

Land reform in Vietnamese literature

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Abstract

Even now, Vietnamese historians are reluctant to criticize the land reform campaign of the mid 1950s. However, four novels published between 1988 and 1992 seem determined to locate this traumatic event in the collective social memory. All four are partly based on personal experience, but have different perspectives. One from the viewpoint of a cadre records the damage to the social fabric but blames it on the stupidity of the peasants, and sees all those involved as pawns of history. The second, written from the viewpoint of a landlord, uses irony to examine the lack of justice and morality in the campaign, and the resulting mental effects on those involved. The third takes the viewpoint of a woman, and shows how women are always the sacrificial victims, while men are unreliable and have means of escape. The fourth is told from the viewpoint of a landless farmer. He becomes a cadre and victimizes an enemy landlord, but then later suffers retribution. This work, by a younger writer than the other three, refuses to accept the official version of the past.

The land reform program of the 1950s was one of the most traumatic episodes in Vietnamese history and it is consequently one that most Vietnamese want to forget. Not only does it bring back memories of the errors of the Communist Party's policy in the countryside but it also had a deep and damaging impact on many of the individuals involved. Although the land reform program has been widely studied by Western scholars and is referred to in Western language materials, it is rarely discussed in Vietnamese language sources. In Vietnam, this subject has been silenced, and only in recent years has that silence begun to be broken due to the Renovation policy (Doi Moi) that has allowed more freedom of expression. Even now, the tragedy of the land reform program is told mainly through literature rather than in works of history. This

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study is not an attempt to write a complete account of the land reform, but rather it tries to explore how this tragic episode has been retold and recreated in the post-war literature. This study will concern itself specifically with two subjects: how the land reform is remembered through literary texts and from what point of view it has been told. A precursory remark offered is that the land reform remains a powerful impact in Vietnamese memory.

Background

The land reform campaign started in 1953 in North Vietnam, and was then conducted on a large scale from 1955 to 1956. In theory, land reform was to expropriate the land from rich landlords and distribute it amongst poor peasants, so helping to eliminate the gap between the rich and the poor in the countryside. According to Truong Chinh's report delivered at the first national conference of the Vietnamese Communist Party in November 1953, it was estimated that the land reform program would benefit four areas. Militarily, the land reform would encourage peasants to take part more enthusiastically in the resistance. Politically, the role of the National United Front, which constituted more than 90 percent of rural masses, would be strengthened. Economically, the campaign would liberate peasants from the control and oppression of landlords so that they would devote themselves to working on their own land, resulting in increased production for the national economy. Culturally, peasants would be able to learn new things and adopt refined customs and habits after they had ceased to worry about basic necessities like food and clothes.¹ However, when the land reform was put into practice, it also caused violence, social chaos, and antagonism amongst social classes in the village. It ended in failure. Many peasants were killed because they were mistakenly categorized as oppressive landowners. Due to the errors of the land reform, Truong Chinh resigned from his position as party general secretary in October 1956. President Ho Chi Minh and his government also had to officially apologize for the mistakes of the land reform campaign.²

It is clearly stated in Vu Bao's novel, *Sap Cuoi* (About to Marry, 1957) that although an apology for the mistakes of the land

reform had been made, it is difficult to mend the feelings and relationships of those who were involved in this program. In this story, Xuan and Bui are about to get married, but the wedding ceremony and their relationship are interrupted when the land reform program is introduced to their village, and Bui's family is categorized as a member of the landowning class. When the mistakes of the land reform are announced, Xuan tries to become reconciled with Bui and asks for her forgiveness but she rejects his request. As is pointed out by the writer, the apologies of the government cannot repair the personal relationships broken by the land reform campaign.³ However, the novel *Sap Cui* was banned and heavily criticized. It was not until the late 1980s that the novel was allowed to be reprinted. Recently, critics began to review this novel and have accepted that Vu Bao's view is a good verdict on the land reform.⁴

The land reform program was for long a taboo topic in political discussion in Vietnam. It also seems that most Vietnamese historians have tried to blot out this tragic event from their national history. In Vietnam, most historical texts dealing with this period tend to be brief and obscure. Some historians have even tried to avoid mentioning the losses and disastrous results of the campaign. In the atmosphere of greater freedom that has prevailed since the late 1980s, some Vietnamese historians now write more openly about the land reform campaign and refer to the mistakes that caused misfortune and death to many peasants. However, it seems that most Vietnamese historians are still reluctant to go into details about the errors or to discuss the causes and effects of the campaign's failure. In fact many historians not only avoid mentioning the negative effects of the land reform program, but instead choose to describe how well and promptly the government realized its mistakes and then launched another campaign called the "rectification of errors" to solve the problem.⁵ The references to the land reform in history books written in this period are more or less the same as the evaluation of the program given in *An Outline History of the Vietnam Worker's Party (1930–1975)*, an official party history. In this book, the party views the program as follows:

The success of the land reform was great and fundamental. It assumed a strategic character. In the course of the land reform, we

committed a number of serious errors. The Party Central Committee found out those mistakes in time and absolutely redressed them.⁶

Another example is *Revolution in the Village: Nam Hong 1945–1975*. In this book, the authors refer to the incident as follows:

As in other communes, Nam Hong made errors in the process of the agrarian reform. Some peasants were wrongly classified as landowners or rich peasants; some guerrillas and revolutionary cadres were accused of being reactionaries. However, Nam Hong was quick to correct these mistakes and rapidly restored an atmosphere of unity and harmony in the commune.⁷

However, the land reform has been discussed more openly and widely in literary works. Novels, short stories, and poems written in the late 1950s, such as the novel *Sap Cuoi (About to Marry)*, quickly responded to the aftermath of the land reform and clearly voiced the frustration and disappointment of the peasants. Many of the works that mentioned the errors of the land reform policy, however, were withdrawn from circulation. Some writers were commanded to write self-criticisms for having expressed negative ideas about the campaign and the government's policy. From the 1950s to the mid 1980s, writers kept silent on this issue and it soon became a forbidden subject under the Communist government. However, since the Renovation policy was announced in 1986, the land reform has been discussed and reviewed mainly in literary texts.

This study examines how the land reform is remembered through literary texts and from what points of view it has been related. By juxtaposing literary works of writers from different generations, we will see how the land reform has been recounted and reinterpreted over the post-war years. The experience and perceptions of the land reform have been significant not only in shaping the outlook and political standpoint of each individual towards the present but also in conveying a general picture of how the past event stays in the collective memory. James Fentress and Chris Wickham explain the importance of memory that is transmitted through stories as follows:

Stories do more than represent particular events: they connect, clarify, and interpret events in a general fashion. Stories provide us with a set of stock explanations which underlie our predispositions to interpret reality in the ways that we do.... Memory is not merely retrospective; it is prospective as well. Memory provides a prospective for interpreting our experiences in the present and for foreseeing these that lie ahead.⁸

However, they also warn that a story told from memory is not necessarily always the truth. As they assert:

We may sometimes, it seems, only be deluding ourselves when we think we are 'debunking' social memory by separating myth from facts: all we may get is another story. This does not mean that we must accept social memory passively and uncritically. We can enter into dialogue with it, examining its arguments, and testing its formal claims. But this interrogation cannot uncover the whole truth. It is a mistake to imagine that, having squeezed it for its facts, examined its arguments, and reconstructed its experience – that is to say, having turned it into 'history' – we are through with memory.⁹

Thus, reading the texture of the past from various angles will help understand how writers from different generations, and fictional characters from different circumstances, make contact with each other through the recollections of the past and their viewpoints of the land reform. Also, determining an author's point of view is an important literary technique and vital element in creating and reading a narrative. As Scholes and Kellogg explain:

If we think of a generalised 'novelist' and his equally generalised 'readers' we can see that, for the novelist, point of view is the primary way he controls and shapes his materials. Once made, his choice of point of view and the mode of language appropriate to it will influence his presentation of character, incident, and every other thing represented. For the reader, however, point of view is not an aesthetic matter but a mode of perception. The point of view in a given novel controls the reader's impression of everything else.¹⁰

It is noticeable that literary works only reveal the negative facts of the land reform, and the question of whether or not this program achieved any good results might occur to many audiences. Pham

Van Bich's evaluation of the land reform and the psychological effect it had on Vietnamese society helps to explain why only the negative side of the land reform is remembered in literary texts.

In sum, the land reform was a response to genuine demands from the poor peasants. In fact it made a radical effort to provide adequate landholdings for this sector of the population and gave them what they had always dreamed of – lands and buffaloes, that is to say, the economic basis to earn secure living. However, as an unintended consequence of this, the landlord family ties were seriously undermined. Although only those families classified as landlords came under heavy fire, the land reform had wide-ranging repercussions in society at large.... The class approach brought about gains to landless and poor peasants, and losses to landlords. However, the losses were so heavy that their psychological effects persisted, while the material gains seem to have been neglected even by the beneficiaries.¹¹

Moreover, the fact that the tragedy of the event is only emphasized in literature can be seen as a reaction to the cryptic and conflicting memory of the land reform given by the state's record of official history. The following paragraphs therefore offer an analysis of literary works on the land reform. The discussion here is mainly based on four literary works: *Ac Mong* (Nightmare, 1990) by Ngo Ngoc Boi, *Nhung Thien Duong Mu* (Paradise of the Blind, 1988) by Duong Thu Huong, *Me Lo* (Labyrinth, 1989) by Do Chu, and *Lao Kho* (The Old Kho, 1992) by Ta Duy Anh.

A cadre's perspective

The novel *Ac Mong* (Nightmare, 1990) by Ngo Ngoc Boi is told from the point of view of Ngo Bao, a veteran of the Dien Bien Phu battlefield and a political cadre who was sent with a team to carry out a land reform campaign in a village in Northern Vietnam. By giving the account from the perspective of an eyewitness who participated in the land reform campaign, the author wants to emphasize the authenticity of his story. Like the protagonist in his novel, Ngo Ngoc Boi himself took part in this campaign as a cadre. In fact, Ngo Ngoc Boi later revealed that Ngo Bao in the story is actually the writer himself. Therefore, readers can assume that the novel is based on direct experience and first-hand information.

What I wrote is entirely genuine. It is obvious that anybody could write from real life experience, but I have tried to base my works on actual facts and real experience. I am not just an outsider who wants to comment on what I heard...The two main characters in the novel *Ac Mong* (Nightmare), Ngo Bao and Man, are in fact myself and my wife. 80 percent of this novel is based on reality.¹²

The importance of *Ac Mong* (Nightmare) is that it gives a thorough and detailed account of the land reform campaign. Ngo Ngoc Boi describes chronologically the stages of the campaign. From this novel, we learn that the campaign was divided into four operations. First, cadres would go to live with a poor peasant family in order to *tham ngheo hoi kho* (share poverty and sufferings). They had to convince the peasants that their sufferings were caused by the exploitation of the landlords, not by predestination, as they had understood. The cadres also had to find so-called *re* (roots) among the poorest peasants in the village. These *re* were regarded as *cot can* (the pillars of the land reform). After having been ideologically mobilized by cadres, these *re* would go on to mobilize other peasants, called *chuo*i (beads). Then, the second stage of the land reform campaign was to organize a village meeting and mobilize the peasants to struggle and fight against traitors and reactionaries. The third stage was a rent and interest reduction program. The final stage was to strengthen village organization, review accomplishments, and increase production.¹³

This explanation of the process of the land reform is important not only because it represents reality but also because it demystifies critical speculation and the fragmentation of the campaign. The novel participates in the struggle in national memory over one of the unforgettable events in Vietnamese history. In short, the novel attempts to give a complete picture of what happened during the land reform in the 1950s. The author also tries to explain where the errors started. In the story, the cadre Ngo Bao recognizes that it is wrong to accuse some peasants of being in the landowning class and it is also wrong to torture them. However, in such chaotic circumstances, he is afraid that his colleagues might suspect him of being ideologically influenced and swayed by class enemies. Becoming aware that a female colleague has fallen in love with him, Bao makes her do all the jobs that he does not want to do himself,

such as denouncing the landlords or mobilizing hatred against the landowning class. So the character Bao is not entirely good: he can be manipulative and exploits the love of a woman to protect himself from the demoralizing process of the campaign, but at the same time he is not brave enough to go against the tide. Yet, the narrator tries to convince readers that it was political vicissitudes that turned Bao into a coward.

From Bao's perspective, the errors of the land reform campaign begin at the first step of searching for re (roots). It is not difficult to find re because almost every peasant in the village is poor. However, it is more difficult to mobilize and educate these re, who are described as dot nat (ignorant), hung han (impetuous), and thieu van hoa (philistine). The representatives of the peasants, therefore, do not understand the policy of land reform and have to rely mainly on the instructions of cadres. During the 1950s, the expression *Nhat Doi Nhi Troi* (Cadres come first, and God comes second) was popular among peasants in North Vietnam.¹⁴

The novel *Ac Mong* (Nightmare) also describes the tenseness of the atmosphere in the village. Animosity was heightened when the cadres had to put peasants into different categories according to land possession. Those who were classified as landlords were publicly denounced and some were executed. The number of landlords in each village was calculated from the population of the whole country and did not always reflect the reality of each village. In order to identify the number of landlords required by the government, cadres in some villages had to distort the facts and deliberately categorize some middle-class peasants as landlords. This created worries not only for the peasants but also for a number of cadres. As Ngo Ngoc Boi observes, most revolutionaries and cadres were from landlord and rich peasant families and were more educated than their fellows in the countryside. During the campaign, some cadres deserted because of the news that in their native village their parents were categorized as landlords, beaten up, maltreated, or even killed.

Some patriotic landlords who had supported the revolution were tortured and, in some cases, also executed. Le Don, Bao's father-in-law is an example. Le Don was a well-educated man from a wealthy landowning family. He contributed greatly to the

nationalist movement during the 1940s. However, during the land reform campaign, he was classified as a landlord. According to the land reform regulations, a death sentence was to be given only when it was proved that a landowner had committed four crimes: boc lot (exploitation), chiem doat (seizing property), no mau (blood debt), and hiep dam (rape). To complete the process and give Le Don a death sentence, the cadres had to fabricate evidence for these crimes. They also made the village people believe that Le Don had really committed these crimes, and they mobilized hatred against him among peasants. Then, the village committee organized toa an nong dan dac biet (a special people's court) where landowners were condemned in front of the peasants. In order to make the accusations more credible, cadres also persuaded the children of some landlords and rich peasants to denounce their own parents before the special people's court. In order to survive, the children of accused landlords normally had to comply with this command. This left a legacy of tension and ill-feeling between family members and people in the village even after the end of the campaign.

Hy Van Luong's factual study of a village in Northern Vietnam confirms that Ngo Ngoc Boi's story is realistic. The rigid class division and discrimination against landlords applied during the land reform had its effect on relationships in the village and among members of the family. In Hy Van Luong's study, a peasant recalls:

In this entire episode, the physical loss meant relatively little in comparison to the emotional trauma and the damage to the social fabric. After my wife passed away, in my absence, my children moved her tomb away from my father's because of the bitterness in their relationship after her public denunciation and her indirect rejection of their kinship tie by the term of address used during the trial. Even nowadays, I still do not feel comfortable in the presence of the relatives who denounced my father and addressed him with the terms may and tao¹⁵ on that trial day more than three decades ago. It is still embarrassing for us to interact.¹⁶

Ngo Ngoc Boi concludes that the campaign had a wide range of effects on the relationships in the village community. Here is an example:

According to Bao, the policy of abolishing the private property system and feudalism, taking the land, and dividing it between peasants is right but its implementation is too simplistic. Only small numbers of rich people live in the countryside and almost all of them hate the colonial regime. Even before the Party was in power, the rich peasants always took part in and actively supported the revolution. The reactionaries followed the French to the South. We need to find a different method of dealing with those rich peasants who remained. If we only need to take land from the rich and give it to the poor, only a small campaign of dividing land and offering land would be enough. Why do we need to use millions of people and spend billions in accusing and denouncing landlords and in killing without any control?... Is it true that actually it was our hands that drew a tiger on the wall to threaten ourselves? These mistakes can never be buried or hidden away!¹⁷

With his peasant origins and working experience in the rural areas as a party official, there is no doubt that Ngo Ngoc Boi had a profound understanding of rural problems and a genuine sympathy for the peasants. In the following statement Ngo Ngoc Boi reveals the interconnection between his literary life, political career, the peasants, and the countryside:

I have been a member of the Communist Party since I was 19 years old (1948). If I had chosen to follow the road to power, my social position would not have been mediocre. But, I was born with the 'blood of an artist.' So, I chose early on to pursue a literary career. I mainly wrote about the countryside because I myself am a peasant and a large area of Vietnam is still countryside. My literary life has always been related to that of the peasants. For fifty years, I have been a peasant, party member, writer, and also journalist. I fully supported the war and revolution, but at the same time, I was also worried about the party's policy towards the countryside. My writings have always reflected this tossing and turning. This is also the reason why it took a long time for my works to get published.¹⁸

Undeniably, Ngo Ngoc Boi's writings reflect his interest in the development of rural society and the agricultural economy, and it appears that his literary corpus is dedicated to the concerns of the peasants. However, whether or not Ngo Ngoc Boi actually regards

himself as a party member, a writer, and a peasant as he claims in his short stories and novels, the voice of a political cadre prevails. His novel *Ac Mong* (Nightmare) is no exception, because he chooses to tell the story of the land reform from a cadre's point of view instead of a peasant's. Thus, the tone of the narrative represents the view of the government and party officials. That is to say, it is similar to any official documents on this subject: the party admitted that errors had been committed during the land reform campaign, but it tried its best to correct those errors.

Uncle Ho requested that we live in harmony. The party secretary had to resign. The party gave orders for corrections to be made. When we realize there is an error, we correct it. This is the strength of our party. Obviously, there are things that we can correct but also some things that we cannot. Perhaps only time can wipe fearful memory away.¹⁹

Recalling the story from the point of view of a cadre, the author concludes that this infamous episode was an inevitable process of history. The sufferings of the victims and the reaction of the peasants are mentioned, but the focal point of the novel is to call for an understanding of the participants in the campaign and their mistakes. As the character Bao emphasizes throughout the story, amidst such chaos there was not much that the cadres could do to prevent the errors. They were not even able to defend themselves against false accusations or resist the rigid rules laid down by party officials, or against the influence of the Chinese model, as many Vietnamese like to believe. Some writers from the younger generations find this apologetic viewpoint unsatisfactory, and they are not happy just to let bygones be bygones. In the next part, we will discuss Do Chu's short story, which tells us what one landlord thought about the land reform.

A landlord's perspective

The process of denouncing, humiliating, and executing the landowning class caused widespread fear and terror among the peasants. When the villagers were ordered to denounce their neighbors, they did so, even if it was against their will, in order to prevent themselves from being suspected of having a connection

with the landlords. An article in the newspaper Nhan Dan (The People) reported that this kind of fear was out of control. Peasants tried to avoid talking or having anything to do with those who were classified as landowners and their families; even hairdressers refused to cut the hair of landlords' families or anybody who had lien quan (a connection) to the landowning class.²⁰

In the short story *Me Lo* (Labyrinth, 1989), Do Chu relates how an accused landowner and his family had to endure humiliation and terrible psychological effects. The story starts with the mental breakdown and memory loss of Tru. He is a promising young soldier. Yet, things begin to change when his father is classified as an exploiting landlord. This causes an awkward feeling with Tru's soldier colleagues because they do not know how to treat him. Tru might be their commander, colleague, and friend but at the same time he is the child of a landowner, regarded as the class enemy of the peasants and socialist development. As we can see, other social relationships are overshadowed by class relations, and the belief that class can determine everything. Unfortunately, Tru's excellent record in the army is marred by his family background. Therefore, Tru has a hard time in the army since his colleagues keep a close eye on him because they suspect that he might be ideologically influenced by his class origins. The key incident that leads Tru to mental breakdown and memory loss occurs when his rank is lowered by five levels. It is later discovered there has been a mistake and that he had in fact been promoted to a higher position, but his commander misread the title of his new rank. However, it is then too late for Tru to recover his memory.

The anxiety and frustration of Tru as the child of a landlord is clearly described. His mental torment results from a combination of outrage that his father has been wrongly classified as a landlord and the hope that the errors will be properly resolved. Meanwhile, in the army unit, tension builds around him as his colleagues speculate on how Tru is going to react to this situation. Pressure keeps growing until his abrupt demotion shocks him to the core and he loses the capacity to deal with reality. He loses his memory and retreats into a dream world in order to escape from the cruelty and injustice of the society in which he is living.

Like his son, Tru's father at first believed in justice, and never

thought that he would be categorized as a landlord. The father even agreed that the land reform policy was a good solution to the problem of landholding in the Vietnamese countryside. The naivety of father and son creates irony in the story. According to Scholes and Kellogg, irony is

always the result of a disparity of understanding. In any situation in which one person knows or perceives more or less than another, irony must be actually or potentially present. In any example of narrative art these are, broadly speaking, three points of view – these of the characters, the narrator, and the audience.²¹

Here in *Me Lo (Labyrinth)*, the narrator and audience know that both the father's and the son's hopes for justice will be dashed. The characters are anxious about what is going to happen to them. As readers, we know more than the characters and can guess what will follow. Thus, though we are not surprised when they face the injustices of the land reform, our sympathy for their misfortunes is increased. The control of irony is a successful aspect of this short story. With the advantage of hindsight, we can see the errors of the land reform program that the peasants in the story cannot. It is, thus, difficult for the father to understand why he, a good farmer who has a son serving in the army, has to endure such maltreatment. This disparity of viewpoints allows the reader to foresee the catastrophe that befalls the characters. At the same time, it generates a more sympathetic feeling for the anguish of the characters as they wonder how their misfortunes can be explained. As the father ponders:

He (the father) was proud of Tru and the other comrades and he always put his faith in them. He considered them as his own children, nephews and members of his family. These people would be the future of the nation. He could not believe the ruthlessness which they carried out the land reform policy. Why? He was disappointed and devastated.²²

The father decides to take his own life because he finds it difficult to cope with maltreatment and humiliation in front of the cadres and his fellow villagers. He is also disappointed with the other peasants because nobody dares to speak the truth or to step forward to defend justice. The peasants are too terrified to think of

anything, except how to survive or not to be seen as being connected with the landlords. Suicide is a device to dignify the life of a peasant and to criticize the regime for failing to protect him from injustice. From the landlord's perspective, it is not worth living because his pride has been damaged, not because his land has been taken away. After the mental breakdown of her son and the suicide of her husband, the mother is left behind and only reason that she tries to continue living, despite the unpleasant reality, is to look after her son.

In addition, the fish in the pond disappear after the father's death. This supernatural detail lends a metaphoric meaning that prosperity is impossible where virtue does not exist. The fishpond is, together with rice production, an income source for Tru's family but an abundant supply of fish requires proper knowledge, patience, and hard labor from the person who looks after them. The land reform cadres and other peasants look only at the final output which is the money earned from the fish and they fail to consider the whole process required to obtain that money. So, when the man of virtue is no longer alive, the fish also cease to exist.

The mother finds that life is not so cruel when she discovers that Tru has had a son with a hill tribe woman. She is happy that at least the family has a descendant. That the narrative switches from the land reform terror to the secret love affair of Tru is a surprise but it provides a good ending to the story. Towards the close of the story, the mother is able to die in peace because she does not have to worry about descendants; and Tru is not all alone in this world. However, this ending is ironic because we know that it is only fiction that can provide a rewarding result and give compensation to the victims. Miracles are rare in real life.

The short story *Me Lo* (Labyrinth) gives an interesting account of the land reform campaign from the perspective of an accused landlord and his family, the victims of the errors of the campaign. It also emphasizes the virtues of the peasants and their belief in morality and dignity. From this viewpoint, we can see that the major effect of the land reform on the peasants was that it took away their pride. However, from this detail, the author's attitude towards the male concept of dignity and virtue is evident. Here Do Chu makes a clear distinction between how men and women react

to injustice. The father prefers to die rather than be subject to humiliation, whereas the mother is seen as more selfless and tolerant. She seems to care more about the happiness of her son than the concept of self-respect. We will examine this topic further in the next section through a discussion of Duong Thu Huong's novel, which presents a female point of view.

A woman's perspective

Historical accounts of the land reform have predominantly been written by men. Similarly, in the literary sphere, this historical incident is usually remembered from the male point of view. Thus, when the female writer Duong Thu Huong presented a tale of land reform in her controversial novel *Nhung Thien Duong Mu* (*Paradise of the Blind*, 1988), it was an attempt to take part in the construction of social memory from the perspective of women. Gender difference is considered as a key factor in the production and reception of literature. As Susan Sniader Lanser, a literary theorist, asserts:

Gender is also central to cultural communication because of the importance gender distinctions play in everyday life. Sex differences therefore permeate the uses of language and condition the reception of discourse; along with other social identifiers marking the relationship of a textual personage to the dominant social class, sex is important to the encoding and decoding of narrative voice.²³

Duong Thu Huong's version of the land reform focuses on its effects on women and on the bitter memories they carried with them afterwards. The story is told from the point of view of a young girl, called Hang. She focuses on the impact of the land reform on her family life. The peaceful atmosphere of the village soon disappears when Chinh, Hang's uncle, comes back to the village. He is now a cadre and assigned to carry out the land reform policy at the village level. The first task he has is to command Que, Hang's mother, to leave Ton, Hang's father, because his family is classified as a member of the landowning class. Chinh is worried that having a sister married to a member of the landlord's family will have a bad effect on his political life. Hang's father cannot

tolerate the discrimination from the land reform teams and the insults from other peasants. Her grandmother dies because of maltreatment, while her aunt, Tam, has to sleep in the paddy field and endure hard work. To guard herself from the assault of some male villagers, Tam has to carry a knife on her back, even when sleeping.

Duong Thu Huong disclosed in an interview that the novel *Nhung Thien Duong Mu* (Paradise of the Blind) is modeled on her childhood memories. She was eight years old when the land reform campaign came to her home village in Bac Ninh province. In the same interview, she revealed that she could never get rid of the memory of a man who was accused of being a landlord and who committed suicide.²⁴ According to an evaluation by the writer Mai Van Tao, *Nhung Thien Duong Mu* (Paradise of the Blind) “portrays, to some extent, the tragedy of the whole nation.”²⁵ Duong Thu Huong’s childhood memory of terror is written into the novel, and provides a vivid description of the fearsome atmosphere of the land reform:

My mother never understood the tragedy that had befallen her. Like so many others at this time, she began to live in constant terror. Uncle Chinh struck hard and fast. My grandmother and my aunt were forced to prostrate themselves, heads bowed, arms crossed behind their backs, in the communal village courtyard. Facing them, behind a blaze of torches, sat the people of our village. They obeyed the orders: “Listen to our denunciation of their crimes. Then, shout then slogan: ‘Down with the land-owning classes!’ Raise your fist like this and scream: ‘Down, down!’”

They were told that the louder they screamed, the greater would be their fervor and the firmer the proof of their revolutionary spirit, of the hatred they felt for the ‘exploiters’, the landowner classes. Among these so-called ‘exploiters’ were many well-to-do villagers, people who owned just a bit of land, who cherished their rice paddies like their own flesh.²⁶

The impact of the land reform on women is demonstrated through the struggles of the three female characters: Que, the mother; Tam, the aunt; and Hang, the daughter, who is the narrator of the story. According to Hue-Tam Ho Tai, “the twin images of constant mother and unreliable father” are dominant features in the Vietnamese imagination. The representation of women is related to maternal tenderness, constancy, and boundless

love, whereas men are portrayed as unreliable fathers who are always absent, emotionally and physically. This is due to the prevailing condition of the long period of wartime when men had to be away from home and women were left behind to take charge of the family economy and to look after the children. In the Vietnamese context, men symbolize power both in the house and in public life but in imaginative works, such as folktales, male power is often seen as unreliable.²⁷ In Duong Thu Huong's novel, the representation of female sacrifice and the unreliability of male power is also inherited from this tradition, as is shown through the relationship between Que and her younger brother, Chinh.

Que's love for her brother is limitless: she agrees to separate from her husband in order to secure Chinh's political career, because it is better that nobody in Chinh's family should have a connection with a member of an accused landowning family. Que stays at home to look after the altar of the family's ancestors while Chinh is always absent from the village because of his revolutionary activities. Then he comes back as a powerful cadre who takes charge of the land reform campaign. Later it is proved that his power is unreliable or even corrupt. The land reform program fails and he becomes the subject of hatred and anger from his fellow peasants. Chinh flees while Que stays behind to suffer the insults of the villagers on his behalf.

Through the character of Aunt Tam, Duong Thu Huong describes how the land reform campaign destroys the individual happiness of a woman. Although surviving the campaign, Tam loses almost everything: her mother dies, her brother leaves the village, and her house and property are confiscated and distributed among the poor peasants. The memory of the past event is carried with her for the rest of her life. Part of her revenge is to get rich, even richer than when she was classified as the daughter of a landowner. For her, this is the only way to recover the honor of her family and to earn the respect of the other peasants. Tam works so hard that she has no time to think about having a family. After Aunt Tam's death, Hang discovers wedding dresses, make-up powder, and money at Tam's house. These items show that Tam would have liked to have married but her plan was disrupted by the tragedy of her family. As stressed by the narrator, the land reform

destroyed the youth and happiness of a woman, including her chance to fulfill female dreams, such as to experience motherhood.

It was a thick wad of bills the likes of which no one would ever give to a child. I was shaking now. How could I take the money of a woman who had never known motherhood, or a man's love, who had camped out on tree roots for a whole winter, slept with a knife under her neck? She had saved this money, note by note. This was her revenge, her only answer to existence.²⁸

As for Hang, her family is torn apart by the memory of the land reform program. After the incident, it seems impossible that the friendship between Aunt Tam, a former landowner, and her mother, the sister of a former land reform cadre, can be restored. Hang wants to distance herself from the feeling of vengeance and antagonism. This is why she decides not to keep the house that Aunt Tam gives to her. She refuses to carry with her the memory and hatred of the past, which has haunted the generation of her mother and aunt.

A full moon shone through the dark crown of the trees. A few stars shimmered. I stood there motionless, staring at them. Never in my life had I felt, with such sharpness, the passing of time. Like watching the tail of a comet plummet and disappear into nothingness. Like the span of my life.

Comets extinguish themselves, but memory refuses to die.... Forgive me, my aunt: I'm going to sell this house and leave all this behind. We can honor the wishes of the dead with a few flowers on a grave somewhere. I can't squander my life tending these faded flowers, these shadows, the legacy of past crime.²⁹

Hang's determination to discontinue the antagonism of the past and to turn down "the legacy of past crime" reflects the attitude of the young generation towards the land reform in particular and historical memory in general. Another example of this viewpoint is the novel *Lao Kho* (*The Old Kho*, 1992), by the young writer Ta Duy Anh, which will be examined in the next section.

A landless peasant's perspective

Ta Duy Anh tells the story of the land reform from the point of

view of an old peasant, Lao Kho.³⁰ The novel's storyline is constructed in a similar way to that of Socialist Realist literature; that is, the narrative is based on the struggle of the peasant through historical changes. But, unlike the heroic picture of peasants represented in Socialist Realist literature, Lao Kho is depicted as a fool and a scoundrel of history.

The novel begins with the childhood of Lao Kho. As he was born into a poor landless peasant family, he has to earn his living by working for the landowners of the village. Unexpectedly, his life changes dramatically after being involved with some Communist cadres by accident. When the Communist Party takes control of the Northern part of Vietnam, he is appointed as political cadre for his own village. He is also the head of a section of the land reform campaign. However, Lao Kho exploits power for personal revenge and cruelly oppresses those who are against him, especially the family of the landlord he used to work for. During the period of land reform, many innocent villagers are killed on his orders. Anyone categorized as a landlord has to endure insults, discrimination, and torture, which are officially encouraged by the party cadres, including Lao Kho.

The novel also asserts that Lao Kho, as a peasant, is not only a villain but also a victim of the uncertainty and unreliability of government policies. After the land reform program comes to an end, Lao Kho is accused of having collaborated with the French. However, he is later proved innocent and allowed to return to his former position as the chief of the village committee. Lao Kho strictly follows government policy in order to affirm his loyalty and ideological strength towards the party. However, again Lao Kho becomes the victim of political vicissitude when the members of the landlord's family, once categorized as "traitors and enemies of the people," return to the village at the end of the war against American troops. With their money, they begin to establish a good relationship with the authorities. These former victims of the land reform get their revenge against Lao Kho by accusing him of having had contact with foreign enemies. Once again, he is arrested and jailed, but then released.

Ta Duy Anh clearly points out that the ups and downs of Lao Kho's life result from his own ignorance. Lao Kho is ignorant

enough to allow himself to be manipulated by officialdom and he blindly follows government policies. Lao Kho believes in what he is told to do and also that it is good for the people. The narrator stresses that it is this blind belief that changes the poor peasant into a villain and turns him against his own fellow villagers. In a dream, Lao Kho is taken to court and interrogated by the judge about the crimes he has committed. It is through the words of the judge that the author wants Lao Kho to be evaluated:

The judge: 'Do you believe in what you have done? For example, you abolished the village market, did not allow people to attend religious services, destroyed Buddha images, and forced people to get married though they did not love each other. What do you believe in and what did you expect to gain from doing these things?'

Lao Kho: 'I did everything for my people.'

The judge: 'But your people did not really want your favors. The crimes you committed can be summarized in one word "Stupid".'³¹

Ta Duy Anh goes beyond the official rhetoric about the heroism of peasants by emphasizing the sufferings endured by them. The peasants are manipulated into taking cruel and inhumane action against each other during the land reform. For Ta Duy Anh, the peasants are merely the fools of history. Lao Kho's tragedy is his belief in vague and unreliable instructions.

Lao Kho argued: 'if we have nothing to believe in, what do we live for?' And then he cried bitterly and openly. 'Listen to me, Lao Kho. Nobody said that you couldn't believe. In fact, the worst thing is what people believe. I just wish and pray that your belief will transform itself and won't turn a human being into a devil.'³²

Ta Duy Anh's writing about the land reform demonstrates his attempt to connect himself with the past and understand the mentality and motives of the people during that period. As a representative of the young generation, Ta Duy Anh expresses the mixed feelings of young Vietnamese towards their national history. It is a struggle between pride and shame. Vietnamese history is known for its heroism in defeating the troops of powerful countries; namely, France, Japan, and America, but it is also full of losses and tragedies. The post-war identity of Vietnam rests on the self-serving

memory that the country is the winner of wars. However, Ta Duy Anh's novel highlights that official efforts to force the rhetoric to victory on the surface cannot bury the nation's traumatic memory of previous mistakes. Ta Duy Anh's anxiety is also related to the indecision about whether or not the peasants should be seen as heroes or villains. It is undeniable that national independence relied on the force of the peasants, but the national history has also been marred by the peasants' naivety and ignorance. Thus, writing about the peasants and the land reform is, for the young writer Ta Duy Anh, a means not only of understanding and evaluating the past, but also of challenging the official version of national history.

Ta Duy Anh's perception of past events is different from that of his older colleagues. While older writers, such as Ngo Ngoc Boi, seem to accept that the failure of the land reform is inescapably a part of historical development, Ta Duy Anh, like Duong Thu Huong, feels alienated from the past. He even refuses to be a part of it, as shown through the character Hai Duy, a son of Lao Kho. Hai Duy leaves his village because he is unable to tolerate the hatred between the classes, the use of violence in the village and, particularly, the chauvinism of his own father. His leaving symbolizes the denial of the past and the refusal to collaborate with old concepts and practices. The message in the letter that Hai Duy leaves for Lao Kho before his departure clearly reflects the young generation's rejection of the terror of the past and the desire for social change and a better society:

For me, the Dong village is like a prison. You (Lao Kho) are both prison warder and prisoner number one. You have bound yourself and enjoyed the jingling sound of the chains. I felt suffocated even when I was trying to think that I was a happy person. I realize that you have turned your villagers into obedient people. They only know how to say 'yes.' That is very useful for control but it goes against their interests. Your kingdom is filled with hatred, with superciliousness regarding the past, and with illusions about the future.

Your kingdom is lacking in air which people can breathe. There is only pale light reflecting from the past. People are dyed with the same color. They are not allowed to look forward, to shout or to cry openly because of shame or happiness. They have to look at each others' feet so that they will not walk faster than others.

People can show their sincerity only by whispering. As a result, the 'Murmur' has become characteristic. All faces look alike. They are the faces of slippery people, without souls, stupid, with no emotion and always looking up to morality. No one is allowed to think for herself or himself. Their obligation is to follow orders when they eat or sleep. They have to forget the existence of the individual self.³³

Ta Duy Anh proposes that the young peasants should learn from the mistakes of the past, like the character Hai Duy who clearly announces that he will not follow in his father's footsteps. According to the literary critic Hoang Ngoc Hien, this novel "presents another hypothesis about the essence and destiny of Vietnamese peasants. This is an important novel."³⁴

Conclusion

Of course, we cannot conclude that the accounts of the land reform given or reconstructed in the works of Ngo Ngoc Boi, Duong Thu Huong, Do Chu, and Ta Duy Anh are entirely based on actual fact. What is presented in these literary works cannot be seen as total truth, but it is fragmented truth based on individual experience and imagination. Different perspectives on the land reform program given in literature also reflect the attempt of writers to challenge the official account of national history. In literary texts, writers can imagine and relate themselves to the past, and in some cases can pass their experiences on to later generations. This shared traumatic memory of past errors links Vietnamese writers from different generations, from Ngo Ngoc Boi to Ta Duy Anh. The memory of the land reform is not completely removed from the social realm. It is still an unfading memory and its moral ambiguity and social ambivalence have a great influence on the present-day consciousness. Writers of all generations contend that violence and hatred should be replaced with love and forgiveness. The collection of land reform narratives is a phantasmagoric reflection of the past and is a part of the socially contested process to relocate social memory within relations of power and domination. The memory of the land reform will continue to be challenged and investigated in Vietnamese literary texts for as long as the search for truth fails to be properly conducted elsewhere.

Notes

¹ Truong Chinh, 'Implementing the land reform' in *Selected Writings* (Hanoi: The Gioi Publishers, 1994), pp. 526–7.

² Le Minh Han, ed., *Dai Cuong Lich Su Viet Nam tap III* (The Outline of Vietnamese History) Vol.3 (Hanoi: NXB Giao Duc, 1999), pp.137–42.

³ Vu Bao, *Sap Cuoi* (About To Marry) (Thai Binh: Hoi Van Hoc Nghe Thuat Thai Binh (Institute of Literature and Art of Thai Binh), 1988).

⁴ Tran Cuong, 'Nhin Lai Van Xuoi Viet ve Nong Thon truoc Thoi Ky Doi Moi (1986)' (Looking back at Prose Writings on the Countryside before the Renovation Period) in *Tap Chi Van Hoc* 12 (1995), p. 39.

⁵ For example, Le Mau Han, *Dai Cuong Lich Su Viet Nam tap III*, pp. 137–42.

⁶ *An Outline of the Vietnam Workers' Party (1930-1975)* (Hanoi: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1976), p. 82.

⁷ Pham Cuong and Nguyen Van B, *Revolution in the Village: Nam Hong 1945-1975* (Hanoi: Foreign Languages Publishing House, date of publication unknown), p. 33.

⁸ James Fentress and Chris Wickham, *Social Memory* (UK and USA: Blackwell, 1994), p. 51.

⁹ Fentress and Wickham, *Social Memory*, p. 202.

¹⁰ Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg, *The Nature of Narrative* (London, Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 275.

¹¹ Pham Van Bich, *The Vietnamese Family in Change: The Case of the Red River Delta* (Surrey: Curzon, 1999), pp. 75–6.

¹² Ngo Thao and Lai Nguyen An, eds., *Nha Van Viet Nam Chan Dung Tu Hoa* (Self-portrayals of Vietnamese Writers) (Hanoi: NXB Van Hoc, 1995), pp. 24–5.

¹³ For a more thorough history of the land reform, see Edwin Evariste Moise, 'Land reform in China and North Vietnam: at the village level,' PhD thesis, University of Michigan, 1977; and Christine Katherin White, 'Agrarian reform and national liberation in the Vietnamese revolution: 1920–1957,' PhD thesis, Cornell University, 1981.

¹⁴ Lam Thanh Liem, 'Chinh Sach Cai Cach Ruong Dat cua Ho Chi Minh: Sai Lam hay Toi ac?' (The Land Reform Policy of Ho Chinh Minh: Error or Cruelty) in *Ho ChÝ Minh: Su That ve Than The & Su Nghiep* (The Truth about Ho Chi Minh and His Work) Vol. 1 (Paris: NXB Nam A, 1990), p. 185.

¹⁵ may (you) and tao (I/me) are pronouns that can be used for address among close friends, or with those who are younger or from lower social status. However, in this case, the use of may and tao show total disrespect and denial of kinship relations.

¹⁶ Hy Van Luong, *Revolution in the Village: Tradition and Transformation in North Vietnam, 1925-1988* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1992), p. 189.

¹⁷ Hy Van Luong, *Revolution in the Village*, p. 138.

¹⁸ *Hoi nha van Viet Nam, Nha Van Viet Nam Hien Dai* (Contemporary Vietnamese Writers) (Hanoi: NXB Hoi Nha Van, 1997), p. 78.

¹⁹ Ngo Ngoc Boi, *Ac Mong* (Nightmare), pp. 197–8.

²⁰ Hoang Van Chi, ed., *The New Class in North Vietnam* (Saigon: Cong An, 1958), pp. 56–8.

²¹ Scholes and Kellogg, *The Nature of Narrative*, p. 240.

²² Do Chu, *Me Lo (Labyrinth)* (Hanoi: NXB Tac Pham Moi, 1989), p. 81.

²³ Susan Sniader Lanser, *The Narrative Act: Point of View in Prose Fiction* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1981), p. 166.

²⁴ The interview is reprinted in *Tram Hoa van No tren Que Huong: Cao Trao Van Nghe Phan Khang tai Viet Nam (1986–1989) (One Hundred Flowers still Blossom in the Homeland: The Dissident Movement in Vietnam (1986–1989))*, pp. 197–8.

²⁵ *Tram Hoa van No tren Que Huong*, p. 198.

²⁶ Duong Thu Huong, *Paradise of the Blind*, translated by Phan Huy Duong and Nina McPherson (USA: Penguin, 1993), pp. 24–5.

²⁷ Hue-Tam Ho Tai, 'Faces of remembrance and forgetting' in Hue-Tam Ho Tai, ed., *The Country of Memory* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), pp. 168–70.

²⁸ Duong Thu Huong, *Paradise of the Blind*, p. 99.

²⁹ Duong Thu Huong, *Paradise of the Blind*, pp. 257–8.

³⁰ Here, he plays with the word "kho," which literarily means "miserable." Lao is used for old people, mostly put in front of the name of an old man.

³¹ Ta Duy Anh, *Lao Kho (The Old Kho)* (Hanoi: NXB Van Hoc, 1992), p. 156.

³² Ta Duy Anh, *Lao Kho*, p. 178.

³³ Ta Duy Anh, *Lao Kho*, pp. 113–4.

³⁴ Hoang Ngoc Hien, interviewed in *Tac pham Chon Loc 3* (1995), p. 132.