

The Sacred Willow Four Generations in the Life of a Vietnamese Family

BY DUONG VAN MAI ELLIOTT
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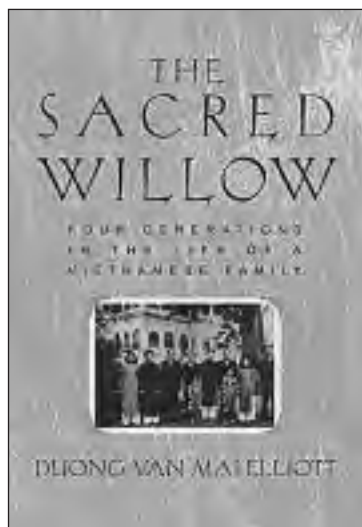
Courses on the Vietnam War and Vietnam remain popular across American campuses, but there has been a dearth of literary materials from a Vietnamese point of view, originally written in English, which can be used for such courses. As the poet William Ehrhart once observed, the Vietnam War has generated the most prolific U.S. veterans' literature in American history, so this side of the story is well represented. Academic studies on such topics as Vietnamese history, culture and society, diplomatic, military and political histories of the U.S. intervention in Vietnam, and the impact of the Vietnam War on American culture have received the broad attention of American scholars, and many of these works can be and are used for courses. But the Vietnamese side of the story from an "American" point of view is not as well known, for lack of texts.

Now, with the publication of *The Sacred Willow: Four Generations in the Life of a Vietnamese Family* by Duong Van Mai Elliott, we have an important and accessible historical memoir that focuses on the impact of war and revolution on four successive generations of an extended Vietnamese family, going back to the nineteenth century and originating in the north of the country. This is the first such account by a Vietnamese American.¹ The author of this chronicle first came to the U.S. in 1960 and is now living in California. Duong Van Mai Elliott's book fills a large gap in the literature for teaching purposes because much of the literature from a "Vietnamese point of view" in the U.S. is in the form of translations (many of which are excellent) of Vietnamese texts. Otherwise, courses on the Vietnam War must rely on texts and materials which focus in large part on the U.S. side.

The Sacred Willow, published in hardback by Oxford University Press in 1999, has recently been issued in paperback, and I

highly recommend it for classroom use. The book provides an effective way to shift our attention from solely *our* losses and travails to the impact of the war on Vietnam and the Vietnamese, both Communist and non-Communist. Literary works do this as well, of course, but *The Sacred Willow* has a particularly long historical time span. Beginning in the late nineteenth century, the chronicle conveys the dramatic events associated with the French conquest, colonialism, the Communist revolution, and the American intervention, through the experiences of an extraordinary family, originally from the Red River delta of northern Vietnam.

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"willow tree" in Vietnamese), was one of the most distinguished mandarin clans in the North. Mai's great-grandfather served the Nguyen Emperors before the French conquest in 1884. Her father was the mayor of Haiphong under the Emperor Bao Dai and the French colonial regime in the 1940s and 1950s. Her natal family consisted of eleven children. Her father took a concubine, as expected of a man of his social standing, but much to the anguish of Mai's mother. The family escaped the North in 1954 as Ho Chi Minh's revolutionary army took over Hanoi. Mai went to high school in Saigon, where she became enamored of the U.S. and American culture. She applied for a USAID scholarship to attend college and studied at Georgetown University, where she met her future American husband.

The fortunes of the Duong clan were directly affected by the nineteenth-century Vietnamese scholar-gentry resistance against the French conquest, the colonial regime from 1884 to 1945, the rise of the Communist revolution under Ho Chi Minh starting in the 1930s, the August Revolution of 1945 in Hanoi, the Viet-Minh French war (1946–54), the flight to the South in 1954, the American War, and finally, flight to Western countries when the Communists reunited the country in 1975.

Mai's motive for writing and researching her family's history was to both write her own memoirs and to show how her family endured despite their many "fates" and fortunes. The family was split up by the revolution. Mai's older sister, Thang, joined the

Communist Viet Minh in 1946 with her husband, Hau. They spent most of the French war in the *maquis*. Her paternal uncle, Chinh, was part of Ho Chi Minh's circle. An elder brother, Giu, was captured by the French and spent time in "the Hanoi Hilton," originally a French prison for Communist suspects. Giu ended up in the South, where he was a draft-dodger from the Army of the

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Republic of Vietnam (ARVN). Failing to escape in 1975, he spent four years in re-education camps.

In writing this story, Mai particularly wanted to reconnect with Thang. They had had no contact for forty years. Their meeting in Saigon in 1993 was intensely emotional for both of them. Over the years Mai retained respect for her sister's commitment to the revolution, since Thang took a principled stand against colonialism and for the revolution, adhering to this position despite enormous deprivation and hardship. When Mai returned to South Vietnam after Georgetown, she worked for the Rand Corporation interviewing Viet Cong prisoners and defectors in the South. Yet, when she and her husband came back to the U.S. in 1968 to attend graduate school, they were thrown into the maelstrom of anti-war activities gripping American campuses and couldn't fail to be affected by them.

One of the issues underlying this family history and memoir is that of personal destiny and choice. Mai examines this with great poignancy through the stories and life-paths of herself and Thang. An implicit question is, who made the "right" choice? Who had the "better life"? Was joining the revolution "worth it"? Would it have been better for educated idealists among the colonial elite to have abandoned the Communists when hard-line and self-defeating policies took over? Did the Communists unnecessarily doom Vietnam to endless warfare and a hopeless future? The picture Mai paints of the revolution through the experiences of her sister is grim. Thang devoted herself to a sometimes ungrateful Communist Party, and today she is simply tired and worn out. Thang now lives in Ho Chi Minh city, surrounded by her children and grandchildren, domesticity filling her days. The wartime experiences are too mind-boggling and painful to reminisce about.

Mai, for her part, escaped to middle-class life in the U.S. and to the politics which animated the conduct of the war from the American side. She married an American, akin to heresy in her traditional Confucian family, making her vulnerable to accusations of being a "loose woman." But when she returned to Vietnam in 1993 to reconnect with her family, she confronted wishful expectations common to many Vietnamese in Vietnam. The streets in the U.S. must be paved with gold; "how lucky" she is to live in such a prosperous country.

But is elder sister Thang's weariness a result of a revolution gone wrong or of being involved in two long wars? Many others of her generation who were also part of the former colonial elite made the same choice she did. Some were attacked unjustly and recall their past with bitterness. Others, though, endured the very slow start of the post-war era and the eventual adoption of market policies and the reopening to the West. In their memories of the past, they believe they have led rich lives, particularly those who experienced the August Revolution first-hand in 1945, and came to the defense of their country. Some served by living among and working for "the enemy" while secretly giving aid to the revolution. Communism may be one thing, but nationalist pride is still strong among these veterans, who recall the past with pride.

The reader cannot fail to be struck by the telling of this family story from a woman's point of view. Present in Mai's story

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is the enormous change in Vietnamese women's lives from Thang and Mai's mother's and grandmother's generations to their own generation. Both grandmother and mother were confined by the strict patriarchal rules of an upper-class Confucian family. The Communist revolution broke up the extended Confucian family in Vietnam. Thang became "liberated" in the revolutionary way, following the androgynous model of social liberation through revolutionary service. Mai experienced change from contact with the West, through her education in the U.S. and later her marriage to an American. She came to embrace her new station in life, granting her more personal freedom, more material comfort, and looser rules than if she had remained in Vietnam. But in the U.S., she was also the target of racism.

The merit of this book for teaching purposes is to shift the obsession with the Vietnam War from our trauma to its impact on Vietnam and the Vietnamese. The trauma, death and misery spawned by the Vietnam War resulted in more than 58,000 casualties on the American side. But Vietnamese losses were far greater. Recent figures appearing in the official press in Hanoi have put the number at about 6–7 million killed and wounded on the Communist side (military and civilian, North and South). Of these are 300,000 Missing in Action (MIAs).² South Vietnamese ARVN casualties and wounded number about 1 million. (The total northern and southern Vietnamese population was about 70 million people during the American War.) Over 5 million tons of bombs were dropped on Vietnam by the U.S., compared to 2.7 million tons dropped by Allied forces during World War II.³ Between 1962–71, the U.S. sprayed 20 million gallons of Agent Orange and other defoliants on Vietnam. The Vietnamese government estimates that more than 1 million people out of the present population of 78 million are disabled or genetically affected by dioxin still present in human tissue and the food chain. A new study of residents of Bien Hoa city in the South reveals that dioxin levels among both children and adults are still alarmingly high.⁴

There are almost 3 million Vietnamese living abroad, dispersed around the world, as a result of the Communist revolution and the wars with France and the U.S. Every family in the North and South lost one or more family members due to military action. A large percentage of families in Vietnam have relatives living abroad. In fact, the impact of the Cold War on Vietnam (1946–75) may have been among the most devastating on any Third World country in terms of casualties and war-related human and environmental damage.

The Sacred Willow helps instructors raise some of these larger issues. But the story properly begins with the initial Vietnamese encounter with the French. Through the twists and turns in the fortunes of one family, the reader can experience the tumultuous course of the major events in Vietnamese history spanning the twentieth century. This perspective is long overdue, and this book provides an extraordinary means of viewing it. ■

NOTES

1. Le Ly Hayslip with Jay Wirts, *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places* (New York: Penguin, 1993) is also a memoir by a Vietnamese-American originally written in English, but it is mainly confined to the period of U.S. intervention and the southern portion of the country.
2. *Nhan Dan* (Peoples Daily), September 22, 1995. The Vietnamese government has been very reluctant over the years to release casualty figures for the 'American War' (1960–75) and, indeed, they may not be fully known.
3. In all military theatres. See James P. Harrison, "History's Heaviest Bombing," in Jayne Werner and Luu Doan Huynh, eds., *The Vietnam War: Vietnamese and American Perspectives* (Armonk, New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1993), p. 133.
4. The study was conducted by U.S. scientist and dioxin expert Arnold Schecter and published in the *Journal of Occupational and Environmental Medicine*, as reported in an AP release, May 15, 2001, VNNNews-list 5/15/2001.

JAYNE WERNER is a Professor of Political Science, as well as Associate Research Scholar at Columbia University. Her book, *Gender, Household, State: Doi Moi in Viet Nam*, co-edited with Daniele Belanger (Ithaca, N.Y.: Southeast Asia Program Publications, Cornell University, 2001) has just been published.



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