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e P R E S S

PORTAL Journal of
Multidisciplinary
International Studies

Vol. 15, No. 1/2
August 2018



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Citation: Hoàng, N.T., Quán, T., Campbell, I. and Chu, T. 2018. Two Poems by Nguyễn Tiên Hoàng, Writing in Vietnamese as Thường Quán, With English Translations by Ian Campbell and Tony Chu. *PORTAL: Journal of Multidisciplinary International Studies*, 15:1/2, pp. 121-124. <https://doi.org/10.5130/portal.v15i1-2.5845>

ISSN 1449-2490 | Published by
UTS ePRESS | <http://portal.epress.lib.uts.edu.au>

CULTURAL WORK

Two Poems by Nguyễn Tiên Hoàng, Writing in Vietnamese as Thường Quán, With English Translations by Ian Campbell and Tony Chu

Nguyễn Tiên Hoàng, as Thường Quán¹, Ian Campbell², Tony Chu³

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5130/portal.v15i1-2.5845>

Article History: Received 30/11/2017; Revised 10/06/2018; Accepted 15/06/2018;
Published 23/08/2018

Abstract

Born in 1956 in Danang, Vietnam, Nguyễn Tiên Hoàng arrived in Australia in 1974 on a Colombo Plan scholarship. In writing poetry and literary essays in Vietnamese over more than thirty years he has generally used the pen name, Thường Quán. However, as Nguyễn Tiên Hoàng, his English language poems have been featured in the Poetry International Web series of Australian poets—<https://www.poetryinternationalweb.net/pi/site/poet/item/20689>—as well as in a number of Australian poetry book collections, the most recent being *Captive and Temporal*, published by Vagabond Press (Sydney & Tokyo, 2017) in its Australia Series—<https://vagabondpress.net/collections/australia>—which was short-listed for both the 2018 Kenneth Slessor Prize for Poetry and the Mary Gilmore Award in 2018.

The poems published in this issue of *PORTAL*, 'Ngoài Giác Ngủ' and 'Hiện Ra,' were included in the book poetry collection—also titled *Ngoài Giác Ngủ*—published in California, USA, in 1990, which featured sixty-seven poems by Melbourne-based Nguyễn Tiên Hoàng, writing under the pen name Thường Quán. In 1994 the *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* (Melbourne) published the poem 'Ngoài Giác Ngủ,' together with a first English language version co-translation, titled 'Beyond,' by Ian Campbell and Tony Chu. An adaptation of the poem was sung in Vietnamese *ngâm* style by Thu Huong Huynh, as part of 'A Spring Evening of Poetry, Translated Verse and Music' held in 1995 in Sydney to mark 50 years of post-war

DECLARATION OF CONFLICTING INTEREST The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

migration to Australia. The English language version later appeared in 1996, with the original poem in Vietnamese, in a Sydney-based Vietnamese language newspaper, and in 2002 the English language translation appeared again in *Sunlines: An Anthology of Poetry to Celebrate Australia's Harmony in Diversity*, edited by Anne Fairbairn (Canberra: Dept. of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs, 2002). The English language co-translation of the poem appeared in Nguyễn Tiên Hoàng's collection, *Captive and Temporal* (Sydney & Tokyo: Vagabond Press, 2017). The poem, 'Ngoài Giác Ngủ,' now appears in its Vietnamese language original form (1990), and in an English language co-translation by Chu and Campbell which varies slightly from all previous translations. An English language version of the poem, 'Hiện Ra,' has never been previously published and appears now in a co-translation as 'Becoming Visible,' together with the 1990 poem in its original Vietnamese language version.

Keywords

Poetry; Australia; Vietnamese Diaspora; Nguyễn Tiên Hoàng; Thường Quán; Ian Campbell; Tony Chu; Ngoài Giác Ngủ; Hiện Ra

Ngoài Giác Ngủ

Những người khuất mặt
 Đến lặng lẽ chào tôi trong đêm
 Khoảng cách là những cuộc đời
 Nở hoa hiển tử
 Tím xanh tròng mắt dòng sông
 Đôi bờ quán lữ
 Mưa giăng
 Tay tì nhau
 Chẳng thể sờ chạm
 Giọt mưa không giọt mưa không
 Rơi ngoài giấc ngủ
 Trôi vào hun hút mùa đông
 Những ao làng xám rũ
 Núi đôi bia mộ lách lau
 Gió bần bật bần bật
 Trắng thối về đâu
 Lạc mất câu chào
 Trời mây thiên cô
 Chẳng tìm ra nhau
 Chẳng tìm ra nhau
 Nép thấp trong đêm
 Những lời khan vọng.

Beyond

Shades unseen, hidden
 come silently to greet me in the night
 Between those shades and I
 so many lives, passed by
 as flowers that bloom open

then wither—translucent as violets
 Shades in the iris of a cold eye,
 a cool stream before my eyes meandering,
 pale blue; then the night
 in this dark inn.
 The gathering showers come,
 hands seek out one another
 unable to reach, to touch
 empty drops, empty drops
 Falling into a world beyond sleep
 drifting endlessly, into winter,
 and the bleakness of village ponds and hamlets destitute.
 Mountains and hills, where tombstones part the sea of reeds
 where the wind buffets and trembles
 O white wind, where are you blowing to?
 Lost from the night are the moments of greeting,
 in this eternity of sky and cloud
 they and I remain
 Unable to seek the other
 unable to find the other
 A candle burns in the night
 the beatings of the wind, hard to discern
 still echo and reverberate...

Translation by Ian Campbell and Tony Chu (1993, 2017)

Hiện Ra

Hiện ra một giếng sâu ký thác
 Một bờ sông chạy đầu lắc lư
 Bờm ngựa đỏ trăng hai búi cỏ
 Nên tàn phơ phát lửa phần thu.
 Rồi hiện ra người đèn nhánh tóc
 Đi tìm nhặt nhạnh giữa đêm mù
 Những trang cháy dở hồn than khóc
 Về gọi thơ lên đàn giải oan.
 Hiện ra đàn trẻ thơ hồng ửng lòng đèn
 Ôm sừng trăng non về trả đường tre ám lửa
 Bây dom đóm bay vào ở giữa
 Hồ ao trăng ngát độ nở sen.
 Mở cửa thôn làng mở cửa
 Hiện ra kiêng bạc áo nâu non
 Oan khi gột sạch lòng son
 Hiện ra ô cửa mây lành hiện ra.

Becoming Visible

Becoming visible, this well into which I trustingly cast
 my melancholy, along a river's edge, a galloping horse,
 its fiery mane flaring up, the light of the moon is shining

upon tufts of grass, and ash of the candle turns white
as the flame meanders across the pages.
Becoming visible again, a woman with jet black hair flowing
looking for what is lost in the fog-mist of the night,
her soul weeping over the half-burnt pages
drawing forth the muse to the task of setting all aright.
Becoming visible, children silhouetted in red of lantern light,
gathering up the rimméd horn of the young moon over the
bamboo-shrouded road, warm night, fireflies dart here and there,
between moths, aflutter upon the scented ponds
as the lotus blooms.
I prise open the gate of the village, I open it,
I see the silver of the necklace worn over a brownish dress,
my heart is made whole again, away the past,
becoming visible, at the window, serene are the clouds.

Translation by Ian Campbell and Tony Chu (1994, 2017)