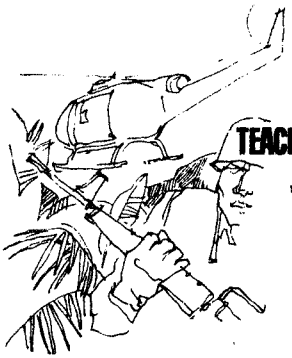

TEACHING WORKS BY VIETNAMESE ABOUT THE WAR
Six Recommended Texts

John C. Schafer
Humboldt State University

In *Orientalism*, Edward Said suggests that the difference between an Orientalist, a Westerner who studies cultures of the East, and an Oriental is that "the former *writes* about, whereas the latter *is written* about" (308). In other words, the Orientalist is assumed to be active, imbued with the power to observe, study, and write. The Oriental, on the other hand, is assumed to be passive, a character in a story perhaps but not the author. I fear that those of us who teach literature about the war in Vietnam perpetuate this myth of Oriental passivity by assigning works by Americans and slighting works by Vietnamese. Until recently we might be excused for not assigning works by Vietnamese. Some translations existed in libraries but most were out of print. Works from the communist-controlled areas, translations usually by the Foreign Languages Publishing House in Hanoi, were written according to the dictates of socialist realism, a type of writing that posed problems—both political and aesthetic—for teachers. Vietnamese exile writers had produced some works in English, but not many, and often these were published by obscure hard-to-locate publishers.

Now the situation has changed. During Renovation or *Đổi Mới*, Vietnam's Glasnost, Vietnamese writers in Vietnam achieved some freedom to publish works that broke with the dictates of socialist realism. The window was already closing in 1989 but it was open long enough for some interesting narratives to be published first in Vietnam and later in English in the West. More Vietnamese exiles have achieved some economic stability and have mastered English and so more exile narratives are appearing. Some gaps still remain, few works by writers who lived and wrote in the South during the war have been translated, for example, but speaking generally many works are available in English. In an annotated bibliography on Vietnamese writing in English

about the war that I recently prepared there are 157 works.[1] Some of these are critical or historical studies by Western scholars, but most of the items listed are by Vietnamese. The question for teachers who wish to include Vietnamese perspectives is changing from "What is available?" to "What works should I assign?"

I would like to suggest six works to include in a course on the war. Though I believe my choices would be appropriate for many courses on the war, different courses have different purposes and so my choices will not work for everyone. Inevitably in making my selections I have had two courses at Humboldt State University in mind, one in the English department and one cross-listed by both English and history. The English course, which I teach, is called "Literature about the War in Vietnam" and includes personal narratives, memoirs, and novels by both Americans and Vietnamese. The history course, which I team-teach with a colleague in the history department, is called "The Vietnam War through History and Literature." In this second course my colleague and I present the historical background more completely and systematically than I do in my English course. The six works that I suggest here are, in my view, appropriate for both these courses and for other similar courses taught at other institutions. Teachers and readers with other aims and interests can, however, consult the bibliography mentioned above and make their own choices. My six selections can serve as examples of the kinds of works that are available. To help teachers with the second question, "What works should I assign?" I'll explain why out of over 150 possibilities I have chosen these six works. Considering my reasons should help teachers develop their own rationale.

I had five criteria. First, I wanted my total list of six to help teachers put that part of the war in which the Americans were involved in a larger historical perspective. To accomplish this, I include works that discuss different historical periods, from colonial times to the aftermath of the war and the experience of exile.

Second, I have attempted to represent a variety of gender, regional and political perspectives. As I take up each work, I'll identify the par-

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1. This bibliography, "Vietnamese Perspectives on the War in Vietnam: An Annotated Bibliography of Works in English," will appear in the next volume of *The Vietnam Forum* (Yale Southeast Asia Studies).

ticular perspective that it represents.

A third criterion has been literary value, admittedly a tricky criterion because decisions on quality are influenced by political and cultural assumptions. But the works included are works that I think either have literary merit or at least nicely reveal writers working under certain constraints imposed by the political moral order.

My fourth criterion relates to genre. I've sought literature as opposed to straight history because I've found literature engages students more. I've also tried to present a combination of fiction and nonfiction.

Finally, I have tried to choose works that would interest students even when it meant leaving out a work that I personally would have preferred. I'll return to this problem in discussing my last selection.

My first work, Trần Tử Bình's *The Red Earth*, is a memoir about the author's experience on a Michelin rubber plantation. It was published in 1964, but describes events that occurred in the late 1920s and early 30s. The most gripping parts are the descriptions of the cruel conditions at the plantation: twelve-hour work days, bad food, almost no medical care, and fierce beating by overseers.

Trần Tử Bình spoke French and was more educated than other workers. He went to work on the rubber plantation because he was a patriot and had been told by a member of the Vietnam Revolutionary Youth League, a predecessor of the Indochina Communist Party, that the experience would "proletarianize" him and make him a better revolutionary. Aided by advisors from the Youth League, in 1930 he and his comrades succeeded in organizing a demonstration involving 5,000 workers that won some concessions from the French managers but also got Trần Tử Bình arrested and sent to the infamous French prison on Côn Sơn Island where he spent five years. He later participated in the August Revolution of 1945 and held high positions in Hồ Chí Minh's government before his death in 1967.

The Red Earth is a good exposé of the evils of French colonialism: it will help students understand why Vietnamese might want to join a revolutionary movement and follow a leader like Hồ Chí Minh. It is also a good example of the many revolutionary memoirs that were published at the Party's urging in the 1960s.[2] Authors of these mem-

2. Many of these memoirs describe experiences in colonial prisons, com-

oirs had to be careful to avoid bourgeois individualism. It was important to stress collective effort and praise the wisdom of Party leaders. One sees the author working within these constraints in his memoirs.

My next choice, Nguyễn Thị Định's *No Other Road to Take*, is another memoir published in the 1960s. It resembles Trần Tử Bình's in some respects but describes a different period of the revolutionary movement. It is written by a woman from Bến Tre Province in the Mekong Delta, who decided to join the revolution after watching a Vietnamese province chief torture her older brother for his anti-colonial activities. Nguyễn Thị Định later became a heroine of the struggle in the south, especially in her home province of Bến Tre. Her most famous achievement was an uprising in January, 1960, in Bến Tre which she organized. Using captured weapons and a variety of strategies, her forces overran village outposts, subjected the cruelest officials to revolutionary justice, and ran the rest out of town. She participated in meetings to establish the National Liberation Front in December, 1960, and before the war was over, rose to the rank of Deputy Commander of NLF Forces.

Though this is a memoir, not a personal autobiography, the author includes many personal details about her life. She describes her marriage to Bích, a fellow revolutionary and friend of her older brother, the birth of their son, and then Bích's death in Côn Sơn Prison. The climax of the book is a detailed account of the uprising in Bến Tre in 1960, usually considered to be the first encounter of the Second Indochina War. If Americans know Bến Tre, they know it as the town that had to be destroyed to be saved. This account will help students understand why Vietnamese revolutionaries call Bến Tre "the cradle of the revolution." This memoir reveals how Vietnam moved from the First to the Second Indochina War, but its real value is the window it pro-

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monly referred to as the universities of the revolution. Many Party leaders came from bourgeois families and went to elite schools. According to Peter Zinoman, the Party encouraged these leaders to write memoirs of prison life to emphasize that they suffered with the masses ("Reading Revolutionary Prison Memoirs," Association for Asian Studies Convention, Honolulu, 13 April 1996). For translations of other revolutionary memoirs, see Nguyễn Duy Trinh et al., *In the Enemy's Net: Memoirs from the Revolution* (Hanoi: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1962).

vides into the mind of a revolutionary. It helps us understand the motivation of those opposing the American-backed regime of Ngô Đình Diệm and his successors.

The next reading is a fictional account, a short story called "The Ivory Comb" by Nguyễn Sáng, one of a group of southern writers who regrouped to the North after the end of the First Indochina War and were sent to the southern front to gather material for writing. The key events in the story take place in the late 50s and early 60s in the Delta. The main character is a liaison girl, a local girl whose job is to guide revolutionary troops safely through the region. The narrator meets this girl when she successfully helps his unit elude American helicopters. He recognizes her as the daughter of a comrade-in-arms who had been killed in 1958 by a bullet fired from an American helicopter. The narrator gives the girl an ivory comb that her father had made for her before he died.

This is a typical story, many like it were written during the war, but in both a literal and a figurative sense, it offers us a different perspective from the one we find in American stories. Instead of looking down on the Vietnamese from a helicopter, the perspective presented by American stories, the reader looks up at the Americans in the helicopter, seeing them through the eyes of Thu, the liaison agent, and the other cadre members. Americans see their role as different from that of the French in the First Indochina War, but from the perspective of Vietnamese revolutionaries, the resistance against the Americans was a continuation of the resistance against the French, all one "Long Resistance" against European invaders. The author of "The Ivory Comb" emphasizes this theme of one long struggle for independence by making both Thu's father and the storyteller veterans of the war against the French and by having Thu follow her father along the road to revolution.

American readers will no doubt be put off by the one-dimensional characters and clear political intent of stories like "The Ivory Comb". Reading it can become an occasion to discuss the relation of art to politics and of the private to the public. In the United States we like to think of these as separate realms, but they were not considered to be separate in communist Vietnam. Writers were supposed to write socialist realism, the rules for which were laid out by Trường Chinh, a key party ideologue, in a report issued in 1948. Drawing on both Russian

formulations of socialist realism and on Mao Tse Tung's speeches on literature at Yenan, Trường Chinh explained that socialist realism was "a method of artistic creation which portrays the truth in a society evolving towards socialism according to objective laws" (285). He explains what he means by truth in this way:

> For example, shall we report a battle we have lost truthfully? We can, of course, depict a lost battle, but in doing so, we must see to it that people realize how heroically our combatants accepted sacrifice, why the battle was lost, what our gains were and notwithstanding the defeat, that our combatants never felt demoralized because all were eager to learn and saw the appropriate lessons in order to secure victories in future battles. (285)

In a speech to an association of Vietnamese journalists, Hồ Chí Minh had this to say:

> Our journalists must serve the working people, they must serve socialism, they must serve the struggle to reunify the country and achieve world peace. That is the reason why all journalists (writers, printers, editors, distributors, etc.) must have a solid political viewpoint. Politics must be the master. Only if the political approach is correct can other activities be correct. Therefore our journalists must have a correct political viewpoint. (59)

Capitalist culture, on the other hand, Fredric Jameson argues, is based on

> a radical split between the private and the public, between the poetic and the political.. We have been trained in a deep cultural conviction that the lived experience of our private existences is somehow incommensurable with the abstractions of economic science and political dynamics. Politics in our novels therefore is, according to Stendhal's canonical formulation, a "pistol shot in the middle of a concert". (69)

According to Renny Christopher, the typical Euro-American narrative of the war reflects this split between art and politics and the private and the public. Euro-American works, Christopher says, are intensely personal and strangely depoliticized. The conflict is often internalized in a way that deflects political analysis. Christopher quotes Chris Taylor's comment at the end of *Platoon*: "We did not fight the enemy; we fought ourselves, and the enemy was in us" (3). Unaccustomed to works that are unashamedly political, our students may resist works like "The Ivory Comb". We should not discourage this resistance. We should not dissuade students from the kind of critical analysis useful in distinguishing propaganda from great literature. But we can make the point that we read with more insight when we understand the political

and cultural context within which writers work. Interestingly, after the war ended Vietnamese writers themselves began to resist the strictures of socialist realism and during the Reformation period published works that challenged the assumption that politics must be the master. One advantage of reading works like "The Ivory Comb" is that it helps students appreciate works by Reformation writers, including my fifth choice, Bảo Ninh's *The Sorrow of War.*

My fourth choice is designed to represent a perspective that is in danger of being overlooked: that of writers who lived and wrote in the South during the war. American publishers seem much more interested in books by our former adversaries than by our comrades-in-arms. While writers living in the communist-controlled areas were working within the narrow restrictions imposed by socialist realism, writers in the South enjoyed more freedom and were exposed to a wider variety of influences as works from the West poured into Saigon along with the GIs and U.S. civilian workers. This literature by writers in the South cannot be adequately summarized here.[3] Unfortunately very little has been translated. The best choice to represent this perspective is Nguyễn Ngọc Bích's *War and Exile*, an anthology of fiction, poetry, and essays by non-communist writers. Many of the writers represented—Doãn Quốc Sỹ, Nhã Ca, Dương Nghiễm Mậu, and Thảo Trường, for example—spent many years in communist reeducation camps. Knowing about their lives would add meaning to their works, but unfortunately not much biographical information is provided in this anthology; the stories can stand alone, though. Only a few selections are explicitly anti-communist; most simply detail the sadness of war. In their more subdued political content and more conflicted attitude toward the war they contrast sharply with stories like Nguyễn Sáng's "The Ivory Comb".

My fifth choice is *The Sorrow of War*, a semi-autobiographical novel by a veteran of the People's Army of Vietnam, one of only ten survivors from the 27th Youth Brigade. It differs greatly from a socialist realistic work like Nguyễn Sáng's "The Ivory Comb" and provoked

3. For a survey see Võ Phiến, *Literature in South Vietnam: 1954-1975*, trans. Võ Đình Mai (Melbourne: Vietnamese Language and Culture Publications, 1992).

considerable controversy when it was published by the Association of Writers in Hanoi in 1990. In fact, before Renovation or *Đổi Mới* it probably could not have been published. Earlier works of socialist realism glorified revolutionary heroism and minimized the suffering of war. Bảo Ninh, however, talks about the pain of war—about lost comrades and the mental anguish of those who survive.

The Sorrow of War is also a love story: its original title was *The Fate of Love* [Thân phận của tình yêu]. The main character, Kiên, is in love with Phương. When he is sent to the front in 1965, she recklessly joins him on a troop train and is gang-raped in the confusion following a bombing raid. The destruction of her beauty and innocence suggests the magnitude of the losses caused by the war. In Kiên's mind the sorrow of war is akin to the sorrow of love. The two sorrows mix to form "a kind of nostalgia, like the immense sadness of a world at dusk" (86). *The Sorrow of War* is finally about writing, which for Kiên is both obsession and therapy: he is determined to "expose the realities of war and to tear aside conventional images" (45). Writing this novel, the narrator says, was his last adventure, his last duty as a soldier, and we are led to believe that working on it lessened his pain.

This is a good work to assign. Reading works of socialist realism, works with heroes who never seem to lack courage or to make a wrong decision, may make it difficult for our students to appreciate the suffering of soldiers on the other side. They will see few similarities between heroes in these works and the tortured souls they encounter in works by American authors such as Philip Caputo, Ron Kovic, Tim O'Brien, and Larry Heinemann. In Bảo Ninh's *The Sorrow of War*, however, they will discover characters similar in many ways to those in American narratives.

Making my final selection was the most difficult. I wanted an exile narrative, a book written by a Vietnamese living abroad that discussed not only life in Vietnam but also the author's adaptation to the West. I prefer translations to works written in English, often with the help of a ghost writer, for Western readers. Translations allow students the pleasures and challenges of overhearing a conversation not intended for them. For these reasons, I was tempted to choose Võ Phiến's *Intact*, a novel originally written in Vietnamese and translated by James Banerian. It describes a young woman who is separated from her fiancé in the final days of the war and comes to the United States without him. Their separation becomes a metaphor for the exile experience,

for the pain, nostalgia, and emptiness that result when one is separated from one's native land. Unfortunately, however, *Intact* is out of print and copies are not easy to obtain. It is also a very quiet, slow-moving, peaceful story, one that our students, accustomed to fast-paced action films and TV shows, might fail to appreciate.

A safer choice, in terms of student interest, would be Lệ Lý Hayslip's *When Heaven and Earth Change Places.* This is the one work by a Vietnamese that seems already to be included in some courses on the war, in part probably because Oliver Stone's movie has made it better known.[4] The book is better than the movie. In my experience, students are moved by it and learn a great deal from it. Most exile narratives are written by upper-class Vietnamese with privileged backgrounds. This one is written by a woman from a rural village near Đà-nẵng. It therefore provides a perspective on the war that is not easy to obtain from other sources. It also movingly reveals the extent to which the war was a civil war that, like our own civil war, divided not only the country but individual families as well. *Heaven and Earth* is also the tale of a survivor, of a woman who overcomes rape, seduction by a Vietnamese employer, and the difficulties of adjusting to American society.

So those are my six selections. On my "List of Six Recommended Works" I have suggested some possible substitutes. If these substitutes were chosen, the resulting list would still meet the criteria I have outlined. I realize my choices may not please all teachers because courses vary in focus and purpose. I hope, however, that I have exemplified the type of writing that is available now in English. I also hope that my sharing of the criteria I used in making my choices will help others think about the criteria they would apply in making selections for their own courses.

4. Renny Christopher suggests that *Heaven and Earth* may also have become popular because by emphasizing forgiveness and reconciliation Hayslip allows Euro-American readers to feel no guilt for U.S. participation in the war (81).

LIST OF SIX RECOMMENDED TEXTS

(Note: Since I have already described all my first choices, I annotate here only my suggested substitutes.)

I. The Colonial Period

First Choice: Trần Tử Bình, as told to Hà Ân. *The Red Earth: A Vietnamese Memoir of Life on a Colonial Rubber Plantation.* Trans. by John Spragens, Jr. Ed. and introduced by David Marr. Athens, OH: Ohio University Center for International Studies, 1985.

Possible Substitute: Ngô Vĩnh Long. *Before the Revolution: The Vietnamese Peasants under the French.* New York: Columbia University Press, 1991.

Analysis of the evils of colonialism and translations from novels and nonfiction that reveal these evils, particularly excessive taxation and monopolies that led to starvation. Most excerpts come from novels that Ngô Vĩnh Long calls "documentary fiction" (phóng sự tiểu thuyết): fictionalized accounts of actual events.

II. The Beginnings of the Second Resistance

First Choice: Nguyễn Thị Định. *No Other Road to Take* [Không Còn Đường Nào Khác]. Trans. by Mai Eliot. Data Paper No. 102. Ithaca, NY: The Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University, 1976.

Possible Substitute: Trương Như Tảng, with David Chanoff and Đoàn Văn Toại. *Vietcong Memoir.* San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace Jovanovitch, 1985.

An account by a wealthy southerner who took part in the formation of the National Liberation Front and became minister of justice under the Provisional Revolutionary Government. Later he became disillusioned with the communist regime and fled Vietnam by boat in 1978. Some historians believe that the author claims more credit for himself than is warranted, but this is a revealing, intriguing account of political and military developments within the NFL.

III. Socialist Realism

First Choice: Nguyễn Sáng. "The Ivory Comb" [Chiếc Lược Ngà]. In *The Ivory Comb.* 2nd Edit. South Vietnam: Giải Phóng Publishing House, 1968. 113-136.

Possible Substitute: Anh Đức. *Hon Dat.* Hanoi: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1969.

A novel describing heroic revolutionary action around 1961 in a hamlet called Hòn Đất in the western part of South Vietnam. The revolutionaries take refuge in a cave and with the help of the people withstand all attacks by Ngô Đình Diệm's soldiers and their American advisors. Affection between revolutionary families and cadre members is sometimes effectively rendered. ARVN commanders and Americans are stereotypical villains.

IV. Literature from the Non-Communist South

First Choice: Nguyễn Ngọc Bích, Ed. and Trans. *War and Exile: A Vietnamese Anthology.* Vietnamese PEN Abroad, 1989.

Possible Substitute: James Banerian, Ed. and Trans. *Vietnamese Short Stories: An Introduction.* Phoenix, AZ: Sphinx Publishing, 1986.

A good sampling of short stories by some of the best writers, all non-communist. Banerian selects writers who are associated with the South politically but come from all three regions—north, central, and south. Not all stories deal with the war directly. Contains several stories written in the 30s and 40s and so represents the colonial period as well as more recent writing.

V. Renovation (*Đổi Mới*) Literature

First Choice: Bảo Ninh. *The Sorrow of War* [Nỗi Buồn Chiến Tranh]. English version by Frank Palmos based on the translation from the Vietnamese by Võ Bang Thanh and Phan Thanh Hao, with Katerina Pierce. London: Secker & Warburg, 1991. Published in the United States by Pantheon Books.

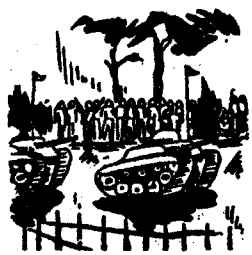
Possible Substitute: Dương Thu Hương. *Novel without a Name* [Tiểu Thuyết Vô Đề]. Trans. by Phan Huy Đường and Nina McPherson.

New York: William Morrow, 1995.
Written in 1990, this is the author's second novel to be translated into English. (First was *Paradise of the Blind.*) Quân, the narrator and main character, describes his experiences as a captain in the army. Main narrative is an account by Quân of his trip home on leave and then his return to the front and more fighting that, by the end of the novel, has led to victory. Through flashbacks, dream sequences, and other devices we learn of earlier events: Quân's mother's death from typhoid when he was eight, his brother's death in battle, his childhood sweetheart's forced seduction by Party officials. Though he was once an idealistic volunteer, the horrors of war have made Quân distrust the patriotic slogans of the revolution. Main themes, besides this attack on the rhetoric of war, are the persistence of love—for one's comrades and family members—and nostalgia for one's youth and for village life before the war.

VI. Vietnamese Exile Narratives

First Choice Lệ Lý Hayslip, with Jay Wurts. *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places: A Vietnamese Woman's Journey from War to Peace.* New York: Penguin, 1989.

Possible Substitute: Võ Phiến. *Intact* [Nguyên Vẹn]. Trans. by James Banerian. Victoria, Australia: Vietnamese Language and Culture Publications, 1990.
The story of Dung (pronounced Yoom), a young girl who, in the confusion surrounding Saigon's fall, gets separated from her family and fiancé and comes to the United States alone. Eventually she reunites with her family in Minnesota, but not with her fiancé who at the end of the book is still in Vietnam. Dung's separation from her fiancé, which causes sadness, regret, and nostalgia, becomes a metaphor for the exile experience.



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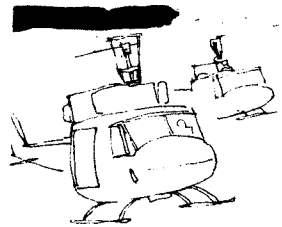

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The new lullaby

Trần Dạ Từ

Sleep well, my child—a shadow, not mama,
will tuck you snug in bed and help you sleep.
A tombstone is your pillow—let the sky
spread over you a blanket, keep you warm.
To shield you as a curtain, there's the rain.
A tree will be your fan, its leaves your roof.
The stars will twinkle as your mother's eyes.
The battlefield will be your romping ground.
Sleep well and smile, with blood upon your lips.
Bullets and bombs will sing your lullaby.

[From *An Anthology of Vietnamese Poems*, edited and translated by Huỳnh Sanh Thông, Yale University Press, 1996]