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WRITERLY REFLECTION

We are Vietnamese. A Reflection on Being Vietnamese-Australian

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Abstract

Hoa Pham is an author and psychologist. Her novella, *Wave* (2015), was translated into Vietnamese by Phương Nam, a Vietnamese publishing house. *The Other Shore* (2014) won the Vive La Novella Prize. *The Lady of the Realm* (2017) is her latest novel and is a historical fiction set in Vietnam from the 1950s to the present day. Further information can be found at www.hoapham.net. She is also the founder of Peril, an online Asian Australian arts and culture magazine.

‘We are Vietnamese. A Reflection on Being Vietnamese–Australian’ is a creative non-fiction piece concerning being a Vietnamese–Australian author in the present day. It explores Pham’s meeting with Phạm Thị Hoài, a Vietnamese author in exile in Berlin, and her encounters with Thích Nhất Hạnh the Vietnamese Zen Master. It also interrogates the cultural perceptions of Vietnam in Australia and Pham’s own subject position as a published Asian Australian author.

Résumé

Hoa Pham est écrivaine et psychologue. Sa nouvelle *Wave* (2015) a été traduite en vietnamien par Phương Nam une maison d’édition vietnamienne. *The Other Shore* (2014) a remporté le prix Vive La Novella. Son roman le plus récent, *The Lady of the Realm* (2017), est une fiction historique qui se déroule au Vietnam depuis les années 1950 jusqu’à nos jours. De plus amples informations sont disponibles sur www.hoapham.net. Pham est aussi la fondatrice de Peril, une revue d’art et de culture australo-asiatique en ligne.

‘We are Vietnamese. A Reflection on Being Vietnamese–Australian’ est un essai sur ce que signifie être un écrivain australo-vietnamien aujourd’hui. Il explore deux rencontres marquantes de l’auteure : l’une avec Phạm Thị Hoài, une écrivaine vietnamienne en exil à

Berlin, et l'autre avec Thích Nhất Hạnh, le grand maître zen vietnamien. Il remet aussi en question les perceptions culturelles du Vietnam en Australie et la propre situation de Pham en tant qu'auteure australo-vietnamienne.

Keywords

Hoa Pham, Vietnamese diaspora, Vietnamese-Australian writers

Phạm Thị Hoài is a Vietnamese diasporic writer in exile in Berlin. Her first book, *The Crystal Messenger*, had beautiful prose that could melt in your mouth. It was the politics of the book, a portrayal of a dwarf as a communist stalwart, that led to her exile. *Sunday Menu*, her short story collection contained marvellous minutiae and no politics. She then devoted the last few decades to journalism.

I tracked her down by using the address of *Talawas*, her Vietnamese current affairs website. Expecting an office I was surprised to find myself, with my father in tow, at an apartment intercom in inner city Berlin. Hoài knew German and Vietnamese, I knew English and my father knew Vietnamese and English. Somehow we would all communicate I hoped.

A young male voice said 'Was?' through the intercom. Dad said 'Phạm Thị Hoài?' and the door opened to a dark stairwell. We ventured in, not knowing what to expect. A rectangular pool of light opened at the top of the stairs and we went up. A lanky Eurasian teenage boy came out and behind him was a petite Vietnamese woman. I recognised her from her author picture.

'Chào chị.' My father said apologetically. 'She is a writer and she has been looking for you,' he continued in Vietnamese.

'We'd like to talk to you,' I said in English.

'She doesn't speak Vietnamese or German,' my father said. 'I'm just the interpreter.'

'I have a cold,' she said, 'Perhaps you can come back later. Like tomorrow.'

'Yes that would be good,' my father said. 'Sorry for disturbing you this way.'

'That's OK,' she said. 'We are Vietnamese.'

We are Vietnamese. With that simple sentence she included me in a sense of community that I did not feel very often in Australia. I was a second generation Vietnamese Australian, the child of refugees, born in Hobart. I did not feel part of the Vietnamese community because I did not speak Vietnamese.

Hoài took us to where the best, most authentic pho was served in Berlin, where the Vietnamese community market stalls were sheltered in giant aircraft hangars out of the cold.

Phạm Thị Hoài told me I should make a name for myself and then publish through the web. 'The book industry is run for publishers not writers,' she said. She herself could not write fiction while concentrating on journalism. I remember a story I had heard that she wrote the *Crystal Messenger* for cigarettes. She would exchange pages for tobacco and papers. I gave her a book of mine for her husband to read in English. He was a German professor.

I founded an on-line magazine, *Peril*, for Asian Australian arts and culture and it has received Australia Council of the Arts funding for the last seven years. It has 2337 followers this week. I identify as being Asian Australian, in a way that I do not identify as being Australian.

My book, the *Lady of the Realm*, was first released as an ebook through the *Australian Literary Review* along with a work by Eleanor Jackson. It had 183 downloads. It will be a while before my name will be known like Phạm Thị Hoài's is.

We are Vietnamese. Nam Le once asked me who the other Vietnamese-Australian writers were and I could only come up with myself, him, Chi Vu and Dominic Golding. That's not very many, he commented, and that's true. Nam Le is still the most well-known author. He has been purposefully misread by Christopher Lee, a Canadian academic as an 'American' author, the argument being he was from the Iowa Writers' Workshop. This misses the important cultural differences between American and Australian perceptions of the war and the positioning of Vietnam in the national imaginaries of both countries.

The Vietnam that Australians know about is mostly in the context of war. The latest war musical is *Rolling Thunder Vietnam*. 'Rolling Thunder' was the code name for the American carpet bombing of Vietnam for a few years in the sixties. It would be like naming a musical 'Operation Desert Storm.' Inappropriate.

The battle of Long Tân is the most famous Australian battle of the Vietnam/American War where the Australians won the battle, but lost the war. It made national news headlines when the Vietnamese government put restrictions on the planned Australian celebrations in Long Tân in 2017. They did not want a band playing and did not want thousands gathering in commemoration. The equivalent would be the Japanese having a celebration at Pearl Harbour. Unthinkable.

Miss Saigon is still the most popular musical concerning Vietnam—*Madame Butterfly* in a modern context. *Cloud Wish*, a young adult book about a Vietnamese refugee girl by Fiona Wood has been awarded a Children's Book Council Award. If the book was about a Muslim girl or an Aboriginal girl it would have been seen for what it was, cultural appropriation by a white writer.

We are Vietnamese. I did not feel at home in my own skin, a banana—yellow on the outside white on the inside—until I met other Vietnamese-Australian artists like Chi Vu who had Vietnamese ancestry and artistic sensibilities. Chi had a piece included in the *PEN Anthology of Australian Literature*, a sign of mainstream acceptance of Vietnamese diasporic work. She also produced a play called the *Coloured Alien* about the issues facing Asian playwrights.

In my first adult book, *Vixen*, I avoided writing about the war. I did not feel comfortable doing so since it was outside my immediate experience, I did not feel I could do it justice. In *The Other Shore* the war is experienced through psychic visions, through a naïve protagonist, Kim, in her early twenties. Through my recent work as a psychologist I have encountered survivors of war, so in the *Lady of the Realm* I am able to write about Lien's experiences of war.

We are Vietnamese. I say I am Vietnamese-Australian. Though I do not speak Vietnamese I have come to realise that my spirit is Vietnamese Buddhist through the teachings of Thích Nhất Hạnh. I was privileged to go on a month-long tour with him in South Vietnam in 2007, receiving dharma talks and going on a retreat with thousands of people at Prajna Monastery before it was destroyed.

Saigon

He walks in silence
Ten thousand hushes
And the world takes a breath

A lake of calm
Ripples outward from the heart
An abbot kneels at his feet
With a gentle touch he rises
And all are made equal
'I have arrived, I am home'

Prajna Monastery¹

This seated Buddha
Overlooks the waterfall
Grey robed novices show the way
Giggling like birds
'I have arrived, I am home'
Messages of meditation
Amongst straight young pine trees
The green tea plantation mountains
Surround the Prajna inside
Ten thousand hear his words
Ten thousand feel his mantra
Each moment, each breath
Being peace personified

Melbourne

'I have arrived, I am home'
With this sangha I am never alone
Touching the earth I see
The seeds of my ancestors in each cell of my body
War, rape and illness exhaled
Soothing my soul with ritual
I grieve, I heal, I inter-be.

Prajna Monastery followed Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings in Vietnam and was destroyed by the Vietnamese government in 2009. Thích Nhất Hạnh is a well-known Vietnamese Zen Master exiled in France with monasteries around the world including in Australia.

Hoài asked me to take pictures of the protest held by the Vietnamese German monastics in Berlin. They held a peaceful walking meditation in the centre of the city, handing out yellow roses to passers-by. She told me that her son did not care about what happened in Vietnam. I could not understand how a son could not care about his mother's exile. Perhaps they would say he was too German, the way I am told I am too Australian.

We are Australian. I'm lucky to be Australian, lucky to be born in Hobart and not a war zone. Though I'm not proud to be Australian in this time and place, it offers opportunities that I wouldn't get elsewhere, for instance if I were a Vietnamese resident in Vietnam. In Vietnam I would not be able to write against the government, to write about sex or violence. Nor would I be able to follow openly Thích Nhất Hạnh's teachings.

After the destruction of Prajna Monastery, Thích Nhất Hạnh said that Prajna is now legend. The monastics who have mostly fled to Thailand carry the seeds of Prajna within them

¹ Prajna means insight in Sanskrit.

with their practice. I had wanted to end the *Lady of the Realm* with messages of peace and reconciliation but instead it ends with the destruction of the monastery, with peace a hope rather than an actuality. A mainstream reviewer found the book beautiful but horrifying, with the ending surprising. She also thought that Lien alone called the war the American War, rather than all of Vietnam doing so.

Thích Nhất Hạnh suffered a debilitating stroke in 2016. He visited Vietnam in 2017 quietly with no public teachings, to visit his root temple in Huế. Somehow he has found peace and a way forward with the Vietnamese government in order to return.

We are Vietnamese.

We are Australian. We are Vietnamese-Australian.

We are all connected. We inter-be.