western counterparts. This poetry section can easily be read as a companion to Nguyen Huy Thiep's folk stories, not to mention the

many possibilities it offers instructors who might wish to discuss parallels between Ca Dao to that of other Asian poetry, Japanese haiku, and tanka, for example.

Turning to the non-fiction selections, I highly recommend the three short autobiographical essays by Nguyen Khac Vien, one of Vietnam's most well-known intellectuals.³ His "The Old Banyan Tree," takes us back to his youth, as well as the innocence and simplicity of village life. The other two essays, "Those Fifty Years" and "The America I Know," are both relatively recent writings that give one man's optimistic vision of a new and better Vietnam to come.

North Vietnam Now has more short stories (by both Vietnamese and one by the American author Wayne Karlin), as well as an unusual gathering of articles that, except for their Vietnamesque quality and occasional links to Hanoi, have little in common. For instance, there are three pieces by North Americans: one that discusses how Vietnam is grappling with the world of computers and cyberspace; another that outlines the history of corporate philanthropy in the country; and lastly, a personal narrative that details a young anthropologist's life and times in Hanoi in the 1990s. Another article written by the Vietnamese art critic, art historian and artist, Nguyen Quan, entitled "Art in the Village," gives an excellent account of the various kinds of art (sculptures, woodcuts, and paintings) that can be found in the villages throughout Vietnam, and goes on to discuss the different social and religious aspects such artwork contributes to village life. The only complaints I have with this provocative piece are that first, it sometimes becomes bogged down with wording and information that is beyond the nonspecialist; and second, it is sorely void of visual aids (photographs, illustrations, drawings). Nevertheless, overall, the article is a good primer on Vietnamese village life and art.

One of the assets to be found in this volume is the research Dan Duffy, the editor, has done in providing additional information in the form of an introduction and capsule biography for each contributor, including which materials have been published in English. In my estimation, this in itself is one of the most noteworthy aspects of *Vietnam Forum 15*. *The Vietnam Forum* and *The Lac-Viet Series* are extremely important publications for anyone who wishes to know more about Vietnamese culture, specifically the literature and writers of Vietnam.⁴ ■

NOTES

1. Perhaps Nguyen Huy Thiep's most well-known work to Western audiences is his *The General Retires and Other Stories* (Singapore: Oxford University Press in Asia, 1990), translated with an introduction, "Nguyen Huy Thiep and the Faces of Vietnamese Literature," by Greg Lockhart.
2. Le Minh Khue's *The Stars, The Earth, The River: Short Stories by Le Minh Khue* edited by Wayne Karlin, translated by Bac Hoai Tran and Dana Sachs, was recently published by Curbstone Press.
3. Nguyen Khac Vien, along with Huu Gnoc, wrote the well-known work, *Vietnamese Literature: Historical Background and Texts*, trans. Mary Cowan, et al. (Hanoi: Red River, Foreign Languages Publishing House, undated) presents a wealth of historical information, with samplings of Vietnamese literature from the tenth through the twentieth century. Although the text does not give a great deal of information on contemporary Vietnamese writers—having been published in the late 1970s—it remains an indispensable resource.
4. The volumes in both series are published at variable intervals, and priced individually. For more information on previous as well as forthcoming issues of *Vietnam Forum* and *Lac-Viet*, take a look at the following Web site: <http://www/cis.yale.edu/seas/vietpub>.

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ANNOUNCING THE CHARLES WEI-HSUN FU ISCP ESSAY CONTEST IN ASIAN PHILOSOPHY

Three prizes of \$2,000 each will be awarded for the best essays in the area of Asian philosophy, one award for entries in each of the following languages: 1) Chinese, 2) Korean or Japanese, 3) English. Decisions will be rendered by three separate panels of scholars. Funding also will be provided for the winners to travel to the biennial conference of the International Society for Chinese Philosophy and present their essays on the program. The next ISCP conference is scheduled for the summer of 1999 in Taiwan. The contest is open to graduate students and young scholars in the first five years of their teaching careers and/or completion of graduate work. Three copies of the essay should be sent directly to the Fu Foundation office no later than January 1, 1999 (twenty pages maximum, double-spaced).

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Long, Long Autumn Nights

*Selected Poems of Oguma Hideo,
1901–1940*

Translated with Introduction by David G. Goodman

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During one of the darker periods of Japanese history—the 1920s and 1930s—Oguma Hideo wrote poetry that illuminated the politics of his day. In *Long, Long Autumn Nights*, the first English sampling of this avant-garde poet, the reader will find powerfully humane writing that reflects the age's imperialism, and in a sense redeems it. Translated by David G. Goodman, *Long, Long Autumn Nights* also serves to reveal the significance of Japan's demographic diversity in what is often thought of as a homogenous country. Readers of this volume will be able to expand their knowledge not only of Japanese poetry but of the Japanese nation.

Goodman tells us that Oguma grew up in Hokkaidō and Sakhaline, colonies in Japan's northernmost region, and that his formal education ended when he completed the equivalent of eighth grade. Before establishing himself as a left-wing, non-Communist intellectual, Oguma took on a variety of odd jobs within the fringes of colonial society, and before the end of his brief lifetime, worked as a reporter and free-lance editor.

This excellent volume divides Oguma's poetry into four time periods within the two decades: (1) From Sakhalin to Tokyo, 1920–1930; (2) The Proletarian Poet, 1928–1933; (3) Post-Tenko Poems, 1934–1935; (4) A Voice Discovered: Epic Poetry Circa 1935. Goodman's introduction analyzes each time period, setting each within modern history and literature; a selection of twenty-three poems are then presented chronologically.

For Oguma, writing was a matter of identifying positive modes of being, of affirming humanity. In "Singing on Horseback" (*Bajō no uta*), the poet fancies himself a Robin Hood-like balladeer. His "task as master thief/ Is to compose poetry on horseback, . . . / To be a fore-runner./ To be in the vanguard./ To manifest courage."

The lengthier narrative poems, published in 1935, contrast with the core tradition of Japanese poetry dominated by the short forms of

