

Exile: Rupture and Continuity **in Jean Vanmai's *Chan Dang* and *Fils de Chan Dang***

Tess Do, University of Melbourne, Australia

Unlike the hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese refugees who have settled in many Western countries, most of them having fled their country to avoid persecution after the communist take-over in 1975, the few thousand Vietnamese migrants who live in New Caledonia today did not leave their homeland for political reasons. Most of them left as voluntary workers in the 1920s and 1930s when Vietnam was still a French colony, and signed a five-year contract with the French Ministry of Indigenous Affairs, which recruited them for the mining companies and landowners of New Caledonia. Others were descendants of previous generations of miners who came in the 1890s. Legally speaking, these workers were not living in exile as, according to the terms of their contract, they would be repatriated after five years and have their return organised and paid for by the French government. Two factors, however, turned their temporary stay in New Caledonia into a long period of exile during which an expatriate community emerged and established itself in the new country. The first factor was a combination of geographical and cultural displacement, social isolation and exclusion from public life in New Caledonia, and mistreatment and exploitation in the workplace that made them feel that their human rights and dignity had been violated. The second factor was a combination of unpredictable political events that put a halt to their repatriation: the outbreak of the Second World War, the French defeat at Dien Bien Phu in 1954, the decolonisation of Indochina, and American military involvement in Vietnam. For those young Vietnamese who left their villages

in the thirties, hoping to return five years later with enough savings to help their family and start a new life, exile was experienced as a particularly trying and painful period of change, rupture and separation. Because of the war in Vietnam contact with loved ones back home was lost, husbands and wives suffered decades of separation, and marriages were threatened by infidelity and betrayal. In the new country family and traditions are broken and New Caledonia-born children grew up culturally uprooted.

Against this historical backdrop New Caledonian-born writer Jean Vanmai chooses to describe the life and working conditions of the Chan Dang, the voluntary workers from Tonkin (North Vietnam), in his first two novels, *Chan Dang* (1980) and *Fils de Chan Dang* (1984). Descended from a Chan Dang family, Vanmai wishes to preserve the memory of the Chan Dang's past. In his "Récit de vie" [Life Story], he points out that the repatriation of the majority of the Chan Dang in the 1960s prompted him to take up writing:

... je pense qu'il faudrait bien que quelqu'un de chez nous se décide, un jour ou l'autre, à écrire l'épopée des Vietnamiens en Nouvelle-Calédonie. Il est inconcevable de laisser disparaître cette période dure, pénible, difficile, vécue par tous ces gens, sans laisser la moindre trace écrite. (2004, 82)

[I think that one of us must decide, one day or another, to write the epic tale of the Vietnamese in New Caledonia. It is inconceivable to let this hard, painful and difficult period that was lived by all these people disappear without any written trace.]

In writing their story, Vanmai, who has not joined his compatriots in leaving New Caledonia, sees himself as the guardian of the Chan Dang's collective memory, a keeper and defender of their common past. His courageous act not only breaks the silence that envelops this difficult colonial period, but it also allows the younger generations of Vietnamese in New Caledonia to reconnect with their parents' and grandparents' past, their country of origin, and to be proud of their cultural legacy. It is not a coincidence that for Vanmai, his foremost and dearest reader is his own daughter. He said in an interview that I conducted with him in December 2003 that he wrote all his books for her, and that she was a passionate reader and a good critic. In the 1960s when, as a young man, Vanmai started collecting documents and interviewing the old Chan Dang about their personal experiences as "coolies," he encountered significant resistance from his own people who preferred to forget such a

shameful past. While memory is central to the exilic experience, memory can be painful; thus, Vanmai's act of resurrection of the past is not an easy task. Not only does he risk hurting the Chan Dang, but he is also in danger of offending the French Caledonian community by exposing the colons' cruel exploitation of the Vietnamese workers. Even twenty years later, in 1980, when *Chan Dang* was published and when the descendants of the migrant workers were well integrated in New Caledonian society, it was still very delicate to publicly touch upon such a controversial and sensitive topic that could open old wounds and rekindle old conflicts among members of both the Vietnamese and the French sides. Functioning as a detention camp for convicts and prisoners condemned to hard labour by the French government, and as a land of exile for foreign workers from Indochina, Java and Japan who came after the closure of the hard labour camps in 1896, New Caledonia's early history of violence, exploitation and poverty was far from glorious. This shameful history includes the war between France and Vietnam, and the retreat of the French after their defeat at Dien Bien Phu that later fuelled the anti-Vietnamese movement in New Caledonia in the late 1950s and early 1960s, thus prompting the repatriation of most Vietnamese people on the island. Such events probably provided the main reasons for Vanmai's decision to recall the past in a fictional way rather than in the form of a documentary or memoir. While a memoirist involves him or herself and real people in the narration, possibly stirring up raw emotions, the novelist creates plots and characters, shielding him or herself and others from direct connection to reality.

Yet Vanmai is also aware of the need to present his fiction as an authentic and accurate piece of evidence of the past, a witness's account that is to be taken seriously and accepted by the wide New Caledonian public as part of their common history, a shared past that no one should be ashamed of. It is significant to find that, on its back cover, *Chan Dang* is introduced in bold capitals as "un ROMAN, mais aussi UN DOCUMENT HISTORIQUE, et UN TEMOIGNAGE SOCIAL" [a novel, but also a historical document, a social account]. According to Gérard Genette in *Seuils*, this introduction is called a paratext; it surrounds the narrative text and influences the way the reader approaches the novel. In this case, both the fictional and documentary aspects of *Chan Dang* are emphasised. Thus, to read Vanmai's *Chan Dang* and *Fils de Chan Dang* solely as historical documents and to focus on the authenticity of their

related events (as did George Pisier in his foreword to *Chan Dang*) is to ignore the carefully constructed narrative plot and to reduce the characters into types. Indeed, in Pisier's reductive reading, all Chan Dang are lumped together as a bunch of poor and hungry Tonkinese "coolies" who migrate to New Caledonia, motivated by greed and material wealth.

The ambiguity of Vanmai's books, written on the one hand as a fiction, documented on the other hand by personal photos as a memoir, reveals the difficult position of this Vietnamese-Caledonian author vis-à-vis his audience. In spite of the overall message of *Chan Dang* humanity, harmony and reconciliation, this book has not been well received by the French Caledonian community. Without any doubt Vanmai's bleak and disturbing description of the Chan Dang's inhuman exploitation at the hands of their French foremen upsets "la bonne société de Nouméa [qui] continua de boudier l'auteur jusqu'à ce qu'il commette des histoires de plus en plus édulcorées et aseptisées" [the good society of Noumea [who] continued to keep away from the author until he toned down and produced more and more sterilised stories] (1992, 57). Although many readers, themselves descendants of foremen, received the book with enthusiasm and agreed that "les évènements relatés à travers les 387 pages du livre étaient encore en dessous de la vérité" [the events related through the 387 pages of the book were understated] as Vanmai has quoted in his "Récit de vie", the reviewer George Pisier shows a much more reserved attitude toward *Chan Dang*, winner of the *Prix de l'Asie* awarded by the *Association des Ecrivains de Langue Française* (Association of Writers of French Language) in Paris in 1980. In his foreword to the novel, Pisier tries his best to defend French colonial policy and practice. He puts part of the blame on the Chan Dang themselves, who he describes as "frondeurs et violents, et qui paraissaient hypocrites" [anti-authoritarian and violent, and seemingly hypocritical], and emphasises the extreme poverty of these "coolies", their determination to get rich at any price, and their desperate need and willingness to apply for work in New Caledonia. Poverty and greed, as hinted by Pisier in his foreword, were the main motives behind the Vietnamese workers' migration. Thus, he asserts, the wealth they succeeded in accumulating and in taking back home to Vietnam after so many years in New Caledonia could be considered to be a fair compensation for their mistreatment:

Les partants emportèrent des tonnes de biens mobiliers et de grosses sommes d'argent. (...) la valeur des biens rapatriés [fut estimée] à 20 millions de francs. (...) Le moins que l'on puisse dire est que si ces gens souffrirent sur mines ils profitèrent au delà de leurs espérances de leur passage en Calédonie. (n.p.)

[Those who left took with them tons of furniture goods and large sums of money. (...) the total value of the repatriated goods [was estimated] at 20 millions francs. (...) The least one can say is that if these people suffered on the mines, they have profited beyond their expectations from their time in New Caledonia.]

According to Pisier's argument, any feeling of guilt from the French side should be wiped out and the French government could comfortably wash its hands of any responsibility for the exploitation of the Vietnamese workers.

The interest of this paper is not so much to prove whether Pisier's argument about greed and gain is right or wrong, or whether the related accounts of the foremen's cruelty are accurate. It is much more relevant to the understanding of Vanmai's novels to treat them as texts and fiction. This textual approach allows us to carefully examine Vanmai's narrative, his construction of the Vietnamese characters and his elaboration of the plot. How does he portray his compatriots and the Chan Dang, of whom he is a direct descendant? How does he construct their life in exile and present their social and cultural integration? What endings does he reserve for his protagonists and what interpretation can be drawn from such endings? This paper aims to answer these questions by offering a reading of *Chan Dang* and *Fils de Chan Dang* in their historico-cultural context and by examining Vanmai's point of view on exile and change, guilt and betrayal.

For the young Vietnamese peasants from Tonkin who had probably never set foot outside their own villages, the exhausting two-week voyage by sea to an unknown land – New Caledonia – and an unknown future constituted the first painful condition of exile: separation from loved ones and the loss of a familiar environment. The prospect of spending five long years away from their family did nothing to boost the Chan Dang's morale, who realised the full meaning of their expatriation as soon as they set foot in New Caledonia. Stuck on an island thousands of miles away from their country, surrounded by unfamiliar landscapes, trapped by their contract, defenceless in the hands of their employers, and denied means of escape, the Chan Dang had little to relieve the overwhelming sense of dispossession, weariness and

despair. Even the striking beauty of the New Caledonian landscape with its sparkling blue lagoons, its white sandy beaches, and its green mountains, could not dispel their disheartening feeling of displacement. These peasants were used to working in rice fields and living in the country: now they were confined to labouring in underground mines and living in the mountains. Under the cracking whips of their foremen they were constantly reminded that they were slave-workers, not tourists, and even if their work had brought them to some paradise beach, they were unable to enjoy the scenic seascape. As strangers, they did not have the same knowledge about the land as the locals and had no warning about the dangers that they might encounter in their new environment. In the eyes of the foreign migrant workers, the beautiful landscape could turn into a deadly trap for those who did not belong there. Out of ignorance, the newly arrived Chan Dang did not know, for example, that some lagoons were infested with stingrays and sharks, that sea snakes came up to shore at night to nest on the beach, and that the red ants' stink could be fatal. Such incidents are chronicled by Vanmai: one young boy who went swimming was stung by a large stingray and narrowly escaped a shark attack; many Chan Dang who slept on the beach were bitten by sea snakes; a baby left under a tree while his parents were working nearby was later found dead, killed by red ants. By recalling these incidents in his book, Vanmai conveys the Chan Dang's feeling of exile, vulnerability and estrangement in a foreign country, and their lack of connection to the land, thus underlining the strong bond the exiles kept with their homeland. For Vanmai's characters, the homeland is where they feel welcome and connected. This strong sense of belonging and connection transcends attachment to the New Caledonian place of birth as seen in the example of Hong in *Fils de Chan Dang*. Although he was born and raised in New Caledonia, Hong always knows where his roots are and immediately feels at home the moment he sets foot in Vietnam.

Besides the unfamiliarity of the environment and the dangerous fauna, another direct consequence of exile that can be considered a form of hostility endured by the Chan Dang was their cruel exploitation at the hands of French foremen and employers. The migrant workers' rights to dignity and respect were largely ignored. In spite of their legal worker status, the Chan Dang were treated no better than the "bagnards", or convicts, whom they replace in many instances. As Isabelle Merle explains, the

Vietnamese workers rather than the Kanaks became the real successors of the convicts:

The rules and regulations described in the order in 1895 are so similar to the ones that have been applied to the convicts in the penal colony. If we set aside the question of voluntary work and that of the workers' repatriation, we have to underline the parallelism between the workers' conditions and that of the convicts who were recruited by the colonial government or who were employed in the mines. So, in an amazing continuity New Caledonia substitutes the convicts with the immigrant workers who were submitted to the same conditions of hard labour (1995, 316).

The (slave) worker status of the Vietnamese was compounded by their status as a colonised people. Merle adds that because they came from a French colony (Indochina), Vietnamese workers were treated as an indigenous people and not awarded the same respect as "real" foreign workers such as the Japanese. Restrictions on the Chan Dang which included bans on alcohol, on leaving camp, or on entering any European centres after eight o'clock in the evening, were not applied to the Japanese workers (Merle 1995, 318). This different treatment was a clear indication that the Vietnamese were treated as colonised people and exiles rather than free foreign workers.

Furthermore, the Chan Dang had little idea, upon signing their contracts, of the many indignities and losses they would suffer in New Caledonia, one of which was the dispossession of their personal names. Claiming that Vietnamese names were either "trop longs ou trop compliqués" [too long and complicated] (Vanmai 1980, 25) or simply impossible to pronounce (a reason put forward by Pisier), the French colonial administration in New Caledonia reserved the right to replace the name and surname of each worker with a "numéro d'immatriculation" [an identification number], a practice that was still applied in 1953 according to Louis-José Barbançon (35). With the loss of their freedom, then their names, the Chan Dang felt increasingly deprived. After receiving his new identification number, 3141, Ming, a young migrant worker from Hanoi bitterly wonders: "Chacun de nous a perdu son nom, sa personnalité. Que nous reste-il donc?" [Each of us has lost his or her name, his or her personality. What is left to us then?] (Vanmai 1980, 63). Ming's question is a poignant reminder of how, in a symbolical sense, the migrant worker's body was colonised. Sold to the colonial employers who could beat, starve and even kill it, the body no longer belonged to the

migrant, in the same way that colonised countries no longer belong to their indigenous inhabitants.

During the colonial period, Vietnam, for example, was divided into three separate regions: Tonkin in the North, Annam in the centre, and Cochinchine in the south. Together with Laos and Cambodia, the three Vietnamese regions constituted for the French a larger colonial entity, Indochina, the land situated between India and the China Sea. Vietnamese people from these regions were thus called Tonkinese, Annamese, Cochichinese, or simply Indochinese. Indeed, the parallels between the colonised land and the colonised body point to the deep feeling of estrangement and exile experienced by Ming and his friends not only in New Caledonia, but also back home in Indochina. A consequence of colonisation, this double exile becomes a vicious trap from which no colonised people could escape. As Phuc, an older Chan Dang says in *Chan Dang*:

Aurions-nous plus de bonheur, plus de liberté en ce moment dans notre propre pays? Sous le régime actuel? (...) Non! car si tout était parfait chez nous, aurions-nous été contraints de nous expatrier ainsi ? Au bout du monde! (1980, 105).
[Would we have more happiness, more freedom at this very moment in our country? Under the current regime? No, because if everything was perfect in our country, would we be forced to expatriate like this? To the other side of the world.]

In this sense, the Chan Dang's double exile will only end with decolonisation.

It is no coincidence, then, that many Chan Dang waited impatiently for the day when they could *really* go home: the day peace is restored and their country ceased being a French colony. Unfortunately, for some of Vanmai's characters like Phuc or Toan, that day comes too late. Face with his friend's death that abruptly ends the latter's hope of going back home, Ming laments:

Mon pauvre Phuc, mon ami! Tu ne reverras plus jamais notre pays, toi non plus!... Toi qui voulais tant confier ton corps, au dernier jour de ta vie, à la terre de ton village natal!... Tu as combattu avec acharnement pour atteindre ce but... Le jour de la victoire, de ta victoire, est enfin arrivé et tu t'en vas, nous laissant le bénéfice de ton combat! (Vanmai 1980, 371)
[My poor Phuc, my friend! You will never see our country again, either!... You who wanted so much to confide your body and the rest of your life to the land of your home village!... You have fought relentlessly for this goal... Now that the day of victory, your victory, has finally come, you go away, leaving us with the benefit of your battle.]

Besides the geographical displacement of the migrant workers and the indignity they suffered at the hands of their employers, the social isolation they encountered during their contract constituted another sad condition of exile. Upon arrival, the Chan Dang were taken to an isolated camp in the mountains and lumped together in crowded dormitories and wooden huts, away from both Kanak and European communities. Normal social contact with the locals was almost impossible, as the law forbade the workers to wander outside their camp after dark. Between the Chan Dang and the French employers who lived in “ces belles maisons (...) entourées de jardins bien entretenus” [these beautiful houses surrounded by well-kept gardens] (Vanmai 1980, 57) there was a world of difference. On the one hand, the migrants’ working contracts bound them to a master-slave relationship with their foremen. On the other hand, the language barrier stopped them from reaching out to others, such as the Kanak, the Javanese or the Japanese communities.

As a consequence of their isolation, their limited mobility, and their language difficulties, the Chan Dang were cut off from the rest of the New Caledonian society. This situation led to further withdrawal and isolation, the only social contact available to the Chan Dang being with people from their own community. This dependence on one’s ethnic group bred misunderstanding and suspicion between the Vietnamese workers and the other communities who, as Pisier argues, saw them as sly and untrustworthy. It also created difficulties within the Vietnamese community itself, among the most obvious being questions of change and adaptation, and even resistance. With a population of a few thousand workers and a ratio of one woman to five men, the Chan Dang did not belong to a colony of settlement, let alone a traditional Vietnamese settlement. At least in the early stage of their exile, they were unable to reproduce the extended social and family structures of the homeland, whereby each individual was supported by strong ties of kinship and a strong sense of belonging. Young men and women were expected to marry and have children, while still living under the same roof as their parents or grandparents. In New Caledonia, where the migrant population was mostly male, many single men were unable to marry due to the shortage of women. Those few lucky enough to find a wife did not have the moral support of parents or extended family. As described in Vanmai’s books, some of the workers who had to live alone suffered serious depression, became

alcoholic or turned violent. Others were tempted to have affairs with other men's wives while others looked for relationships with non-Vietnamese women. The exiled Chan Dang faced serious disruptions to their traditional family life and, in order to survive prolonged exile in New Caledonia, were forced to make changes that would allow them to adapt to their new life. Although exile gives them the excuse to break away from their traditions and principles, not all changes lead to successful integration or a happy outcome, as we can see later with Tuyen in *Fils de Chan Dang*. By reserving a sad ending for Tuyen's life and a happy one for his friend Hong, Vanmai appears to emphasise clearly which Vietnamese ancestral moral values and traditions he believes should be preserved under any circumstances: ancestor worship and filial devotion head his list. According to this perspective, exile is ambivalent, a situation that both encourages and discourages change. When exile promotes resistance to change, it becomes a moral testing ground for the protagonists. Away from the homeland, exposed to new values and principles, Vanmai's exile moral struggles and achievements are measured and judged against their acts of filial devotion.

In Vanmai's books the Chan Dang's moral test starts before they actually set foot in New Caledonia. If we analyse their motive for exile, filial devotion is precisely the underlying factor behind the Chan Dang's decision to leave Vietnam for New Caledonia. Derived from ancestor worship, filial devotion has been one of the fundamental Vietnamese moral codes and corner stones of Vietnamese society. Generally speaking, filial devotion consists of several duties a son or daughter must fulfil during his or her parents' lifetime, as well as after their death. The most common duties are showing care, respect, gratitude, and obedience towards one's parents. A son or daughter is therefore indebted to his or her parents since without them and their gift of life, he or she would not be here. This gratitude also extends to grandparents and ancestors. According to Vietnamese moral standards, a good person is first of all a dutiful son or daughter, and anyone lacking in filial devotion will be severely criticised and condemned by society. In other words, filial devotion is a means to judge and evaluate a person according to the way he or she lives, thinks and acts. In exile in particular, where a person is constantly exposed to other cultures, and therefore to different moral values and changes, failing one's filial duty can be

interpreted as an act of betrayal. It follows that the undutiful son or daughter can be considered a betrayer, not only of his or her parents and family, but also of his or her ancestors and origins. Thus, in the face of the multiple adversities presented by exile, Vanmai's protagonists are divided into two groups: those who live by the traditional moral code of ancestor worship and filial devotion, and those who do not.

To overlook this Vietnamese fundamental moral code and suggest, as Pisier does, that the poor Tonkinese peasants were motivated by the idea of going abroad to get rich, hence their willingness to endure hard living and working conditions, is to ignore the key factor behind the Chan Dang's expatriation. For a people who lay great importance on keeping face, abandoning one's home to search elsewhere for food is considered a final and shameful resort precisely because it can be interpreted as a public declaration of one's poverty. "Tha phuong cau thuc," to wander to a foreign land praying for food, as a Vietnamese saying goes, means just that. Given this attitude toward economic migration, the pain of separation and the undignified treatment of the migrant workers, we need to look beyond the greed and gain motives, and find out what alleviated the suffering of the Chan Dang.

Vanmai's novelistic descriptions of the Vietnamese workers clearly show that, even in their darkest moments, the exiles were most happy not when making a lot of money for themselves, but when they could send this money home to help their parents and the family they left behind. As the narrative outcomes of several characters reveal, filial devotion is evidently a major driving force behind the Chan Dang's efforts and perseverance in a new setting. If Lien, a young migrant worker whose separation from her lover Thang nearly makes her go insane with pain, does not resort to suicide, it is because her friend Lan has reminded her about her filial duty: no matter what happens, she must live and work hard to take care of her parents. Lan, the eldest daughter of a poor peasant family, also places her family interest above her own and readily sacrifices her personal comfort for her parents and siblings. Hoping that her wages would provide for her loved ones more adequately than if she stayed at home, Lan decides to go to New Caledonia. Her unconditional love for her parents and younger siblings, and her unwavering determination to fulfil her duty towards them, give Lan the strength to suffer in silence numerous humiliations, including verbal and

physical abuse, erroneous accusations of theft, and sexual assault. Her sacrifices and selfless use of money not only make her a dutiful daughter; they also guard her against temptation and moral corruption, two evils associated with exile, especially when the poverty-stricken migrant is exposed to wealth and luxury. Courted by many men much richer than her penniless boyfriend Ming, Lan flatly rejects them all, although she knows that marrying somebody like Ngach will immediately guarantee her a wealthy life. Her seemingly contradictory attitude toward money (on the one hand she needs money to send home; on the other hand, she refuses the opportunity to have more of it by marrying Ngach) clearly proves that in spite of her poverty, greed and material gain neither motivate her to go to New Caledonia nor guide the moral principles by which she wants to live her life. With his descriptions of this highly righteous and self-respected Chan Dang, Vanmai shows us a different aspect of filial devotion that goes beyond sending money home or taking care of ageing parents. In Lan's case, by upholding her moral principles and dignity, by being true to herself and faithful to her principles, and by preserving her purity, she honours her parents and the family name.

With the protagonist Ming, Vanmai presents us with another aspect of filial devotion. The only son of a wealthy family, Ming does not migrate out of need. His parents do not expect him to prove that he is a dutiful son by helping them financially or by taking care of them (at least not when he is still living with them). What they ask of him is obedience, one of the key filial duties. But this duty is something that Ming cannot and will not give them, since it would require him to marry a woman not of his choosing. As mentioned earlier, he prefers to leave home (which causes great grief and pain to his parents) rather than sacrifice his life and personal happiness to please them. In disobeying and disappointing his parents, and placing his own interest above theirs, Ming appears at first sight to be an undutiful son, the opposite of his wife Lan or her friend Lien. However, as the story unfolds, Ming expresses his filial devotion on more than one occasion, and finally makes amends for his initial disobedience.

Shame is the first sign of his repentance: he is never proud of or happy about having left his parents in such an undignified way. Although he refuses to accept his father's decision to marry him off against his will, Ming never really blames anyone, only the

obsolete tradition of arranged marriage. As soon as he learns that his father has fallen seriously ill because of him, he is overwhelmed with guilt and distress. After shame, his sense of guilt provides his second step towards redemption. When his own New Caledonian-born son, Hong, refuses to return to Vietnam with Ming and his wife, and runs away on the day of departure to stay with his (French) girlfriend, Ming feels the same pain, anger, and despair that his father felt twenty years earlier when he left home. Through his suffering, Ming is able to reconnect with his father, and his life comes full circle. By coming home after a twenty-year stay in New Caledonia, Ming fulfils his parents' last and most fervent wish and takes the final step towards redeeming himself in their eyes. His return liberates him from the burden of guilt that haunts him for having run away behind his parents' back "comme un voleur, comme un fils indigne" [like a thief, like an unworthy son] (Vanmai 1980, 65). Thus, the renewal of filial devotion now largely makes up for his past disobedience. He has proven to be, after all, a good and loyal son and, now a father himself, he now expects that Hong, a son he raises dutifully for many years, will not run away from his roots or forget his filial duty toward his parents. "Il viendra nous voir un jour... J'en suis sûr. C'est un bon garçon" [He will come to visit us one day... I am sure of it. He is a good boy] (Vanmai 1980, 385), Ming assures his devastated wife on their day of departure from New Caledonia, a statement that confirms like father like son.

Of the second generation of the Chan Dang migrants, Hong is the only one of Vanmai's protagonists who pushes through the complicated paperwork and bureaucracy to make the journey home as soon as the Vietnam war comes to an end; he is the only Chan Dong who answers immediately his mother's urgent call. Although Vietnam is not his birth country, Hong's deep love for his parents extends to their homeland, a land he has never seen but to which he already feels a strong emotional attachment. It is the place where his parents were born and where they will die, like so many generations before them. Through his parents, through the family line, Hong traces his roots back to his Vietnamese ancestors and is proud to reclaim his place as one of their descendants. His earlier refusal to go home with his parents, his marriage to a non-Vietnamese woman, and his Western life in New Caledonia, do not mean he has changed and betrayed his origins or become an undutiful son. He does not forget or deny his past. Far from hindering his integration into New

Caledonian society, Hong's recognition of his cultural and ethnic origins enables him to live harmoniously and happily with his French wife and his mixed-race children. He is, after all, a "good boy", like his father before him. His conscience remains unburdened by guilt because he does not emotionally abandon his parents when he decides to live in New Caledonia. In Vanmai's eyes, Hong thus represents the good son who manages to fulfil his filial duty towards his father and his ancestors while at the same time constructing a new happy life for himself and his family in his birth country. It is evident that Hong's success is not based on wealth or social status (he is an ordinary employee in a commercial industry) but rather on his willingness to preserve the Vietnamese tradition of ancestor worship and filial devotion. In this light, Hong is not only worthy of the family name he carries, a name given to him by his father that he, in turn, proudly passes on to his children (he has a son), but also of the title given by Vanmai to his second book: *Son of Chan Dang*.

For Hong and Ming, the fulfilment of filial duty is the key to their happiness and success in New Caledonia, a means to counter the disruption and loss that are closely associated with exile. In their friend Tuyen's case, cultural assimilation does not reflect a personal achievement and his interracial marriage is not the happy outcome of a successful integration. As Vanmai seems to tell us throughout *Fils de Chan Dang*, neglecting one's filial duty and failing to maintain one's cultural and moral integrity in the face of change, as did the protagonist Tuyen, inevitably leads to a tragic ending. Compared to the other Chan Dang such as Ming, Hong, Lan and Lien, Tuyen's greatest sin is his greed and his refusal to return to his homeland. When the opportunity for repatriation presents itself, Tuyen decides to stay longer in New Caledonia with the aim of making more money, instead of going back to Vietnam with his family: his wife, their two young children and his old parents. The desire to make "more" money and the decision to let money stand in the way of the return home creates feelings of guilt in both Tuyen and his wife Hoa. Deep down, they both know they are making a mistake and that one day they will have to bear the consequences. On the ship that takes her back to Vietnam without her husband, Hoa is sick with worry and keeps wondering "si leur separation n'était pas en fin de compte une folie? Oui, folie que de se laisser séduire par la perspective de gagner un peu d'argent" [whether their separation was not simply foolish? Yes, it is foolish to let

oneself be seduced by the prospect of earning a little more money] (1983, 31). Separated from his family, Tuyen for his part feels “terriblement coupable et fautif envers les siens” [terribly guilty toward his loved ones] (Vanmai 1983, 34). However, unlike Ming, his guilt does not compel him to return to his home country and does not stop him later on from betraying his wife. Tuyen relies on money to ease his mind and, consequently, is caught in a vicious circle of greed and need, in which he has to accept risky business ventures and investments in order to catch up financially. By letting material gain become the driving force in his life, Tuyen loses what is most important to an exile-turned-migrant: his sense of self and his moral principles.

Tuyen’s acculturation and change of character, described by Vanmai as a series of transformations and transgressions, begin with him driving, then acquiring, a truck. This allows him to enter the industrial sector and the extremely competitive, ruthless world of truck drivers. But Tuyen’s new status as a truck owner seems more like a failure than a success; he succumbs to the “hystérie collective” [collective hysteria] (Vanmai 1983, 62) occasioned by the New Caledonian economic boom and becomes obsessed with the idea of getting his share. The possession of a truck is a double-edged sword; Tuyen is not only its owner, but also its slave. He no longer controls how he lives, works or relaxes; everything is tied to his new job and, indirectly, to his truck:

Tuyên tenta de conserver tout d’abord le rythme qu’il pensait raisonnable de dix heures de travail par jour. Mais il dut se rendre à l’évidence: on ne raisonnait pas dans ce métier (...) Très vite il fut donc lui aussi happé puis entraîné dans une ronde infernale (1983, 66)
[At first Tuyen tried to keep to what he regarded as the reasonable workload of ten hours work per day. But he had to yield to the evidence: one could not reason in this job. Very quickly he, too, was grabbed then dragged into a vicious circle.]

Somewhat like the infernal train in Zola’s *La Bête humaine*, Tuyen’s truck acts as a demonic force that dehumanises him and drags him with it into the mad race for profit. Driver and vehicle became inseparable, an extension of one another, to the point where the merest dent or puncture is experienced by Tuyen as a personal injury.

Thus, through Tuyen’s identification with this symbol of Western technology and modernism, his transformation begins and he takes his first step towards assimilation:

C'est bizarre, mais je finis par m'identifier à ce véhicule... Je souffre terriblement lorsque je le vois ainsi blessé. Sans doute parce que je suis responsable de cet outil de travail que l'on m'a confié ; sans doute que nous formons tout simplement une équipe indivisible (1983, 71).
[It's weird, but I end up by identifying myself with this truck. I suffer terribly when I see it wounded like this. Surely it's because I am responsible for this working tool that has been entrusted to me. But also because we simply form an indivisible team.]

While the other, more dutiful Chan Dang like Lan and Ming bond with family and detach themselves from material possessions, Tuyen moves in the opposite direction and bonds with his truck, to the detriment of his wife and children. In his truck, in the company of his non-Vietnamese truck-driver friends, Tuyen's character begins to change and he starts to lose his old personal values and principles. One day, during which torrential rains forces Tuyen to remain inside his truck, he abandons his rigid moral standards and allows his friends to introduce him to alcohol and unbridled pleasure-seeking. From wine to dog meat and from bat meat to women, Tuyen is transformed by the rapacious consumption of foreign food and casual sex with Kanak women. Although eating dog meat is not uncommon in Vietnam, Tuyen's real transgression lies in the fact that he eats a pet dog, and a *stolen* one at that: "Il oublia ou négligea ses bons principes, le respect qu'il avait pour tout animal domestique, le chien en particulier. Il avait trop faim, une faim de loup" [He forgot or neglected his good principles, the respect he used to have for all domestic animals, dogs in particular. He was too hungry, as hungry as a wolf] (1983, 94). Tuyen may have been hungry, but in Vanmai's hands, this does not justify his moral weakness. If poverty and hunger are what lead the Chan Dang to migrate in the first place, neither Lan nor Ming abandons their moral integrity. Loneliness and grief do not turn Thang and Phuc into casual sexual partners of Kanak women. By eating unfamiliar or forbidden food and by indulging in sexual relationship with the indigenous women, Tuyen drifts further and further away from his old self.

The road accident that destroys his truck and leaves him in a long coma completes his metamorphosis. The man who wakes up to find Sylviane (his friend Robert's deserted wife) at his bedside is no longer the traditional Vietnamese peasant who arrived in New Caledonia with his family years before. And when Tuyen moves in with Sylviane and her two daughters, he is no longer the trustworthy husband that Hoa left behind on the quay on the day of her return to Vietnam. Besides his truck, Tuyen comes to associate himself with yet another symbolical figure of Western culture:

Sylviane, a French woman. Judging from appearances, his new life seems to be successful and harmonious. Financially he is doing very well in his clothing business and emotionally he seems happy with his new partner and their newborn son. However, from a Vietnamese perspective, his achievement is deeply flawed: not only is his happiness with Sylviane founded on betrayal, but his cultural integration is achieved at the expense of broken principles. Tuyen's selfish new life cuts him off from his past and origins, leads him away from his war-torn homeland, and renders him insensible to the suffering of his people.

Through the tragic narrative outcome that ends Tuyen's life, Vanmai portrays this character as a problematic figure and a sad counterpart to Hong. While both protagonists are living between two cultures, Hong recognises his roots and is happily reunited with his parents in Vietnam, whereas Tuyen betrays his family and origins and, as a consequence, has to pay dearly for his mistakes. Happily settled in his new home with Sylviane, Tuyen no longer wishes to go back to Vietnam or to see his Vietnamese wife and children again. Instead of going home to visit them, Tuyen asks Hong to take a large amount of money for Hoa and to tell her to leave him alone. Money, as we have seen, has always been the currency with which Tuyen tries to make amends for his mistakes and to ease his conscience. Money, however, cannot buy him redemption for having been an undutiful son to his parents and his ancestors. Moreover, money, in this case, is no longer an indication of success, as Pisier would suggest, but a sign of shame, betrayal and guilt. Stemming from a guilty conscience and not from love, the very act of sending money home, when the exilic son could have gone back, brings more shame and grief, and not pride and joy, to the parents. Failing his duty, Tuyen is no longer a worthy son and, as such, has also failed to be an exemplary father. His lack of filial devotion returns to haunt him in the guise of Khanh, his sixteen-year old son, who travels with his mother all the way to New Caledonia to find him. Insolent, defiant and rebellious, the teenage boy shows his father no respect whatsoever. Like his father, he is greedy and cares only about money.

History thus repeats itself as avarice breaks Tuyen's family apart for the second time. Sixteen years before it was Tuyen who did not return home with his wife and children

because he wanted to make more money; sixteen years later his eldest son leaves Vietnam with the sole aim of extracting more money from his sinful father. Rebuked by the latter, Khanh disowns Tuyen and, with a violent blow, breaks all bonds between them:

Tu m'a mis au monde, ensuite tu m'as abandonné pendant des années. Tu n'as même pas daigné me faire venir ici. Il nous a fallu nous débrouiller par nos propres moyens. Et aujourd'hui tu me déshérites! (...) Eh bien, moi je te renie ! Je ne te reconnais plus pour mon père! Oui! Tu es déchu désormais de tes droits paternels sur moi (1983, 287).
 [You put me in this world then you abandoned me for years. You did not even try to bring me back here. We had to do it all by ourselves, by our own means. And today, you disown me. Very well, I renounce you. I don't recognise you as my father any longer. Yes, from now on, you are relieved of any parental rights on me.]

With this dramatic breakdown of family bonds and hierarchy, Tuyen's fate is sealed; even before his disappearance (suicide?), his son has announced his father's symbolic death. Tuyen, who refused to board the Eastern Queen some sixteen years before to go back to Vietnam, now takes his own little boat out to sea. Does this reverse sequence represent his last attempt to run away from the past, or his first real – and desperate – attempt to run back to his parents? Is his death a planned suicide or an accidental drowning? Vanmai does not elaborate.

However, if suicide is the motive, Tuyen has committed yet another offence against his parents. While they remain alive, his duty is to look after and care for them; by taking his own life he commits a shameful breach of filial duty and proves that he is, again, thinking only of himself and his own pain, not of his parents' grief or his duty towards them. In fact, since failing to care for one's parents during their lifetime is a serious breach of filial duty, whatever the cause of Tuyen's death, he remains an unworthy son who leaves his ageing father and mother (not to mention his wife Hoa and their two children, who have just migrated to New Caledonia) unattended and uncared for. Such neglect cannot go unpunished. In this respect it is significant that Tuyen's body is never recovered. It is as if he will forever remain a lost son to his parents, both during his lifetime and after his death. Without a body, there can be no proper burial for Tuyen – either in his homeland, Vietnam, or in New Caledonia – and therefore no rest for his soul. As a person who has spiritually betrayed his ancestors and ancestral land, Tuyen's soul cannot join them after death and his body will not deserve a resting place even in a foreign land. Thus, his spirit is condemned to wander

at sea, forever lost, forever trying to redeem himself by crossing the ocean and reaching the shore of his homeland. In death as in life, Tuyen remains homeless and in exile, his soul trapped in perpetuity between the two worlds, New Caledonia and Vietnam. Far from setting him free, Tuyen's death perpetuates the conditions and the suffering of exile, and precludes all possibility of redemption.

Through Tuyen's tragic end Vanmai reveals his reservations about change and acculturation and stresses the duty that each and every Vietnamese migrant must display towards his or her parents. For the exile, to return home in order to pay respect to one's ancestors is one of the surest ways to redeem oneself and thus find inner peace and reconciliation. Setting up the final scene with two grieving wives (Hoa and Sylviane) rooted on top of a mountain, looking out to sea in search for their common husband, Vanmai probably wants to use the well-known Vietnamese legend of the Waiting Wife Mountain to convey both his sympathy toward Tuyen's weaknesses and his humanist viewpoint on exile. By linking the undutiful son character to the husband of the myth, a guilty and incestuous brother who, upon discovering that his wife is his long lost sister, goes out to join the king's army never to return, Vanmai appears to shift part of the blame for Tuyen's betrayal to fateful circumstances. That the incestuous brother finally redeems himself and becomes a patriotic hero who dies in battle for his country can be interpreted as Vanmai's wishful thinking: his character Tuyen will be forgiven, one day, by his two families, and also by his readers.

In the modern Western world where individualism, independence and personal freedom are encouraged, filial duty is often neglected and the authority of one's parents questioned. For a Vietnamese migrant, this type of moral and cultural environment represents a real challenge since it is at odds with the traditional Vietnamese moral values that subject the individual to the family, and the children – especially the sons – to the father. In Vanmai's view, however, it is evident that any migrant who neglects his filial duty towards his parents (and on a larger scale, towards his country of origin) is an unworthy son and human being. No amount of Westernisation or assimilation should cause a son to neglect his filial duty, and no transcultural change should be made at its expense. This is the foundation of Vanmai's moral integrity; it is solely through the relationship with his parents that a

son or daughter will be judged as a person. In the difficult conditions of exile, filial devotion not only safeguards the morality of the migrant but also provides him or her with continuity and an invaluable sense of belonging. Since going back to one's parents also means going back to one's origins, filial devotion is one of the key cultural practices that can transcend political and social differences and bring together the Vietnamese people of the diaspora. Vanmai, in telling the story of the Chan Dang and their descendants both as a documentary and a fiction, has attempted to achieve that unity in two ways. First, by sharing with other Vietnamese migrants and refugees his representations of the life and experiences of Tonkinese voluntary workers in New Caledonia, Vanmai breaks the silence surrounding the colonial exile and exploitation of this little known exile community. He thus provides an account of the Chan Dang's exile that can be integrated into the contemporary history of Vietnamese migration. Second, by using different narrative resolutions for each of his protagonists, Vanmai stresses the need to fulfil one's filial duty among the young Vietnamese generations. With this symbolic filial act, the New Caledonian-born author pays homage to his Vietnamese ancestors and earns himself an honourable title, that of a true dutiful "son of Chan Dang."

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