

A TIME FAR PAST: A NOVEL OF VIETNAM
BY LE LUU

Ngo Vinh Hai, Nguyen Ba Chung, Kevin Bowen, and David Hunt, trans. Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997. 272 pp. ISBN 1-55849-085-x (hard). From the original Vietnamese text: Thoi Xa Vang. Hanoi: Writers Union, 1986.

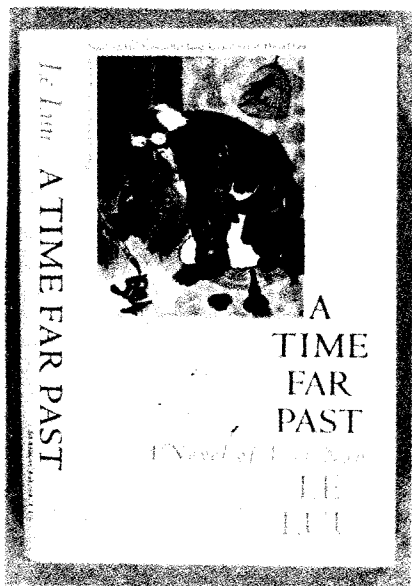
John C. Schafer and Le Tho Giao, Reviewers

As David Hunt, one of the four translators, points out in his introduction, *A Time Far Past* is "a novel about how the Vietnamese lived and not about how they fought in the era of the American War" (vii). The protagonist, Giang Minh Sai, is a decorated soldier, but we learn much more about his marital difficulties than about his battles with the Americans. This is a novel about the social transformation of Vietnam, a portrait of peasants in rural villages struggling to adapt to changing times. Clearly, it is in part autobiographical: Le Luu was born in a poor village in the Red River Delta that resembles Sai's village of Ha Vi. Like his protagonist, Le Luu was the son of a Confucian scholar and like his character he was married at the age of ten! Le Luu was also a soldier, though, unlike Sai, he became

a correspondent for an army journal after three years of combat duty.

The novel covers a period of 30 years: it begins in 1954 when Sai is ten and the Vietnamese have just defeated the French at Dien Bien Phu; it ends in 1984 with Vietnam ready to embark on a policy of "Renovation," which includes moves toward a market economy. Le Luu finished his novel the same year he ends his story—in 1984—and it was published in 1986, a fortunate time. Party officials questioned Le Luu about his novel before allowing it to be published. What troubled them, no doubt, was the fact that *A Time Far Past* breaks with the then accepted socialist realism, an approach demanding near-perfect heroes who live for the revolution. Sai is a bonafide military hero, but goes to war primarily to get away from his first wife, not because he loves the revolution. And his personal life is one disaster after another. "People thought that if he [Sai] was a hero at war, he could not be a failure in other aspects of his life," Le Luu has explained in an interview.¹ These "flaws" in its hero probably would have kept *A Time Far Past* from being published if it weren't for Renovation, which, beginning in 1986, brought some freedom to literary as well as economic spheres.

A prominent theme in the novel is the role of individual freedom in a society committed to what an important character, a political officer named Do Manh, refers to as "collective concern" (*tap the quan tam*), by which is meant the right of superiors to make key decisions in a person's life. In Vietnam this concern has been encouraged by Confucianism, which discourages individual initiative and emphasizes social responsibility, including the obligation of parents to guide their children's lives. The wars for liberation enhanced collective concern as officers and Party officials, acting *in loco parentis*, took control of their soldiers' lives. But when does "collective concern" become harmful interference? This is the question the novel asks. Problems begin with Sai's arranged marriage. Sai is repulsed by his wife and refuses to consummate his marriage even when he is old enough to do so. He loves Huong, a girl from a nearby village. Told by his superiors that he must love his wife if he wants to become a Party member, he obediently sleeps with her and she becomes pregnant. Hearing this news, Huong stops waiting for him, and so he loses the love of his life. Then he is denied



admission to the Party because his wife's family had ties to the colonial authorities. While the arranged marriage can be blamed on "old-fashioned, Confucian attitudes" (6), frequently criticized by Sai's brother and uncle (who are district officials), the novel suggests that socialist morality—an excess of collective concern—has only made a bad problem worse. "I must admit," says Do Manh, the political officer and voice of reason in the novel, "that I feel very depressed about this matter of 'living other people's lives,' about the so-called collective concern" (104).

The novel has other themes, including one directly related to difficulties of translation. The novel contrasts village life with the city life of Hanoi. Chau, Sai's second wife, is a sophisticated Hanoi woman, who considers Sai and his relatives crude country bumpkins. Le Luu, himself a soldier-writer with a peasant background, uses the language of the north Vietnamese peasantry to tell his story. Unlike dialects of Chinese, which are not in most cases mutually intelligible, a spoken dialect of one region can be understood by Vietnamese of other regions but not without some difficulty. For a non-northerner, Le Luu's original narrative is difficult to read.

Differences in social register are added to this problem of differing regional dialects. Peasants speak differently from city dwellers; those who are literate speak differently from those who are illiterate or only barely literate. Translating Vietnamese into English is always difficult, but most translators find it easier when the original is written in a modern and urbane style, one in which the syntax is more parallel to English sentence structure and stylistic artistry more closely resembles that of Western writers. When dealing with an original text that makes use of the northern dialect as spoken by the peasantry, the problems of translation become monumental.

In addition to challenges posed by dialect and register, the translators of this novel also had to deal with Le Luu's frequent digressions and his tendency to shift points of view without any cue. In passages containing dialogue, it is often difficult to determine who is speaking. These formidable challenges provoked the need not for a single translator but a team of translators and editors. In "Notes on the Author and the Translation," Kevin Bowen, a member of this team, describes the approach:

Our method of proceeding was to divide the novel in half, with a native Vietnamese speaker working in team with one of the U.S. translator/editors on each half. Initial drafts were then exchanged, differences in translation compared and discussed, and a revised draft written by all four working together. This version was then passed on to Debra Spark, a novelist and editor with no background in the text or history, for more general editing and comment. From her annotated draft a final version of the manuscript was prepared. (xxii)

How successful is the final product? Any criticism has to be considered in light of the challenges mentioned above. Bowen explains that the team cut where it was impossible to "keep the tone of the original narrative" and where "a literal rendering would make little sense in the overall development of the novel" (xxii). Some cutting would appear to have been done simply to make the book shorter. For example, the translators cut three-and-a-half pages describing how Sai threw himself into military training to keep his mind off his bad marriage. The deleted material is a bit repetitive but could have been translated without harming the overall tone or meaning of the novel. Some cutting, however, was probably necessary to make this work leaner and more digestible for English readers. The translators have also broken up long paragraphs into many shorter ones, another feature that improves readability.

The translators have been less successful in rendering certain idiomatic expressions and vocabulary items. When they have the narrator explain that Scholar Khang believes his family "were not a family of shrimp" (10), their literal translation of the expression "ho nha tom," they leave the English reader wondering what Scholar Khang means. Is he defending his family against charges that they are too short? They might have had the Scholar say that his family members were not a bunch of fishmongers—something to convey the idea that they weren't crude or boorish, which is what the expression "ho nha tom" means. In translating a section when Sai and another soldier are in the mountains, Ngo Vinh Hai et al. have the narrator say that in "only a few hours, the two had filled a backpack with bamboo shoots and a two-kilo bag of cat's ear." "Cat's ear" is a strange translation for *muc nhi*, a kind of edible mushroom found on decaying tree trunks. Would English readers assume the two were collecting the ears of cats? Since there are quite a few proofreading errors, some involving the "s" for plurality or possession, this is possible. In the space of two paragraphs on pages 256-57, there are two subject-verb agreement errors: "Chau's answers was weak..." and "It was the same house...except that the cabinet, the ceiling fan, the sewing machine and the box bed made of wood and bamboo was missing." See also page 119 where we read "Sai morale and enthusiasm would remain high..."

Every translator of Vietnamese texts struggles with the problem posed by modes of address and titles. In Vietnamese, personal pronouns are also kinship terms. People who are not blood relatives also use these kinship pronouns, selecting the one that is appropriate for their relationship. "Anh," for example, means "elder brother" but also "you" in the speech of a younger sibling or of a "fictitious" younger sibling—a younger non-relative who is a friend. If the younger person wishes to be somewhat more formal but still friendly, he or she can use "anh" as a title, as in the phrase "Anh Sai," literally, "Brother Sai." Huong, the fellow student who loves Sai, refers to him in this way early in their relationship: "O Heavens! Brother Sai. Let's go to the other side of the river" (36). The danger in using "brother" (and "sister," "uncle," etc.) in a translation is that phrases such as "Brother Sai" strike the

English reader as rather odd. The translators generally handle these difficulties skillfully, using the kinship term when it is part of a title ("Anh Sai" becomes "Brother Sai") but not when it is used alone as a simple pronoun ("Anh" becomes "You").

The titles for Sai's parents pose another problem, one less satisfactorily resolved. As a Confucian scholar, Sai's father has earned the right to a special title, *Ong Do*, or Mr. Scholar, and his wife is called *Ba Do*, or Mrs. Scholar. The translators refer to this couple as Scholar Khang and Madame Khang, titles that may sound a bit grand to the English reader when used for a poor peasant family.

These are, however, minor infelicities that should not detract from the whole. Faced with an original text that would challenge the most skillful translator, the team of Ngo Van Hai et al. has done an admirable job. They have made *A Time Far Past* accessible to English readers. As a result of their efforts, readers who don't know Vietnamese can appreciate the issues facing north Vietnamese society as it moves from feudalism to capitalism, particularly the problem of defining what, in this new world, will be the limits of "collective concern."

NOTE

1. Keith B. Richburg, "Vietnam Urges Artists to 'Untie Yourselves,'" *Washington Post* 24 July 1988. ■

John C. Schafer teaches English at Humboldt State University in Arcata, CA. His articles on Vietnamese literature have appeared in the Journal of Asian Studies, Viet Nam Forum, Hop Luu, and other journals. His book Vietnamese Perspectives on the War in Vietnam: An Annotated Bibliography of Works in English (Yale University Council on Southeast Asia Studies, 1997) was published recently.

Le Tho Giao, a computer technologist, contributes to Van Hoc, a Vietnamese literary journal, as its managing editor. His translations of Vietnamese short stories have appeared in The Other Side of Heaven, edited by Truong Vu, Le Minh Khue, and Wayne Karlin, and Writing Between the Lines, edited by Kevin Bowen.