

RESOURCES
BOOK REVIEW ESSAYS

Việt Nam and the Cold War

A Short Bibliographical Essay

By Dan Duffy

The Cold War in Asia blew the wars for post-colonial Việt Nam out of all proportion, magnified the centuries-old web of Vietnamese diaspora into a train wreck, and laid the ground for post-socialist transition to an especially lively civil society under abiding authoritarian rule. These fascinating stories are well served by world scholarship, but best told by Vietnamese witnesses, who testify through daily life experiences to the abstractions of policy and research.

Duong Van Mai Elliott's *The Sacred Willow*, the history of her family from the eighteenth through the end of the twentieth century, introduces both the Vietnamese sense of the national past and accurately reflects mainstream scholarship. Her narrative is too substantial for most classrooms, but as preparation, it will situate the non-specialist instructor in a local view of the Vietnamese nation.

Elliott, a former RAND researcher in the war between Sài Gòn and Hà Nội, researched and interviewed her extensive family to flesh out the story of Việt Nam since the dawn of the Nguyen dynasty (1802–1945). Her procedure is Tolstoyan, proceeding from set pieces on the stage of domestic life to social science overview, providing many dramatic passages that can be taught, as well as citations to the scholarly literature for research projects.

Most teachers in survey courses can bring only one or two Vietnamese texts into the classroom. There is a rich opportunity to select those exact texts that direct attention to Vietnamese views of the topic of the course. Despite ritual laments of scarcity, in fact a great many texts have been published in English over the last forty years. Improved access through interlibrary loan, Google, and dealer networks have made them all available with planning.

Two tools are at hand on the Web to guide the search for the right few texts. John C. Schafer's *Vietnamese Perspectives on the War in Vietnam* provides a classified, annotated view of the translated literature available as of 1996. Schafer taught in Huế during the war and researched Vietnamese literature on his own during a career teaching college English despite a heavy class load. His two-handed grasp of both the subject matter and its possibilities in the US classroom is unmatched. The Yale University Council on Southeast Asian Studies, who published the book, now makes it available on their Web site.¹

Once oriented by Elliott and Schafer, an instructor can search further in *Wikivietlit*, the online encyclopedia of the Viet Nam Literature Project.² It is intended for those literate in Vietnamese and French as well as English, but automated categories provide lists of authors translated into English by genre and topic. Author entries provide both backgrounds for instructors and avenues for student research.

I made my own suggestions in "Not a War" in the fall 1997 issue of *Education About Asia*.³ In the two stories by Le Minh Khue, I discussed teaching "Distant Stars" and "Last Rain of the Monsoon," which depict two of the three most important Vietnamese aspects of the Cold War in Asia, the hot war in Việt Nam and the new society it created. Le Minh Khue, one of the most prestigious book editors in her country, has since worked with novelist Wayne Karlin and Curbstone Press to bring out a lengthy series of such work by her colleagues.

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Where course content includes the memory of the war, an instructor might also consider works by foreigners who scrupulously attend to the testimony and interpretation of non-writers. Martha Hess's *Then the Americans Came*, from a variety of Southerners; Lady Borton's *After Sorrow*, from communist women in the North and Central regions; and, Heonik Kwon's astonishing report of the afterlife of deceased Vietnamese, *Ghosts of War in Viet Nam*, are rich candidates.

Other texts, mostly memoir, address the third great consequence of the Cold War in Asia for the Vietnamese—their intensified diaspora after 1975. These texts range from those by adult emigrants with a firm grasp on the home country, such as Le Ly Haslip's *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places*, Lucy Nguyen's *Dragon Child*, Quang Van Nguyen and Marjorie Pivar's *Fourth Uncle in the Mountain*—to writers from the next generation, such as Andrew X. Pham and le thi diem thuy [*sic*], for whom the war is fantasy and family secrets. Nguyen Qui Duc's *Where the Ashes Are* and Quang X. Pham's *A Sense of Duty* combine the two impulses, acting on their memories to investigate the family past and its public context.

In this brief introduction to teachable resources in English on the Cold War in Việt Nam, my largest point is that no longer are there just a handful of accessible texts to consider for teaching, whose limitations themselves determined the content of many past courses. There are now dozens of teachable texts in print or online from which the instructor may choose. Working through Elliott for a panoramic Vietnamese view of the Cold War, with Schafer's bibliography, and the Wikivietlit encyclopedia, a motivated instructor can find exactly the right works for his or her students. ■

NOTES

1. John C. Schafer, *Yale University Council on Southeast Asian Studies*, "Vietnamese Studies on the War in Vietnam," online at <http://www.yale.edu/seas/bibliography/>.
2. Wikivietlit, Viet Nam Literature Project, at <http://vietnamlit.org/wiki/index.php?title=Wikivietlit>.
3. Dan Duffy, "Not a War. Suggestions from a College Reading Course in Fiction and Poetry from Vietnam and Vietnamese Americans," *EAA*, 2:2 (Fall 1997), 9.

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