

Postscript

The Other Turtle's Tale

While writing this book, I often turned to a Vietnamese friend and colleague for advice. After reading 'The Professional', he hazarded: 'You're Maria Pham, aren't you?' My friend was convinced that I had made myself a character in the book in the same way a film director might take on a cameo role. As he saw it, Maria Pham revealed the true me as an expatriate who had reluctantly returned to his birthplace only to find himself adopting the culture and loving the country. My friend was right. I am Maria Pham. But there's more to my relationship with this book, and with Vietnam, than that.

'Every character is me', I explained to him. By which I meant that they not only do in the stories as I have done in real life, but also that they often think and feel how I thought and felt. Like the Sticky Rice Seller, I've made up stories about people as they go by in the street, wanting to get to know them and for them to know something of me. The Ball Boy and the Professional's struggles against conformity and obligation very much align with mine. At times, I'm as insufferable as the Goalkeeper. And, like the Student, I have sought to reconcile the present with the past and whatever lies beyond. Other characters are also me, depicting everything from my obsession with gadgetry to my pursuit of mindfulness in a world of distractions.

However, none of the characters are closer to me than the Turtle of Hoan Kiem Lake, who embodies how I lived in Vietnam and how I've studied and written about it. That is, as if I was dreaming; as if I was part of the action, as if I somehow knew that it was all a dream, and as if I was all the while observing events from the outside unable and unwilling to intervene. Allow me to explain.

I was part of the action in Vietnam during an extended visit from early 2011 to mid-2012. My intentions during this time were to experience all that I could of my birthplace, to relearn the language so as never to forget it, and to eat out as much as possible. I was successful on all three counts, although I had to cook once during the Lunar New Year when my favourite food stalls were closed. During my visit I took on many trades and identities. I spent time with street vendors, motorbike taxi drivers and ball boys. I dined, drank, sang karaoke and went on spiritual pilgrimages with corporate flyers and government officials. I attended weddings, concerts, exhibitions and rituals, and spent much time with students lounging in cafes, bars and bookshops. For a while I was an editor, activist and student. I was even a lecturer. Whereas newcomers are often horrified by the traffic in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, I was able to walk, pedal, and ride with a degree of surety and comfort. Near the end of my time in Vietnam, strangers asked me for directions and I could show them the way.

These experiences compelled me to write this book about the everyday wonders of contemporary Vietnam. In so doing, I had to be ever conscious of the dreams and visions of the Vietnamese people. I had to gain an appreciation of how their and my cultural heritage animates Vietnam today. The vital literary works that informed each chapter are set out below.

'The Sticky Rice Seller' echoes a famous poem by the salacious yet much revered Ho Xuan Huong (1772–1822). A concubine and then widow for much of her life, Ho Xuan Huong compares the fate of women to sweet dumplings: moulded by the hands of men, just as likely to float or sink, yet able to preserve their inner essence. My translation of 'Floating Dumplings' is as follows.

My body pure white,
My fate gently rounded.
Rising and sinking
With mountain streams.

Whatever hands
Shape me.
My heart remains
Red and true.

The opening story of this collection explores gender discrimination in Vietnam, acknowledging how women often negotiate their social roles and contest their subjugation. Almost instinctively, Mai blends her mother's and boyfriend's expectations with her own desires for affection and belonging. 'The Sticky Rice Seller' also considers some of the ongoing cultural tensions between North and South Vietnam, which have been largely taboo for Vietnamese writers and researchers since the end of the Second Indochina War. The varied and dynamic tastes of the sticky rice seller's customers reflect the complexity of dialects, outlooks and values stretching from Ca Mau and the Gulf of Thailand to Lang Son and the gateway to China.

'The Ball Boy' is a rough remake of Vu Trong Phung's (1912–39) modern classic, *Dumb Luck*, which tells of an impoverished young man named Xuan (Spring) who finds fame, popularity and love among Hanoi's Francophile tennis playing community. Mistaken as someone of high culture and intellect, Xuan's sun-bleached red hair is deemed stylish by the city's *nouveau riche*. Xuan's admiration for high society and desire to be part of it is affirmed when he falls into good fortune. Thu, on the other hand, makes his own fate and sets his own standards. He turns his exile into a platform for advancement and savours conflict as an opportunity to assert himself over others. The ball boy Thu screams out to minorities to reject orthodoxy, to rejoice in all that is different, to never cower in the shadows.

'The Professional' turns upside-down the values and virtues espoused in Vietnam's most esteemed literary work, 'The Tale of Kieu'. Nguyen Du's (1766–1820) 3,254-verse poem tells of a star-crossed heroine who sells herself to save her family and then denies herself happiness so as to protect her true love's integrity. In contrast, the cut-throat businesswoman Kieu has contempt for Confucian duties and patronising Westerners. Nguyen Du's Kieu is incessant in her self-sacrifice, while Kieu the professional is incessant in her self-interest. As a result, both of them are never at ease with themselves or others. The major issue that this twenty-first-century tale seeks to deal with is the moral and civic indifference (*vo cam*) that has beset many of the Vietnamese super-rich and which shows signs of spreading throughout society.

'The Goalkeeper' pays tribute to Pham Thi Hoai's (1960–) award-winning novel, *The Crystal Messenger*. Hoai's story tells of the social and sexual coming of age of twin sisters from the perspective of the more reserved and plain-looking of the two as she watches people go by from her window. The book was banned in Vietnam and Hoai left the country in the 1990s. In part this was because it was an incisive allegory of Vietnam's tribulations as it emerged from a cloistered post-war era to encounter alluring but unsettling forms of capitalism and Westernisation. Most controversially, the narrator's suitor is a stalwart party cadre named Quang who happens to be a dwarf. For all his

efforts and virtues, Quang is ultimately thwarted in his quest for love and respect. Like the dwarf and other true believers in the Vietnamese Communist Party, Kim Lien's earnestness and rectitude cannot make up for her emotional and aesthetic limitations. Many of the Goalkeeper's proclamations have been adapted from the speeches and letters of prominent revolutionaries and point out the corrosive effects of corruption and excessive consumerism in Vietnam. In a conflicted socialist-oriented market economy, Kim Lien stands out because she believes everything the Party says, and attempts to live by its principles and rules without compromise.

Finally, 'The Student' is informed by the idea of taking my father as a young man out of the 1950s and 1960s and placing him in Vietnam today. Back then, my father's move from the countryside to the city sparked in him a stridently modern outlook. From the time that he first touched ice as a small boy right up until he helped to design the South Vietnamese electricity grid, my father believed that his life and his country were moving ever onward and upward. This tale is told in my book about my parents and twentieth-century Vietnam, *Where the Sea Takes Us: A Vietnamese–Australian Story*. The student Kien is also eager to catapult himself and Vietnam into tomorrow and in so doing sever all associations with ancestors and superstition. My father's progressive zeal was blunted by the fall of Saigon and subsequent events that compelled us to leave Vietnam. Kien has a far more positive confrontation with resurgent tradition and is drawn back to his home soil, which he comes to regard not solely as a place for vanquished ghosts and macabre rituals, but also as a source of spiritual nourishment and meaning.

For all my efforts to engage with Vietnam's literature and people, I am now and probably always will be as much an outsider as I am insider. This is not such a bad thing. It grows in part out of the fact that, having left Vietnam as an infant, I have no childhood memory of it. I am also on the fringe of Vietnamese youth culture and youthfulness more generally. Being in my mid-30s, this book captures my last chance to hang out with a demographic that increasingly confounds and outpaces me. Like Hoan Kiem's antediluvian turtle, I often find myself amazed by Vietnam's exuberance and dynamism, and also a little anxious about the pace and direction of change.

Returning to Vietnam as an academic has also contributed to my detached dream-like state of being. Archetypal social scientists seek to set themselves apart from the objects and forces they research. To this end, I found it useful to wake up early in Vietnam to watch people. The light and air are clearest in the morning. This is when people are on the move, doing their exercises and preparing for the day. Often they are not fully awake or wholly cognisant of their surroundings. They are too preoccupied to pay much attention to me,

which allows me to pay more attention to them. Roughly speaking, 5 to 6 am is the hour of the social scientist in Vietnam, when one can best observe others without influencing or being influenced by them.

Of course, *Vietnam as if* ... is not standard social science scholarship. This raises the question of why I have chosen to represent my research as fiction as opposed to fact. By 'fact' I mean the Western tradition that famously grows out of the meditations of the seventeenth-century French philosopher René Descartes. Descartes tried to discern truth by severing his mind from everything around him – his body, culture, history and other people – all of which might be illusion or dream. It is largely from this example that the social sciences came to associate truth with the qualities of detachment and purity.

Importantly, the ways that Westerners have come to know the world align with the ways that they have sought to conquer and control it. And so, French colonists were disdainful of Indochinese culture and history: the natives had no libraries and were therefore not literate. They were clumps of clay – as one Governor-General of Indochina stated – that Western civilisation would mould into humans.

An even more extreme derivation of Cartesian thinking is evident in the way that America managed its Vietnam War. In *The Best and the Brightest*, David Halberstam tells the story of the 'whiz kids' who were recruited from academia and industry into the highest levels of government so that they could apply the latest scientific methods to the counter-revolutionary cause in Indochina. Again, Vietnam as a country and people – even the instructive history of the French occupation – were wilfully ignored by American managers of war, who busied themselves collating statistics about enemy behaviour, the territory and their resources. In the end, being detached from the Vietnamese only made it easier for the best and the brightest to carpet bomb, spray toxins and drop napalm upon them. And so, putting aside scientific fact in favour of fiction is not merely a matter of style or method for me. It is a deeply political and ethical endeavour.

Others have turned to storytelling after linking detached truth to acts of horror. Indeed, there is a vast body of work on how the social sciences took a 'narrative turn' in the 1980s. The exponents of this turn sought to destabilise grand narratives such as Marxism-Leninism and liberal capitalism, which they associated with disastrous social engineering projects and the unprecedented concentration of political and economic power. Instead, they espoused micro-narratives that were more intimate, situated and radically egalitarian. In the social studies literature, this shift can be seen in the proliferation of academic articles in which the identities, biases and backgrounds of both the researcher and the researched are not set aside, but brought to the foreground by way

of autobiographical and biographical vignettes. While I am indebted to this narrative turn, *Vietnam as if* ... also represents my turning away from it. This is because the push for narratives has become rather predictable and stale; there is now a ready-made way to use and think about stories and a formal language with which to talk about them. To the extent that the narrative turn has become part of an academic discipline, it has abandoned the creative flair that makes it worthwhile.

So my rationale for this book was simple: if I was serious about stories as scholarship, then I should write a few. I was also compelled by the belief that scholars can strive to be public intellectuals who not only describe social change, but also inspire better forms of it. In this regard, stories are particularly useful because of their potential to operate in a democratic fashion, whereby writers do not so much dictate messages to readers, but rather conjure scenes and scenarios which readers can occupy, contemplate and complete at will. Good literature, as an expression of enlightened social science, must therefore entice readers to slow down, to savour the story and to make it their own – a process that the old Turtle of Hoan Kiem Lake would endorse.

Of course, to promote fiction as a valuable form of truth is not to suggest that all scholarly writing should be replaced with storytelling. There are dangers and drawbacks in fiction. Most notably, it arguably asserts an arrogant truth that cannot be probed, verified, contested. Thus, a key purpose of this postscript in laying out the influences and reasons behind these stories is not to force the reader to interpret them in a particular way, but rather to humble their truth claims and to pry those claims open so that they can be scrutinised. There will be people who enter these fictional worlds only to find that they are distorted, exaggerated, and seem nothing like Vietnam as it is. Even so, I maintain that it is important to imagine Vietnam as if ... In fact, I would not conceive of it in any other way.

With respect,
Kim Huynh

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