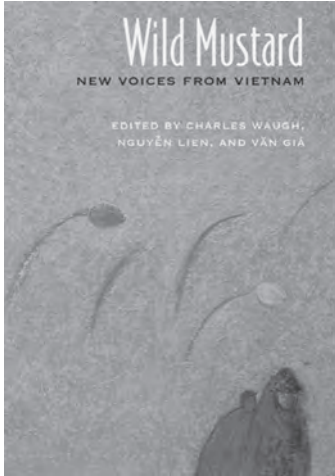


Planting the Seeds of *Wild Mustard*

Reading Vietnamese Short Stories in the Study of Asian History and Religion

By William B. Noseworthy



W*ild Mustard: New Voices from Vietnam* is a collection of contemporary short stories, translated into English and edited by Charles Waugh, Nguyen Lien, and Van Gia (Curbstone Books/Northwestern, 2017). I have used the book in two college courses on the history of Asian religions. This essay primarily focuses on using “Sleeping in the Lotus Flowers,” a story included in the book, in the classroom. There is also contextual content on Vietnamese culture and religion that should be helpful for instructors who have limited knowledge of Việt Nam.

For the grand majority of college students studying in the United States, “Việt Nam” still conjures up the images of a war before the images of a country. Việt Nam is a critical country in the international community, a rapidly developing economy with substantial recognition for its strategic importance concerning its proximity to the South China Sea and the People’s Republic of China (PRC). “Sleeping in the Lotus Flowers” by Nguyen Ahn Vu is a short story that affords students a glimpse into Vietnamese culture, history, and literature. The story features two central characters, Thoai and Thoan, who have been permanently injured by war. Thoai has just half of one leg and one arm after his body was maimed by an explosion when he was a soldier. Thoan is deaf because of an explosion that occurred when she was a small child. When they are reunited, Thoan attends Cầu Quả Temple to burn incense to bless the reunion.

The plot of the story centers around the negotiations of Thoai and Thoan’s relationship. How does a person who is permanently deaf learn to care for someone else? How does a person who is unable to walk care for someone who is deaf? Moreover, what happens when, as their relationship develops, Thoan wants to have a child, but Thoai is physically unable to fulfill her desires? Thoai attempts, at first, to enlist the help of a friend, Sat, who might be able to serve as a surrogate. However, in a quite dramatic discussion, Sat reveals that he is undoubtedly physically incapable. The two laugh and enjoy a moment of recognition of their shared suffering. These basic plot features extend beyond the social and historical context of the work. They touch upon universal questions about how people shape relationships around shared experiences of past trauma. “Sleeping in the Lotus Flowers” is also a useful text precisely because of the way that the text can be drawn upon to teach about Việt Nam. Students will gain a better understanding of how expectations about gender roles, ancestor veneration, and Buddhist practices impact the ways that Vietnamese have dealt with the trauma of war.

“Sleeping in the Lotus Flowers” does not specify the time during which the narrative occurs. To present some of the context of the story, course instructors should be prepared to work through the basics of pre- and post-Việt Nam War history. This is to say, we are not sure which war or conflict frames the narrative exactly. It is useful for students to be consciously aware of the First Indochina War (1945–1954), the Second Indochina War—including the Việt Nam War—and the subsequent

Vietnamese invasion and occupation of Cambodia (1979–1989), as well as the brief border war with the People’s Republic of China (PRC, 1979). The fact that “Sleeping in the Lotus Flowers” is *not* explicit about the war referenced but more obliquely only “postwar” is essential. First, readers should be aware that while Americans, even at a young age, likely have heard of the “Việt Nam War,” Vietnamese citizens were involved with many wars in the twentieth century. In other words, whether Thoan lost her hearing during the First Indochina War or the Second Indochina War is of little consequence for this story. Whether Thoai was maimed in the Việt Nam War or the Vietnamese occupation of Cambodia is of little consequence. What is more important is that Thoai and Thoan are living with universal consequences of war.

Wild Mustard as an entire collection is advantageous for teaching about essential themes in Vietnamese culture. Hence, while instructors may assign students “Sleeping in the Lotus Flowers” as an individual reading of just twelve pages, the collection as a whole would be useful for instructors to refer to in advance of their lesson. Critical aspects of Vietnamese culture present in these stories include a focus on “the family” and generations. Students need to know that there is no single official religion for most Vietnamese families, although a minority do have official religions designated on their state identification documents. Instead, the widely recognized notions of the *tam giao*, or “three paths,” of Confucianism, Daoism, and Bud-

Lotus flowers are a reference to a famous Buddhist parable of achieving transcendence within the mundane world: even a lotus may grow out of the mud.

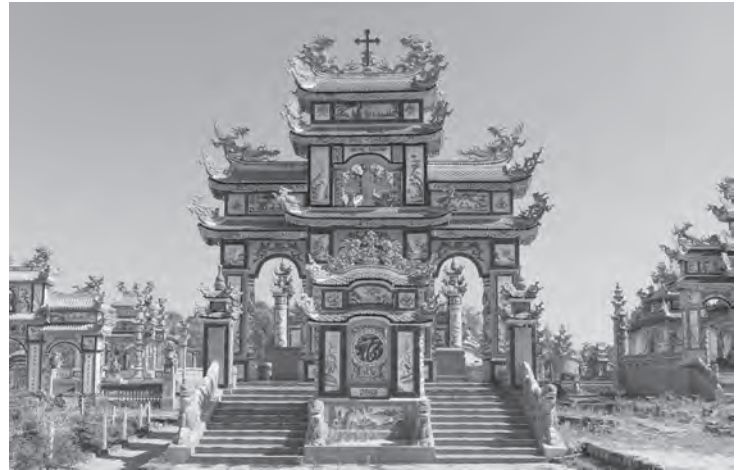
dhism, combine with more broadly held Southeast Asian understandings of animism and ancestor veneration to form the fabric of what scholars typically call “Vietnamese folk religion.” There are individuals who are affiliated with religions more officially in Việt Nam, as well. These include affiliates of two primary schools of Buddhism: Theravada and Mahayana. Other religions that are practiced include Sunni Islam and Hinduism (especially in southern Việt Nam). However, there are also particular versions of Hinduism and Islam that are found only in Việt Nam among the Cham ethnic minority group. Scholars might call these “Cham particularist Hinduism” or “Cham particularist Islam,” meaning that they refer to practices only associated with those populations. There are Vietnamese particularist religions as well. Hoa Hao Buddhism, a millenarian form of Buddhism that originated in southern Việt Nam, could be called a “Vietnamese particularist” religion. Another well-known Vietnamese particularist religion is called Cao Dai. The Cao Dai religion is most famous for being syncretic, because it intentionally blends all types of influences, from Confucius to Victor Hugo, from Jesus to Muhammad. Catholicism and Protestantism also play essential roles in Vietnamese society. In order for students to best understand “Sleeping in the Lotus Flowers,” it is important to focus on Buddhism.

It is arguably most accurate to say that the most popular religion in Việt Nam, by far, is Mahayana Buddhism. The number of Vietnamese officially listing themselves as “Buddhist” (Đạo Phật) on their government identity cards is much smaller than might be expected. In part, this is because the layering of the “three paths” means that most people who practice Buddhism are not officially Buddhist. This is also because of the modernist push against religious affiliations that occurred during the twentieth century, especially after the central Communist Party leadership criticized “superstitious practices” in the last quarter of the century. Despite this push, in Việt Nam today, there are countless altars for gods, saints, spirits—including demons and evil spirits that must be appeased through veneration—and ancestors. For example, a local deity in south-central Việt Nam today is a product of the veneration of an individual who died at sea and was transformed into a whale god. In Vietnamese, this god became known as the “Old Man of the South Seas,” although he is also called other names by local ethnic minority groups.

Amidst all these religious practices, ancestor veneration remains the most central. It is practiced by ethnic Vietnamese and ethnic minority groups living in Việt Nam that are also Vietnamese citizens, although there are different names for the practice depending on the group. For example, ancestor veneration is called *Mbeng Muk Kei* in the Cham language. This is pronounced roughly “Bung Mook Kye,” with kei rhyming with “sky.” “Mbeng,” in this context, means “feast,” while “muk” refers to female ancestors and “kei” refers to male ancestors. In Vietnamese, these ancestors are called *Ong Ba To Tien*. For the majority of Vietnamese, past and present, regardless of religious affiliation or nonaffiliation, the worship of ancestors remains essential. We find explicit references to this in the case of “Sleeping in the Lotus Flowers,” alongside explicit references to Buddhist concepts. The two main characters, Thoan and Thoai, pray with the simple offering of joss incense sticks and burn votive paper in the story. The reference may appear short, but it hints at the deeper cultural setting of the story. Lotus flowers are a reference to a famous Buddhist parable of achieving transcendence within the mundane world: even a lotus may grow out of the mud.

CLASSROOM USE

There is an abundance of material available that can be used to support teaching “Sleeping in the Lotus Flowers.” The majority of this material focuses on the Việt Nam War in image and film. Hence, the challenge for instructors is to provide context for the story, and place it appropriately, without focusing too much on the Việt Nam War itself, thus overshadowing the real points of the piece, which stretch far beyond the specific context of any individual conflict that Vietnamese were involved in. Instructors should assign “Sleeping in the Lotus Flowers” for students to read at home. As the text is only twelve pages, it will probably take students between fifteen and thirty minutes to read before a class discussion. To spark discussion, instructors should ask students to individually reflect upon a simple question or two, and write reactions for a few minutes. Questions like “How would you describe Việt Nam?” or “How would you describe Vietnamese religions?” help get students to generate information that illustrates that they know more than they might expect about Việt Nam, although they might assume they know nothing. After a few minutes of quiet brainstorming and writing, it is crucial to pair students together to ask them to share responses in small groups to generate a series of four or five statements. Then, after eliciting a few volunteer statements from the class, placing the students in larger groups can be a final stage to generate more responses, depending on the size of the class. After these responses are shared, it is most important to teach about Vietnamese society through the use of images (rather than film or text). Showing a series of images: temples, small shrines, ancestor gravesites, and key religious communities in Việt Nam helps students see the landscape’s cultural diversity. Be sure also to include images of joss stick incense being burned, as well as votive paper being burned, to help these scenes from the text come alive. Instruc-



City of Ghosts in Hue, Việt Nam. Source © Shutterstock. Photo by Juanjo Simon.



Vietnamese woman praying in a temple, holding lotus flower buds. Source: © Shutterstock. Photo by Stephane Bidouze.



The graves of PAVN soldiers killed on the 17th parallel north DMZ and on the Truong Son “Long Mountain” Annamite Range Trail at the Truong Son Martyrs’ Cemetery in Quang Tri, Việt Nam. Source: © Shutterstock. Photo by Saigoneer.

tors should also be sure to include images of communities that are not just ethnic Vietnamese, but also the Hmong (northern), Cham (south-central), and Khmer (southern), as this will demonstrate the vibrancy of the religious landscape. As instructors show the images, elicit reactions or comments from students (*What are we looking at here? What’s going on? How do you interpret what is going on in this scene?*).

After the general discussion of the context of “Sleeping in the Lotus Flowers,” instructors should spend about twenty minutes discussing the details of the text with students. During this time, they could place the students in small groups to work or conduct a whole-class discussion, depending on the size of the class. Have students refer to their notes and



Bac Ninh, Việt Nam. The Ba Chua Kho (Queen of Stock) Temple, built during the Ly dynasty (1010–1225) on Kho Mountain, was dedicated as a national cultural historical site in 1989. Source: © Shutterstock. Photo by Yangxiang.



Red brick temples of My Son Sanctuary near Da Nang, Việt Nam. My Son is a complex of partially ruined ancient Hindu temples commissioned by the kings of Champa. Source: © Shutterstock. Photo by Efred.

the text to clarify: (1) the characters of the story; (2) the social context of the story; (3) the critical plot points that they think are most important; (4) any important symbols, scenes, or themes from the text; and (5) what they think is the major takeaway from the story. It is imperative to leave space for individual interpretations during this close reading of the text. When students return for discussion, instructors can respond to the points that they raise through reorganizing assertions, directly addressing any inaccurate information or other important student comments. They can also use this time to have students read aloud any specific passages that they feel are particularly important. If students prove to be shy, but the instructor finds that they are all engaging with a particular passage (as may well be the case with this text), the instructor can read the passage out loud and then use this as a springboard for further discussion. The nature of the comments that instructors will want to highlight will depend on the course, although it is possible to use this text for Introduction to World Religions, Asian Religions, World History Post-1500, Asian History, Introduction to Southeast Asia, and other such courses. Below are a few examples of how broader religious, historical, and literary themes can be employed with students to help them better understand both the short story and Việt Nam and East Asia.

1. Buddhism. The author of “Sleeping in the Lotus Flowers” assumes readers are familiar with Vietnamese Buddhist contexts. Hence, instructors might wish to expound on these contexts a bit more to explore them in relation to the text after the students have had some time to engage with the material, as highlighted above more directly. The two schools of Buddhism in Việt Nam, Theravada and Mahayana, generally have different interpretations of a very important concept in Buddhism, known as the *sangha*. In Theravada

contexts, the *sangha* usually just refers to the monastic order. Hence, after the Cambodian Genocide between 1975 and 1979, when the monastic order in Cambodia had been devastated, there were Vietnamese (including ethnic Vietnamese) Theravada monks who traveled to Cambodia to reinvigorate the *sangha*, as the laity could not perform the task themselves. However, for the majority of Vietnamese Buddhists, who are affiliated with the Mahayana school, the notion of the *sangha* is much broader. The *sangha* in this context includes all of the laity, as well as the monks and nuns. Thoai is part of the *sangha*, as are Sat and Thoan, and the story reads as if all of us are. An additional explanation of the differences between the schools of Theravada and Mahayana is needed. Vietnamese Mahayana practitioners tend to explain the difference between Theravada and Mahayana by suggesting that Theravada emphasizes the focus on individual enlightenment, thereby contrasting these notions with their emphasis on the “Bodhisattva path” in Mahayana. This Bodhisattva path includes the renunciation practices *bodhicitta* (a mind that strives toward enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings) and wisdom. In the middle of the twentieth century, the Bodhisattva path was merged with modernists and reformist understandings of Buddhism during the rise of the Socially Engaged Buddhism movement.

The Socially Engaged Buddhism movement became famous through the work of Vietnamese monastics such as Thich Nhat Hanh, who was criticized by both anti-Communist and Communist-aligned causes during the Second Indochina War. It also contrasts with some of the most popular practices of folk Buddhism, which focus on the use of amulets, traditional medicine, and chanting *sutras* (Buddhist texts) to treat physical or metaphysical ailments. Monastics of all Buddhist schools also play important active roles in numerous aspects of Vietnamese life, from performing services associated with life cycle rituals to consoling individuals who have experienced trauma. In the case of Thoan, she is given a talisman wrapped with a prayer by a master monk of Ca Pagoda and instructions to perform a ritual that will promote fertility. Although we suspect that Thoai’s wartime injuries have left him impotent and frustrated with the psychological weight of not being able to fulfill a conventional role as a future male head of household, the text never makes explicit one other implication: that if he is impotent, this eliminates the possibility that future generations will properly venerate him as an ancestor spirit.

2. Confucianism. Although it is not so clearly referenced in “Sleeping in the Lotus Flowers,” Confucianism in Việt Nam has acted predominantly as part of the *tam giao* to instill a code of ethics that includes clear rules to guide the correct behavior of individuals within broader social contexts as citizens and within narrower social settings as family members. In traditional Vietnamese societies, especially from the fifteenth through the nineteenth centuries, there was the promotion of *dinh*—or “communal houses”—places where both temples and shrines could be merged as adjunct buildings to a community center, where bureaucratic matters could be convened. At the *dinh*, Vietnamese families might also offer food or seek protection from natural disasters and human tragedies. Furthermore, as hinted at above, most households have ancestors’ altars to honor, respect, and maintain, for the sake of the memories of past generations, but also to invoke the *Ong Ba To Tien* for the protection of future generations. Since many Vietnamese families also believe in cycles of birth and rebirth, wherein death is simply an intermediary stage, it is absolutely critical to venerate ancestors and for ancestors to be revered to contribute positively to the karmic cycles at play. Venerating ancestors not only keeps them content and more likely

to bless the living, but it also contributes to better rebirths, paying the affirmative karmic action forward to future generations. Thus, for Thoai, although he is a loyal patriot who was affiliated with nationalist liberation movements, the fact that a nonfatal injury has left him a “dead end” is the major problem for him as a character.

3. Vietnamese History and Literature. To better contextualize students’ reading of “Sleeping in the Lotus Flowers,” it is helpful to have a general sense of the backgrounds of the authors and a summary understanding of the other stories in the collection. Nearly 40 percent of the Vietnamese population had been born after 1975 by the 1990s, and many authors of the contemporary literary scene continue to write reflections of “the war” that are not so much explicitly informed by direct experiences as they are by their own experiences “after the war.” It is notable that the reading of Vietnamese literature in American classrooms focuses almost entirely on the Việt Nam War as such, which is why “Sleeping in the Lotus Flowers” is a particularly innovative text. Although the context of “war” is explicit, which war is never made explicit. Furthermore, the *Doi Moi* transition to “market socialism” in the 1980s and the “open door” period of normalization of relations with the United States, as well as the formation of stronger international ties with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and Northeast Asian states, provide much of the broader social context of the story. The emphasis on family relations is central to the pieces in the collection, such as in the stories of “Wild Mustard” and “In the White Rain.” In the short story “Wild Mustard,” the only time that the main characters feel like they belong is when they are with their grandmother. Somewhat differently, in “In the White Rain,” the narrator describes tense relationships with family members, as the narrator feels at home neither in the urban area nor in their hometown, and thus experiences a sense of displacement with respect to their ancestors.

A possible expansion for drawing on themes beyond “Sleeping in the Lotus Flowers,” which are still present in the *Wild Mustard* collection, includes a focus on urbanization. Although urbanization is not a theme of “Sleeping in the Lotus Flowers,” it is an essential theme for students to understand and comes across in other stories in the collection. For example, in “Wounds of the City,” the main character, Dziu, faces numerous miseries in her new life in urban environs, particularly after an incident that occurs when she is walking home alone at night, presumably an action that would have been considered “safe” in her previous place of residence. Changing environs also emerge as a theme in the story “Heart of the Land,” where old symbols of the village vanish, such as eight stone steles and ancient banyan trees. The central character finds his home village no longer peaceful and begins to describe it as distasteful, even hating it. The transformation or disconnection from village life is potentially traumatic as well. In the story “Thung Lam,” the central character loses her parents, so the village thus no longer provides the emotional comfort and healing necessary for her. A once-innocent and straightforward place disappears, and she is confronted with the cold, ruthless, unforgivingly utilitarian world of the present. Thus, potential disconnection from this place where there is a home, a root, and even—in historical times, during the early modern period—the *noi chon*, or the place where one’s placenta is buried, is related to a sense of, if described in a Buddhist framework, *dukkha* (di-sease). This is related to the understanding of *tanha* (clinging or thirst) that can produce suffering. Although many scholars of Buddhism translate suffering and *dukkha* as entirely interchangeable, this sense of di-sease gets closer to the expression of numerous characters in the *Wild Mustard* collection. This di-sease can also be equated with displacement, which can bring further suffering, such as in the story “The Land,” when several families left the village and were forced to live in a faraway land. Several tragic incidents occur, such as the death of a young boy and a famine. In “The Land,” producing a new



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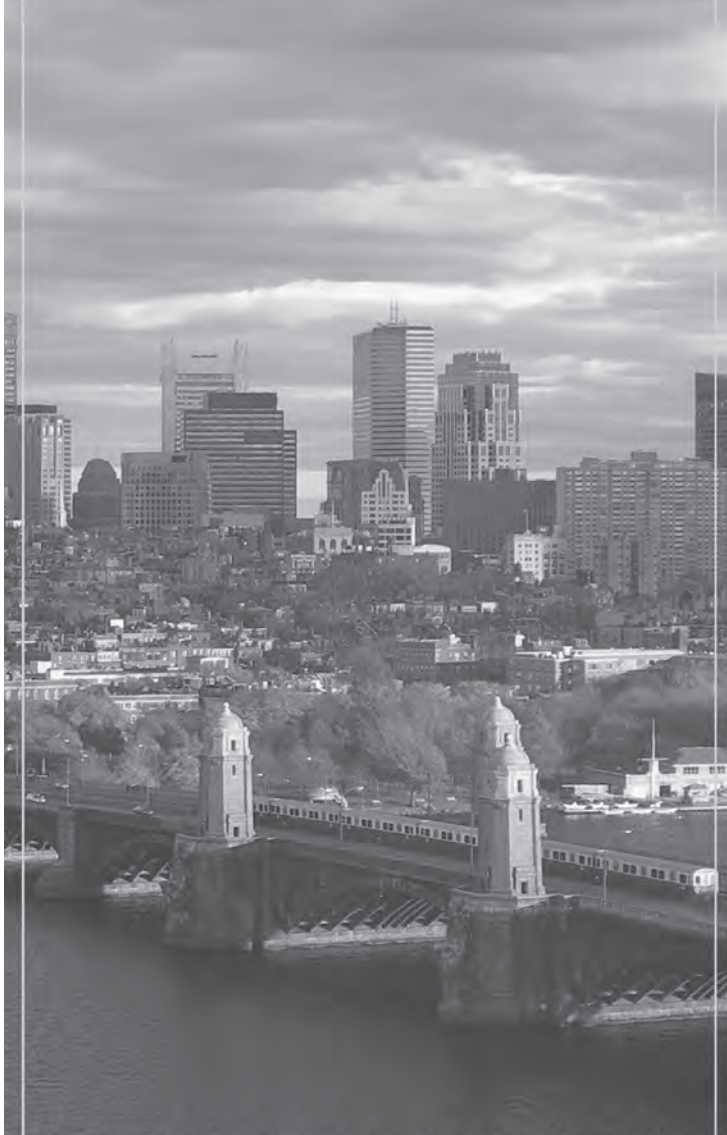


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generation restores the balance. In the case of “Sleeping in the Lotus Flowers,” the most important theme to convey to students is that while mud, or di-sease, may seem ever-present and inescapable, particularly for Thoan and Thoai, even though producing a new generation may be impossible, a lotus may still grow from the mud.

The sheer number of books authored both in the field of Vietnamese studies and Vietnamese literature, in both translation and English, is so enormous that settling upon a single piece of literature that teaches students aptly about the culture, social structures, rich literary traditions, and complexities of war and historical memory is a daunting task for field experts. Locating a place for Vietnamese literature within these broader contexts is as tricky in Introduction to World Religions, Asian Religions, World History, and Asian History survey courses. For further reading specifically on the topic of Vietnamese religion and society, instructors might consider the following works, with brief annotations. ■

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