
NGUYỄN MINH CHÂU AND RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN THE VIETNAMESE SHORT STORY

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My wife and I spent six months in Hanoi last spring. My main job was teaching English but one afternoon a week I went to the Institute of Literature on Lý Thái Tổ Street to study the contemporary Vietnamese short story.¹ Vietnamese are proud of their recent achievements in this genre, some critics maintaining that their short stories are now better than their novels.² If true, various writers are responsible, including Nguyễn Khải, Ma Văn Kháng, Lê Thị Minh Khuê, and Lê Lựu, but the two most important innovators have been Nguyễn Huy Thiệp and Nguyễn Minh Châu. Nguyễn Huy Thiệp's contributions have been ably discussed by others,³ so today I focus on Nguyễn Minh Châu, a man who through critical articles and by the example of his own works led the movement to replace a propagandistic literature with a more complex literature focusing on moral questions faced by ordinary people.⁴

Nguyễn Minh Châu was a Party member and army writer who held the rank of colonel when he died of cancer in 1989 at the age of 59. Revovation, or *đổi mới*, the move to a market economy which was accompanied by more freedom for writers, began in 1986. Nguyễn Minh Châu therefore lived all but three years of his life and produced most of his writing before the strings on writers were loosened, when writers had but one mission, to serve the revolution, and one approach, socialist realism. The origins of this approach to writing lie in Soviet literary discussions in the 1930's, in talks on literature and art that Mao Tse-tung gave in Yunan in 1942, and in local applications and adaptations of these Soviet and Chinese ideas laid down by Trường Chinh and Hồ Chí Minh and other Vietnamese political leaders. A key tenet of the socialist realism approach is that literature serves politics. In times of war, writers and other artists are to produce works that boost morale and contribute to victory; in times of peace, they should produce works that build socialism and help to create the new socialist person. Socialist realism is "good news" literature: any badness described should be attributed to foreign enemies or reactionary elements, not government officials. When Nguyễn Minh Châu's first novel *Cửa sông* (The Mouth of the River) appeared in 1966 there was a problem because he dared to give a district chief two wives. The novel was allowed to circulate but the incident suggests how rigidly the "good news" requirement was interpreted when Nguyễn Minh Châu was developing as a writer.⁵

Nguyễn Minh Châu's most famous pre-renovation work, *Dấu chân người lính* (Footprint of a Soldier), published in 1972, is an account of soldiers in a regiment involved in the battles around Khe Sanh in late 1967 and early 1968, battles which Nguyễn Minh Châu observed firsthand. This long novel, over 500 pages, is an extended tribute to the heroic soldiers who fought the Americans and the Saigon army. In this and in all of Nguyễn Minh Châu's works written during the war, all soldiers are devoted to the cause. They have no faults, except occasionally overzealousness. Though no American characters are developed in this novel, Americans, along with soldiers of the Saigon army, are clearly the villains. The Americans napalm their own wounded, massacre a montagnard village, rape women, bulldoze homes, disembowel their prisoners, and commit other heinous acts. One curious American character is a sergeant in the quartermaster corps named "Thompt." Captured by the heroes of the novel, he explains through an interpreter that his only job is to sew U.S. and brigade flags. He works at a sewing machine in a trench filled with rats. Flag-making is a

terrible job in Vietnam, he says, because nowhere in the world are American flags shot down so quickly. America's "lackeys," the soldiers of the Saigon regime, are also propaganda devices, not developed characters. One ARVN soldier beats and rapes his wife and is hunted by his own father, a loyal supporter of the revolution.

Footprint of a Soldier secured Nguyễn Minh Châu's reputation as an army writer. Soldiers and revolutionary cadre enjoyed seeing their achievements reflected in its pages. It was translated into Russian in 1977 and was apparently well received in the former Soviet Union.⁶ This novel and others that Nguyễn Minh Châu wrote before and after it resemble other works published during the war. In 2001 a five-volume collection of the complete works of Nguyễn Minh Châu was published. In an introduction to this collection, a good place to look to learn how his literary culture will judge his contributions, Mai Hương describes Nguyễn Minh Châu's wartime novels as typical of the works written during the anti-American struggle, part of the "chorus of heroic songs" of this period, but he says they also contained some distinctive "notes" that reveal the author's interest in the private, inner world of his characters—in those aspects of character that lay beneath the heroic exterior.⁷

Perhaps because he was from a farming family in Nghệ An Province, some of these notes are heard when he describes country soldiers. As one of my teachers points out, Nguyễn Minh Châu understood the connection between soldiers, the countryside, and the war.⁸ His portraits of country soldiers, simple, modest men who were not confident talkers but who unselfishly and heroically devoted themselves to the cause, are well-drawn and have evoked praise from critics. "One encounters a deep note," says Lá Nguyễn, "when his pen touches the poor, shabby, quiet life of country people."⁹ Because he was himself a country soldier, there was no doubt an element of autobiography in his portraits of loyal, unsophisticated soldiers. Vương Trí Nhàn begins an article memorializing Nguyễn Minh Châu by describing the simple-hearted and gentle country soldiers, dressed in crudely tailored uniforms and bamboo hats, that entered Hanoi in 1954 after defeating the French. Nguyễn Minh Châu reminds him of those soldiers. Though, he says, he later saw Nguyễn Minh Châu dressed in western suits preparing to go to literary conferences abroad, the image of Nguyễn Minh Châu that stays with him is that of an ordinary soldier, one with many years of war behind him.¹⁰ Nguyễn Minh Châu is also praised for his careful observation that enabled him to describe scenes so well that readers would exclaim, "Oh, that's right, that's the way it is!"¹¹ His descriptions of the people and places of his native central region, that thin strip of land where white sand quickly gives way to mountains with little cultivatable land between, have won him special praise.

Though he had these strengths, they weren't enough to attract readers in the post-war period. After the war readers (and writers) quickly grew tired of works glorifying heroic soldiers. Readers waited eagerly for works that were more lively, more convincing, less propagandistic. Surprisingly, though he had become famous by mastering the old heroic style, Nguyễn Minh Châu was one of the first to become aware that readers were tired of it. He renovated himself before renovation was officially inaugurated. In an extremely influential article published in 1978 called "Viết về chiến tranh" (Writing about War), he argued that it was time for writers to stop producing works with one-dimensional characters too virtuous to be believed.¹² Writers, he said, should write about an "actual reality," not some hoped for, dreamed for reality. It was time, too, he argued to write not just about external events but about the inner life of individuals. This article was influential because Nguyễn Minh Châu dared to speak publicly what many were thinking privately, but also because it appeared in a journal, *Văn Nghệ Quân đội* (Army Literature and Art), that had political clout; and because it was written by an author with great prestige—a member of a highly admired group of writers whose roots were in the army and who had "đi B," gone to the South (known as zone B); in other words, they had covered the war firsthand and written works that were reports from the front lines.¹³

The Painting

In short stories published in the early 80's Nguyễn Minh Châu began experimenting with this new way of writing he argued for in "Writing about War." In "Bức tranh" (The Painting), one of his most famous stories, the narrator, a painter, confesses to a terrible wrong that he committed eight years ago during the war. While traveling with the troops in the south, seeking inspiration for his work, the artist is called back to Hanoi to be part of an exhibition abroad. On the trip back to the capital, a young soldier he meets asks him to paint his portrait. Considering himself an artist not a mere painter of portraits, he coldly refuses. The next morning he finds that this same soldier has been assigned to carry his paintings for the next leg of the journey. He carries the paintings and both their packs as well and helps the artist survive the hazardous trip along the Ho Chi Minh Trail. After the first day the artist apologizes to the soldier and agrees to paint his portrait. He learns that the soldier requested the portrait because he has heard that his mother thinks he has been killed. He wants the painter to take his portrait to his mother in Hanoi to prove he's alive and well.

The artist assures the soldier that he will deliver the painting, but lulled by the more peaceful atmosphere of Hanoi and distracted by the adulation his paintings receive, he never finds the time. Instead of showing it to the soldier's mother, he sends it with other works for the exhibition abroad. Eight years later he encounters the soldier when by chance he drops into his barbershop. On the wall above the barber chair is a copy of his sketch of the soldier. Known as "Portrait of a Liberation Soldier," it has become famous both at home and abroad. The ex-soldier now a barber does nothing to reveal that he recognizes the artist and the artist also doesn't reveal himself. But he keeps coming back to the barber. He learns that the soldier's mother went blind weeping for her son who she thought had been killed, a tragedy that the artist knows he could have prevented. The story ends as it begins with the artist standing in front of a recently finished painting of a man in a barber's chair, clearly a self-portrait. The face of the man, with eyes described as looking inward, dominates the painting.

This story contrasts sharply with Nguyễn Minh Châu's earlier works. Here the struggle is not on the battlefield but within a person's mind. Here it is not the fate of the nation but the fate of an individual that is highlighted. Here the main character is removed from the collective struggle for national independence and undergoes a private, individual struggle with his own conscience. The struggle is intense: the artist has to summon up all his courage to return to the barber's shop. On one trip the barber's blind mother hears him ride up and asks if he wants a haircut. He momentarily loses courage and starts to ride away, but finally he says yes, a decision he describes in military terms. "I felt," he says, "as if I were a soldier battling to take an outpost and had pierced the outer perimeter" (393).¹⁴ Here the military language is used metaphorically to describe his inward struggle. By having neither the soldier-barber nor the artist reveal that he recognizes the other and by having the artist-narrator confess only in his painting and in his narrative not directly to the man he has wronged Nguyễn Minh Châu emphasizes the private quality of the artist's anguish.

This story can be read as a literary treatment of Nguyễn Minh Châu's new position on the role of literature and art. At one point in the story the artist imagines justifying himself to the soldier in this way: "I'm an artist not a portrait painter and the duty of an artist is to serve a larger number of people, not just one individual. You're just an individual, with your own private story. Let me forget it so I can serve a larger goal. Don't you see that this painting, 'Portrait of a Liberation Soldier,' has increased the world's understanding of our resistance struggle?" (387) The artist-narrator realizes, however, that this is not a valid defense, that behind the idealized abstraction of "The Liberation Soldier" lies a real, concrete individual with his own private story. If writers are to move beyond

the old stories glorifying heroes in the collective struggle, Nguyễn Minh Châu seems to be suggesting, they must tell those private stories.

A Woman on a Fast Train

“Người đàn bà trên chuyến tàu tốc hành” (A Woman on a Fast Train), published in the same collection with “The Painting,”¹⁵ breaks even more with established practice. “Fast Train” is the story of a twenty-seven year old woman named Quỳ, who when the story opens is both an assistant doctor and a patient in a hospital for people with mental disorders, most of them caused by the war. She befriends a male patient still suffering from dizzy spells, the result of a head injury. This patient can’t understand why Quỳ, who is both beautiful and accomplished, is a patient in a mental hospital. The story is her explanation to this patient of why she’s a patient.

It’s a long explanation and so a long story—90 pages.¹⁶ When she was 15 Quỳ turns down a chance to study natural science abroad. She instead quits school and goes to the Trường Sơn Mountains to help the war effort, serving in various capacities—folk singer, typist, liaison guide, nurse, reporter, and truck driver. She falls in love with Hòa, a commander of a regiment, and a brave, handsome, and talented soldier. Though she loves him, and he loves her, she is put off by his imperfections, his very human weaknesses—the fact that he feels pride when promoted, speaks badly about some people, for example. She’s troubled particularly by his cold and sweaty hands which assume symbolic importance in the story. When Hòa is wounded, fatally as it turns out, and is brought to the hospital, she takes his two bandaged hands and presses them to her chest, a gesture that indicates both her love for the commander and also her guilt for insisting he be free of all weakness, a saint. These hands, symbols of both human imperfection and talent, have been destroyed by the war.

A virtuous doctor, a colleague, asks Quỳ to marry him, but in a key decision, she gently declines, though she is fond of him and he would in many ways have been a more suitable husband than the man she does marry: an old schoolmate of Commander Hòa’s who has been jailed for stealing public funds. When they were teenagers, Hòa and her future husband both attended a school that taught electro-mechanics. Before he died, Hòa had told Quỳ that this schoolmate of his was the most talented student in the school. Encouraged by a greedy wife, however, he has lost his moral compass after the war. In deciding to marry her dead lover’s friend, whom she first must nurture and re-educate, instead of the doctor, Quỳ chooses duty over love and demonstrates loyalty to her dead lover. The fact that her human reclamation project succeeds—her husband becomes a leading expert in manufacturing—confirms the truth of the lesson that she says she has learned, namely, that “life doesn’t have saints, but there is no person whose soul is completely unable to be saved” (215).

Apparently critics immediately liked “The Painting”: at least I’ve found only praise for it in published comments, and it was translated into Russian and printed in a journal in the Soviet Union.¹⁷ “Fast Train,” however, and another story I’ll discuss next, bothered some influential members of the Writers’ Association, the group charged with regulating literature to be sure it serves the cause of advancing socialism. In July, 1985, Nguyễn Minh Châu was invited to come to the Association’s meeting room for a discussion of his work. Though billed as one of a series of friendly debates, a great deal was at stake for a writer called to defend his work in front of this group. If powerful members of the Association, who would also be Party members, decided the writer’s views and positions were off base (lệch lạc), opportunities to publish would become scarce, and perhaps most importantly in Nguyễn Minh Châu’s case, an illustrious career as a revolutionary writer would be tarnished. It is important to remember that this meeting occurred before Nguyễn Văn Linh, a reformer sometimes called Vietnam’s Gorbachev, became Party Secretary and “untied the strings” on writers at the beginning of the renovation period.¹⁸ This was a scary time for writers. In a

later interview,¹⁹ Nguyễn Minh Châu said that when he wrote on the front lines during the war, his mind was free of troubles, but in the early 1980's he was afraid. You would take a manuscript to the publisher, he said, and then worry about what you had done. What must have added to the pain of this experience was the fact that Nguyễn Minh Châu knew most of the participants and some were old friends, fellow writers who had worked with him for years at the offices of the journal *Army Literature and Art*. One of these, a writer named Xuân Thiều, had been a friend of his since 1960 and had lived in the same house outside of Hanoi when the city was evacuated due to American bombing. Xuân Thiều criticized his friend's short stories, and Nguyễn Minh Châu never completely forgave him for it.²⁰

What was it about Nguyễn Minh Châu's short stories that troubled some members of the Writers' Association? At the meeting a writer named Xuân Trường reminded participants that "the purpose of literature is to struggle for the success of socialism; or, to put it another way, to build the foundation for a literature of socialist realism in the present period."²¹ In the view of many participants the task before them was to determine whether Nguyễn Minh Châu's recent short stories advanced this purpose. What could be the problem with "Fast Train," which features a heroine who devotes her life to the anti-American struggle? The problem was her unusual character, the fact that she is "dị thường" (not typical). "You can't find a person like Miss Quỳ in real life," Lê Thành Nghị complained, "a beautiful girl who can do every job, driver, financier, nurse. And everywhere she goes she has men who love her, either openly or secretly . . . So is she real or only special, so unique that she becomes difficult to believe? Is she typical of female soldiers on the battle field?"²²

This comment nicely illustrates the problem facing writers after the war. Readers were demanding more interesting, more individualized, and more psychologically complex characters, but the literary powers-that-be preferred typical characters: they didn't want a liberation soldier; they wanted the Liberation soldier. The issue here is how to relate the individual to the collective, a problem for a literature that is supposed to advance socialism. In the works of socialist realism written during the war, the sole measure of a character's moral worth was how he or she related to a collective—his army unit or his rural cooperative, or her liaison team or road repair crew, for example. By this standard, Quỳ in "Fast Train" performs superbly: she excels in all the jobs that the collective assigns her. In this sense, she is a fine model for female soldiers. It seems likely that what troubled some Writers' Association members were Quỳ's accounts of all the men who loved her. Partly it's because the list is so long (It does seem as if everyone who meets her loves her!), partly it is because she is willing to reveal how the love and the death of these men (for many of them were killed) affected her psychologically. "Fast Train" is more inward-looking than the works that they were used to reading and writing. Quỳ's "emotional wandering" (one member's term) bothered them.²³

Though Quỳ serves the collective loyally, she asserts her individualism by giving more weight to her own conscience than the judgment of the collective. This point can be clarified by discussing her illness. Quỳ doesn't explain the cause of her mental problems. As for overt symptoms, we learn only that she sleepwalks. The story suggests, however, that she suffers primarily from sadness, sadness at seeing so many fine young men die, talented young men, like her beloved commander. While inventorying supplies in a cave, she finds diaries in the backpacks of dead soldiers. Some contain expressions of love for her. "I whispered the name of each person, each heart that once loved and now beat no more. Khôi, Hà, Lâm, Hùng, Nhã, Văn . . . No reply . . . I thought of completely abstract and sacred words like Country and Fatherland, and then I looked up at the row of backpacks covered with the sweat of soldiers." She imagines the faces of these soldiers, like so many she had joked with along the trail, and also the country villages from which they came: "relatives living together under one roof, the dikes around the paddy fields, a muddy stream running through the village, a

narrow path, the rustling of bamboo, tiny purple *xoan* flowers sprinkled on the damp earth, the tinkling of a metal dipper hanging by a well” (188).

Mixed with sadness is guilt—guilt that she could dare to be turned off by petty faults in men as self-sacrificing and courageous as those gathered in the Trường Sơn Mountains. Like the anguish of the painter in “The Painting,” Quỳ’s anguish is private. From the collective she receives only praise and probably no one would know she was troubled if she didn’t choose to confess. She has committed herself to this mental hospital; no one has forced her to become a patient. As it did for the painter in “The Painting,” the healing process involves being rigorously honest with oneself. Both the painter and Quỳ reach some peace of mind by engaging in a process that resembles both Marxist self-criticism and religious confession, but is much closer to the latter, to the *sám hối*, or repentance, of Buddhism, because in these stories no collective forces the characters to judge their actions. The characters judge themselves and sentence themselves as well. The only court they confront is their own conscience.

Though both stories are similar in some ways, both “dramas of self-awareness,” to use one critic’s phrase,²⁴ only “Fast Train” troubled some Writers’ Association Members. Possibly this is because, as I have suggested, Quỳ is a little too generous in her affections for soldiers. “Everywhere I went,” she says, “there were people who loved me. I was like a princess in the jungle” (150). And she loved many of them back, “from the white-haired comrade who commanded the front to the chubby-cheeked new recruit just out of high school” (149-50). Her love is so rarefied and pure, however, so mixed with admiration, that it’s hard to imagine it disturbing even conservative critics. Here is how Quỳ describes those who loved her:

Though they differed in age and position, and in rank, they were all serious-minded and courageous. They were all heroes. Many were talented and intelligent. I respect all those who were attracted to me. Today those who are still living have a wife and children. Those who sacrificed themselves will lie on the battlefield forever. (151)

It seems more likely that what bothered Nguyễn Minh Châu’s colleagues was that Quỳ did not fit their typical stereotype of a woman. One critic, a woman who did not attend the meeting on Nguyễn Minh Châu,²⁵ says that

this character [Quỳ] in that story [“Fast Train”] of Nguyễn Minh Châu was a new and original phenomenon. One can say it was something that surprised readers: a woman with a strong personality, with a clear sense of her own worth, and an ability to arrange her life according to her own wants who also has the ability to influence greatly the surrounding environment. In contemporary prose before Nguyễn Minh Châu and even in [previous] works by Nguyễn Minh Châu himself, I have almost never met a female character that had a personality this strong and clear.²⁶

Quỳ’s forceful personality is conveyed not only by the content of her story—the events in her life that she relates—but also by the way she takes control of the narration. Nguyễn Minh Châu’s story begins with first person narration by the soldier suffering from dizzy spells, then there are several pages of dialogue between Quỳ and the soldier, and then Quỳ takes over the narration and tells her story. The soldier recedes into the background, reappearing only four more times for brief exchanges with Quỳ. Thus Quỳ is the dominant narrator in the story.

The soldier to whom Quỳ tells her tale is, however, an important character. Because he holds traditional views regarding the role of women, he becomes an important foil to reveal Quỳ’s departures from normal thinking and behavior. His reactions to Quỳ resemble those of the conservative members of the Association, and one suspects that Nguyễn Minh Châu constructed this character carefully to represent the reactions to his strong female character that he knew would come

from conservative readers. Early in the story Quỳ asks this soldier-narrator what he thinks of women. “I think I’m conservative,” he says. “Women should fulfill the jobs of wife and mother” (147). As Quỳ continues to question him, the soldier says: “In olden times people compared women to poisonous snakes, fierce monsters, and the tigress of Hà Đông, but nowadays people compare women to flowers: orchids, roses, tuberose. Is there a flower named Quỳ?” When she says there’s no such flower, he tries to suggest that all this doesn’t relate to her, but she disagrees: “I know you want to say that I’m a dangerous kind of woman,” and he has to admit she is right (147). Women like Quỳ, he later thinks to himself, will either dominate other men or be dominated by them. They won’t be able to achieve an ordinary kind of love (148). A central image in the story, that of the train, is also used to emphasize Quỳ’s extraordinary qualities. Though the train is an actual train that brings people to and from the mental hospital, it also becomes a metaphor for Quỳ, for a woman who travels too quickly and recklessly, who departs from the tracks laid out for her. The soldier-narrator imagines “the train taking off from the tracks and the only passenger is Quỳ, riding on dream journey, searching for a horizon of perfect value, for people of perfect worth, a journey of a woman’s soul that thirsts for too much” (178).

The Guest from the Country

A third story, “Khách ở quê ra” (The Guest from the Country), disturbed Association members the most: they made many more negative comments about it than they did about “Fast Train.” “The Guest” is the story of Khúng who in the 1960’s, at the height of the war, decides to try to make a living in the undeveloped western central highlands. He had been a fisherman, but American bombing had made fishing from the village impossible. One day, while carrying charcoal and logs back to his primitive house in the highlands, he comes across a woman about to give birth. He assists her and then takes her and her newborn son home in his wheelbarrow. This woman, a very attractive city girl named Huệ, agrees to become his wife if he will never ask her who her child’s father is. On a return visit to his village a nurse tells Huệ to take birth control medicine, but he insists that she have a lot of children to work the land. The two of them eventually have nine children, though the first and fourth are not fathered by Khúng.

Through hard work, Khúng and his family make a living, eventually clearing enough land to plant rice, soy beans, mung beans, and manioc. Dũng, their first son, the one Khúng delivered along the trail, grows up, and on a trip to Vinh to sell tomatoes meets and later marries a city girl. He joins the army soon after the wedding. These events in the life of Khúng are presented as flashbacks. The story begins in the present, the early 80’s. Khúng is in Hanoi, a guest of his uncle (hence the title: “The Guest from the Country”) searching for automobile tires so he can replace his wheelbarrow with an ox cart. Khúng has learned that Dũng’s real father is an engineer in Hanoi, and before he returns to the country he sets out to find him. When he comes to his house, he is shocked and surprised to see his son through a window. Heartbroken that his son has chosen his birth father over him, and city life over life in the country, he walks away unnoticed and takes the train home.

What did Association members find troubling about “The Guest”? A common complaint was that it lacked a clear idea, a main theme. They said they knew the author was trying to argue for something but darned if they could figure out what. Nguyễn Minh Châu’s friend Xuân Thiều says that “after reading his recent short stories, I keep trying to interpret them but can’t grasp what it is he wants to say.” He offers “The Guest” as a prime example of a story with no clear “core” or “idea.”²⁷ Triều Dương says that in his recent stories Nguyễn Minh Châu employs a “tangled” (rối rắm) approach which makes it impossible for readers to pick out the main idea or (just as dangerously, he suggests) allows them to understand the story any way they wish. Again “The Guest” is Exhibit A for this tangled style. In this story, Triều Dương asks, is Nguyễn Minh Châu saying that if

we don't introduce rural farmers to more advanced methods they will become perverse and uncaring and as a result make it difficult to build socialism? Or is he criticizing conservative farmers and arguing that we can't advance to socialism if we don't industrialize? Or is he depicting the disintegration of the countryside in the face of urbanization? Or does he want to say something about the survival of a family that has different "species" (a reference to Khúng not being the father of all his children)?²⁸

This 1985 debate over Nguyễn Minh Châu's more experimental short stories makes for strange reading for a westerner because what gets attacked are the qualities we value: complex characters, ambiguity, themes that aren't announced but have to be discovered, stories that demand discussion. Two participants—writers Lê Lựu and Nguyễn Kiên—praised Nguyễn Minh Châu's stories for their ability to provoke thought and debate, but they were in the minority.²⁹ Most participants longed for his simpler stories, ones with straightforward and heroic characters and a simple message. Lê Thành Nghị, a critic, pleaded with Nguyễn Minh Châu not to stop writing about war heroes. If you do, he said, we'll have to go to war museums to meet them.³⁰ In this debate, which occurred one year before the formal beginning of the renovation movement, one sees some signs that concepts related to literary value are beginning to change, but old concepts still dominate. In his remarks to Association members, Phong Lê, a literary scholar and critic, puts the debate over Nguyễn Minh Châu's stories in historical perspective: "Brother Châu enjoyed the advantage of time. When we were fighting the Americans, we searched for unanimity. When we met, we blended into one. After 1975, along with searching for unanimity we also searched for diversity. In a stage of this search, Nguyễn Minh Châu has dug deeply into the human heart and has become involved in the struggle between the bad and the good."³¹ In other words, Nguyễn Minh Châu has taken advantage of the fact that the war has ended and with it the need for works with simple patriotic messages designed to unify the nation. Now we are ready for works that explore the complex moral issues of everyday life.

Some critics, however, decided that "The Guest from the Country" did have a message—one they didn't like. The harshest criticism came from Triều Dương who disliked the anti-collectivist tendency of the main character.³² Khúng is certainly an individualist and shares some characteristics with farmers on the American frontier. Like them he is self-sufficient, successfully carving out a life for himself and his family in a hostile and sparsely populated region. He makes no attempt to establish harmonious relations with the few people living there. He fights with his nearest neighbor whom he catches peeping at his attractive wife. Khúng went to the highlands not only because the Americans were bombing his village but also because he scorns village life. Though his village near the sea has a clinic and a school and some other amenities, he finds life there unsatisfying: "A village is still a village" he says. According to Triều Dương, Khúng has no "logical" or "realistic" reason to oppose village life. By the 1960's the Party and revolutionary organizations had completely transformed the villages of the countryside, improving them socially and culturally. According to Triều Dương, the anti-collectivist Khúng is not the kind of character that should be encouraged, and Nguyễn Minh Châu's presentation of him as a forceful and convincing figure is a serious deficiency.

At the two meetings devoted to discussing his stories, Nguyễn Minh Châu rises twice to defend himself.³³ He first explains that after the war he began to write a novel about the heroic struggle at Quảng Trị in 1972, but became absorbed by the problems of contemporary life, the quiet struggles that people face every day, the difficult moral choices that must be made. Since most of the negative comments, he says, were about his story "The Guest from the Country," he then turns to it. Whether a work conforms to the thinking of the Party, he says, depends on its "tendency" (*khuyh hướng*). His story's tendency is proper, he says. He points out that even during the war it was official policy to develop the highlands; in other words, in going there Khúng was acting according to the

government's plan. He emphasizes Khúng's wife's advice to her children not to seek the city but to make their highland area more city-like. This advice, too, he implies, conforms to the policy to develop less inhabited regions. Finally, he calls attention to the character of Khúng, to his desolation and loneliness at the end of the story and to negative aspects of his character, including his insisting that his wife turn herself into a baby-producing machine so he would have more help in farming. Though Nguyễn Minh Châu doesn't say so, these comments appear designed to refute Triều Dương's charges that he presents the individualist Khúng as a completely positive character.

Requiem for a Literature of Illustration

The literary and political context within which writers worked changed dramatically shortly after Nguyễn Minh Châu was called to the dock to defend his works in front of the Writers' Association. Only three years after this meeting, Nguyễn Minh Châu could joke with an interviewer about how scared writers were in the early 80's, before renovation.³⁴ What changed the atmosphere was the government's adoption of a policy of *đổi mới*, or renovation, at the Sixth Party Congress in 1986. Though primarily a reaction to economic stagnation, the Party, now led by the reform-minded Nguyễn Văn Linh, decided to release restrictions on writers and enlist their help in reforming society. Secretary Linh met with over a hundred writers and artists in Hanoi, Oct. 6 and 7, 1987, to discuss the state of the arts after the war. It was an unprecedented meeting. Instead of giving a speech and leaving, the usual practice of high officials, Secretary Linh made some brief opening remarks and then listened to writers and artists for fifteen hours before giving his closing remarks. "I'm concerned," Secretary Linh said at the start of the conference, "that since the liberation of the country [the communist victory in 1975] our achievements in art and literature are poorer than before. I don't know if this is true. If it isn't, then I'm pleased. If it is, we must ask why? Is it because of censorship and restrictions imposed by the leadership? If that's the situation, then I suggest that is something for us to discuss. I look forward to hearing your opinions."³⁵

Secretary Linh heard some very frank opinions. The critic Hồ Ngọc said the problem was that literature had been made the servant of politics.³⁶ Since Hồ Chí Minh had said this was exactly what literature should be, this was a bold statement to make. The critic Nguyễn Đăng Mạnh said that "the life and death problem of literature is freedom. Art is like a bird: tie it up and it won't sing; or it sings foolishly."³⁷ Most participants identified the restrictions, or strings, placed on writers as the major problem, and Secretary Linh in his final remarks suggested remedies would follow: "The Party," he said "must 'untie the strings' in organization, in policies and regulations."³⁸ Though he didn't repudiate socialist realism, he allowed that it could include bad as well as good news. He encouraged writers to "portray bad people and bad things to arouse public indignation and censure."³⁹

Encouraged by Secretary Linh's loosening of the strings in 1986, writers submitted and editors began to publish works that would have stayed tucked in desk drawers before renovation: Lê Lưu's *Thời xa vắng*, 1986 (A Time Far Past), Nguyễn Huy Thiệp's "Ông tướng về hưu," 1987 (The General Retires), Dương Thu Hương's *Những thiên đường mù*, 1988 (The Paradise of the Blind), Phạm Thị Hoài's *Thiên Sứ*, 1988 (The Crystal Messenger), and Trần Mạnh Hảo's *Lý thân*, 1989 (The Separation).⁴⁰ These works departed radically from what had been accepted practice. Instead of offering good news, they painted a negative picture of life under communism.

Into this changed and freer atmosphere Nguyễn Minh Châu introduced his essay "Hãy đọc lời ai điếu cho một giai đoạn văn nghệ minh họa" (Requiem for a Literature and Art of Illustration).⁴¹ Nguyễn Minh Châu intended to read his speech at the October meeting with Secretary Linh, but a severe sore throat prevented him from doing so.⁴² His speech was never delivered orally, but was

instead printed in *Văn Nghệ* (Literature and Art) two months after the meeting. The points Nguyễn Minh Châu makes in “Requiem” are similar to those made by other writers and critics when they met with Secretary Linh. His remarks, however, are arguably the most moving statement of the need for artistic freedom that emerged from the renovation period. He expresses powerfully the terrible inner turmoil suffered by writers forced to produce a literature of praise. An atmosphere of regret for missed possibilities pervades “Requiem.” Nguyễn Minh Châu argues persuasively that if there had been fewer restrictions on writers during the past forty years, or if writers had had more courage to challenge existing restrictions, much better works would have been produced. In “Requiem” readers encounter a man almost sixty years old, a writer who for thirty years had struggled to succeed by writing according to certain rules, beginning to question not only those rules but also the value of his entire professional career. Though he wasn’t, he says, like some writers who easily adapted to restrictions, one senses he feels he should have fought them harder than he did. He compares his generation of writers with those who wrote during the anti-colonial struggle—to writers like Nam Cao (1917-1951) who despite colonial oppression managed to produce powerful works about the suffering of poor peasants. Now we writers, he says, are subsidized and cared for but truthful works are rare.

“Literature of illustration” is Nguyễn Minh Châu’s phrase for the literature of praise for revolutionary heroes that all cultural cadre were expected to produce since the beginning of the communist movement in Vietnam. Nguyễn Minh Châu’s own works, of course, novels like *Footprint of a Soldier*, were outstanding examples of this type of literature. Nguyễn Minh Châu stops short of repudiating all works written by revolutionary writers in the past forty years, but he attacks the narrowness of the space within which these writers were allowed to demonstrate their talent:

I don’t believe that no good, no truthful revolutionary works—a literature that we have today thanks to the intelligence and sweat and blood of many writers—have appeared in previous years. But we still must speak this truth among ourselves: in previous years creative freedom has been only for a literature of illustration, only for pens accustomed to embellishing ready-made formulas. We have acted as if the already determined meanings of our texts encompassed completely the multifaceted and extensive reality of life. (119)

Throughout his essay Nguyễn Minh Châu develops the metaphor of a narrow corridor with a low ceiling to convey the restrictions that have been placed on writers. Writers who have become accustomed to walking in this corridor, he says, have revealed amazing powers of adaptation, learning to accept this confined intellectual space just as they learned to deal with the physical hardships of wartime service. Though bothered by the restrictions, writers would encourage each other to squat down so as not to hit one’s head on the ceiling and give other advice to enable their comrades to proceed safely through the corridor. If, however, “literature and art had not taken illustration as a central tendency, didn’t have that narrow and low corridor” but had instead “accepted the multifaceted quality of life,” then writers would have left behind works of greater value (127).

In one section Nguyễn Minh Châu describes the effect of the authorities “blowing the whistle” on a writer, which is exactly what happened to him, as we have seen, in 1985:

The biggest harm of our literature of illustration is that it makes writers set aside their minds and write works lacking thought, works without new and original ideas that reveal the private lives of each writer. Writers become like people who have only a body and have lost their soul, or have only a soul supplied by the government. We don’t lack writers with heart and talent but for years they have had to hold these

things in as if they were faults, and so they have become afraid of themselves. After stumbling a few times and having the whistle blown, after being criticized in the newspapers, after having the collective express its constructive opinions, the writer sits alone in the quiet, reciting: “Hereafter I’ll forget my maiden shame.”⁴³

But how can one forget? . . . A writer cannot give up his habitual thirst to create, to speak some heartfelt truths about life. (122)

Fear, which Nguyễn Minh Châu mentions in the above passage, is an important theme in “Requiem.” There was, he says, “an older writer who raised a glass of wine at a gathering of younger writers and said: ‘I am still living, and still able to write, because I know fear.’ Then he turned his face up to the heavens, shaking violently, tears falling on the ground and into his heart. There are writers who are about to pass into the other world who still don’t dare utter one truth from the bottom of their heart. They don’t dare write a true memoir for fear of involving their children” (123). It is this same fear that leads writers to employ elaborate devices to slip their works by the “soldiers on guard”:

We writers still write, still wield our pens because we want to express our ideas, want to press some perceptions about life into our lines; but we also want to hide these perceptions, wrap them in layers of leaves, build a fence of words around them. What kind of literature is this that requires that for every line of truth there must be a line of praise? Is this not cowardly? Writers in our country, in their innermost hearts—who does not feel he’s a coward? (122)

This, one senses, is what torments Nguyễn Minh Châu the most: the fact that the restrictions, by making it impossible for writers to write without violating their own artistic integrity, have left them with an impoverished image of themselves, an image that borders on self-loathing. In one of the most moving passages in “Requiem,” Nguyễn Minh Châu urges his readers to make sure what happened to his generation of writers does not happen to future writers:

People of talent, especially geniuses, are always like a gift from heaven. Who can know when they will come, . . . Our duty is to prepare the air so they can live and breathe; to not kill them off, to not be the least bit jealous of them, to make sure their intelligence and sympathies are not aborted, to encourage them not, in the end, to become like us. (125)

Both “Requiem” and Nguyễn Minh Châu’s short stories can be seen as facets of one renovation agenda. In his short stories he was trying to write outside that restrictive corridor that he describes in “Requiem,” trying to capture some of that “multifaceted reality,” including the inner psychological life of individuals, that were off limits during the war. In stories like “The Guest” he was also trying, like his predecessor Nam Cao, to speak some truths about the suffering of peasant farmers. There is a sense, too, in which “Requiem,” like his short stories “The Painting” and “Fast Train,” is also a drama of self-revelation, only in his essay it is not the self-awareness of a fictional character that is dramatized but his own. Like the painter and Quỳ, in “Requiem” he is examining his personal behavior during the war and finding it didn’t measure up to his own high standards. Clearly Nguyễn Minh Châu had begun to question his own artistic practice long before he wrote “Requiem.” Speaking of “The Painting” and other short stories of Nguyễn Minh Châu, the critic Lá Nguyên suggests that “they couldn’t have been written so well if the writer were not a person who continually placed himself before the bar in the court of his own conscience.”⁴⁴ In writing “Requiem,” Thao Trường says, “he wanted to examine himself.”⁴⁵ In both his essay and many of his short stories Nguyễn Minh Châu associates renovation with self-criticism. An atmosphere of repentance pervades works in both genres. In an essay published a

year after “Requiem,” Nguyễn Minh Châu puts Vietnam’s renovation—its version of glasnost—in the context of changes occurring in the Soviet Union and eastern Europe. In this article he explicitly links renovation to the idea of repentance and truth-telling:

Most Vietnamese from different strata of society have become aware of themselves and of the world. The profound renovation of the Soviet Union and of other socialist countries, carrying within it the idea of repentance, strikes the mind and heart of every Vietnamese. Suddenly we realize: when one dares to speak the truth, how alike the peoples of the world are! The problems taking place in socialist countries on different continents—how similar they are!⁴⁶

Assessing Nguyễn Minh Châu's Achievements

No one can say for certain how future generations will evaluate a writer’s contributions, but based on the many articles about him published after his death and on Mai Hương’s introduction to *Nguyễn Minh Châu: The Complete Works*, he will be appreciated for his novels during the anti-American period, for his courageous role in the literary renovation movement, and for breathing new life into the Vietnamese short story. In evaluating his achievements I will focus on the last two areas, which are closely related.

In “Uniting with Human Kind,” published shortly before he died, Nguyễn Minh Châu argued that Vietnam must open itself to the world. “We can’t act like some traditional medicine man,” he said, “and shut the door in order to renovate.”⁴⁷ He expressed optimism about renovation, associating it with what he saw as promising developments in the Soviet Union and eastern Europe. In terms of markets Vietnam has opened up a great deal, but as Nguyễn Minh Châu’s health began to deteriorate quickly in 1988, the strings on writers that Secretary Nguyễn Văn Linh had loosened in 1987 soon were tightened again as Secretary Linh’s reformist faction lost its battle with conservative elements in the Party. On June 22, 1988, the Fifth Plenum of the Sixth Congress passed a resolution warning writers to adhere to the Party line. Meeting in 1989 after the Tiananmen incident in China and when Eastern Europe was in turmoil, the Seventh Plenum issued a decisive resolution which made it clear that “the VCP’s [Communist Party of Vietnam’s] leading role, namely its political monopoly, [was] still central to the political order.”⁴⁸ In 1991 Đỗ Mười, a conservative, replaced the more reformist minded Nguyễn Văn Linh as Party Secretary, another blow to those championing freedom for writers. This tightening affected some of the writers mentioned above who had taken advantage of the window of opportunity to publish controversial works. Dương Thu Hương was expelled from the Communist Party in 1990 and was imprisoned without trial for seven months in 1991. Her works do not circulate freely in Vietnam. Phạm Thị Hoài has emigrated to Germany and has published her latest work in California, a novel called *Mary Sến* (Gaudy Mary). The authorities confiscated copies of Trần Mạnh Hảo’s *Separation* after it had only been on the market for a few days.⁴⁹

In Vietnam it is difficult to assess the degree of artistic freedom that exists at a given time: the line that separates an acceptable from an unacceptable work is a moving target, changing with the political currents and heavily dependent on the organization that supervises a particular publishing house or journal. Though the hopes for extensive freedom that existed in 1987 have been dashed, writers are freer now than before renovation, and Nguyễn Minh Châu deserves some credit for the change. In insisting that writers abandon the old literature of illustration, in deciding to risk his reputation and adopt, late in life, a new approach to literature, he demonstrated remarkable courage. In 1990 Nguyễn Ngọc, a respected writer, critic, and former editor of *Literature and Art*, summed up Nguyễn Minh Châu’s contributions to renovation in this way. Of those writers who began writing at the end of the war with the French and matured as writers

during the war with the Americans, Nguyễn Minh Châu was “the person who recognized the earliest, and the most deeply, with all his mind and body, the pressing, vital struggle that we now call the project of renovation. Renovate society, people, life, thinking, the human condition. Renovate literature. And quietly, modestly, and extremely courageously, he boldly walked a road filled with obstacles and dangers.”⁵⁰

He will be remembered especially for the powers of self-regeneration that he demonstrated and for his argument that renovation is an internal psychological process as well as an external political one. When asked by an interviewer in 1988 if the strings on writers had been loosened enough yet, he commented that the final loosening has to be done by the individual writer. We writers have been bound so long, he said, that the cords have eaten into our flesh. Removing them can be more painful than leaving them be.⁵¹ Nguyễn Minh Châu had the courage to rip out those cords. We Americans can perhaps grasp the magnitude of what he did if we contemplate going in the other direction—not away from but toward a literary culture in which every writer had to produce works that glorified national heroes. Imagine an American writer, John Updike, for example, or Tim O’Brien, suddenly being told that in the wake of September 11 he would now be required to write only patriotic works with simple messages that paid tribute to fireman, policeman and other heroes in the fight against terrorism.

One must, however, not give too much credit to Nguyễn Minh Châu or to any single individual for the somewhat freer publishing situation in Vietnam today. When my wife and I visited the Hanoi office of the Writers’ Association last spring (2001) and talked to people there, they seemed most interested in getting our recommendations for American works that they could translate and publish. There was talk of authors whose works might sell, of the different situation regarding copyright fees for French and U.S. works, etc. Before renovation and the move to a market economy, a supervisory organization like the Writers’ Association could publish boring works that were safe ideologically because they were state supported. The market economy, however, has created opportunities for organizations to make money with their publications and so now editors sometimes have to decide whom they will please: their readers or their supervisory organization.⁵² The availability of economic benefit has made editors more willing to publish works with questionable political tendencies.

Nguyễn Minh Châu will also be known as someone who breathed new life into the Vietnamese short story. Soon after his death writers and critics were already recognizing his contributions to this genre. At that 1991 conference on the short story held at the Temple of Literature in Hanoi, the writer Nguyễn Kiên argued that “we can consider ‘The Guest from the Country’ an important marker signaling a change to a new period for the short story.”⁵³ There is an openness now, he continued. Short story writers no longer feel they have to follow a formula; they are focusing less on dreams and illusions, more on the practical issues of life. Another participant in this conference, Nguyễn Đăng Mạnh, argued that “if the main point [of a story] is too clear then it’s not literature.”⁵⁴ If one compares this discussion in 1991 with the one devoted to Nguyễn Minh Châu’s stories in 1985, one sees that a new way of judging literary quality was emerging. Stories with simple, unifying messages were losing favor; stories that provoked thought were beginning to be valued. As the two participants quoted above suggest, Nguyễn Minh Châu deserves a great deal of credit for the change.

After the war Vietnamese writers began a movement “from the outer to the inner, from events to people, from the fate of the collective to the fate of individuals.”⁵⁵ Nguyễn Minh Châu contributed to this change by arguing for it in his critical articles and demonstrating it in his own stories. In his wartime novels this interest in the fate of individuals was hidden, a minor note; in his post-war short stories it became, as Mai Hương says, the “starting point, the goal to strive for, and the center of his art.”⁵⁶ “The Guest” troubled some members of the Writers’ Association because in 1985 they weren’t yet ready for this change in focus. This story features a peasant farmer. As the critic Huỳnh Như Phương

explains, in previous works of socialist realism readers were encouraged to evaluate the moral worth of peasant farmers based on their attitude toward the cooperative. “But the situation changed with the arrival of the character Khúng in ‘Khách ở quê ra’ [The Guest] and ‘Phiên chợ Giát’ [Giát Market],” Huỳnh Như Phương observes. “What the writer pays attention to in this character is not primarily whether he joins the cooperative, but his psychology, his inner world, his hidden motives and also his reactions to changes caused by the passage of time. Compared to peasant farmers whose every step was controlled by the idea ‘Let the collective be the boss,’ Khúng applies much more clearly the idea ‘I’m the boss’ of my own fate.”⁵⁷

In an important sense, however, Nguyễn Minh Châu’s stories are not that different from traditional stories. In introducing his translations of Nguyễn Huy Thiệp’s stories Greg Lockhart distinguishes Vietnamese writers who have a “standard renovation agenda” from a writer like Nguyễn Huy Thiệp who has a different agenda—whose “writing marks the possibility of a fundamental shift in literature’s position in the culture [of Vietnam].”⁵⁸ The shift Lockhart refers to is a shift from a Confucian tradition in which “The purpose of literature is to carry doctrine” (văn dĩ tải đạo) to an approach that denies “the didactic political-moral role of literature in society.”⁵⁹ Lockhart argues that both Nhất Linh, a famous non-communist nationalist who wrote novels in the 1930’s opposing Confucianism, and communist authors who oppose “feudal” Confucianism are both “Confucian” because both exhibit “the political-moral impulse of the Confucian scholar.”⁶⁰

This distinction between the standard renovation agenda and Nguyễn Huy Thiệp’s becomes clearer when one compares a story like Nguyễn Huy Thiệp’s “Vàng Lửa” (Fired Gold)⁶¹ to Nguyễn Minh Châu’s “Fast Train.” “Fired Gold” features multiple narrators, bizarre treatments of real historical figures, and three endings (Readers are urged to select the ending they think is most suitable). Nguyễn Huy Thiệp’s portraits of actual historical figures shocked conservative readers. In “Fired Gold” Emperor Gia Long, branded as a collaborator with the French in standard histories, has some redeeming characteristics while the revered poet Nguyễn Du is described as weak and lacking in understanding of the country’s miseries. Lockhart suggests that what was even more disturbing than these specific characterizations of historical figures was Nguyễn Huy Thiệp’s rejection of history, his translation of history into “a repository of free-floating signs.”⁶² “N.H. Thiệp’s multifaceted stories remain tethered to Vietnamese culture,” Lockhart says, “but float free of the political-moral priorities that make us look into the past.”⁶³

Nguyễn Minh Châu’s stories, in contrast, are strongly tied, not loosely tethered, to these priorities. Though she takes more control over her life than do some female characters, Quỳ in “Fast Train” is closely related to the heroines of traditional stories. When her first and only true love is killed in battle, Quỳ exemplifies the traditional virtue of faithfulness by choosing to marry and rehabilitate his childhood friend. In making this choice she remains faithful to his memory and to his dream of a more industrialized Vietnam. Quỳ resembles a host of heroines of Vietnamese stories who honor until death pledges of love for men who go off to war. Though Quỳ demonstrates initiative on the battlefield she never oversteps her role as a supporter of her male superiors. She contributes to one battle success, for example, by convincing Commander Hòa’s superior to see the wisdom of Hòa’s plan of attack. The defining feature of women that she discovers is their inborn instinct to protect human life, which she says stems from their experience of pain when giving birth.

According to Lockhart a defining feature of writers who subscribe to the standard renovation agenda is the “sudden displacement, or ‘overturning’ of the hero image for that of the suffering person,” and he offers Dương Thu Hương’s novels as typical applications of this agenda.⁶⁴ In Dương Thu Hương’s novels, now banned in Vietnam, characters are victims of badly conceived and poorly administered policies and of corrupt and greedy Party officials. Unlike Dương

Thu Hương, Nguyễn Minh Châu does not completely displace the hero image—his stories still contain heroes—nor does he directly attack Party officials, but his stories do have a moral agenda, they do “carry doctrine,” and so are not post-Confucian in this sense. According to Mai Hương, Nguyễn Minh Châu’s post-war stories have helped people deal with losses and suffering caused by the war.⁶⁵ It is doubtful that they would have had this effect if he had, like Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, adopted a more radical renovation agenda.

Lockhart suggests that Nguyễn Huy Thiệp’s “unstable” (lacking a moral center), “post-modern” stories reflect and depict an “internationally induced consumer frustration” that permeated Vietnam in the late 80’s when consumer goods flooded into the country, creating high expectations that couldn’t be realized given Vietnam’s still struggling economy. Nguyễn Minh Châu’s short stories were written earlier, during a time when “the old was not yet considered old-fashioned and the new was still being searched for and tested.”⁶⁶ In some of his stories he does anticipate some contemporary problems associated with a consumer society—environmental problems associated with urbanization and the importing of Western ways of life, for example. But he didn’t live long enough to get a feel for the magnitude of these problems. His own vision of a developed Vietnam resembled one of those Soviet posters from the 1930’s, long on heavy machinery and large industrial projects, short on consumerism, with nary a mention of informational technology. Khúng’s wife Huệ in “The Guest from the Country” “waited here [in the uninhabited highlands] all her life for a city to emerge, not a city of buying and consuming, but an industrial city of thousands of citizens mining ore containing precious metals” (573).

Though this vision seems out of place in modern Vietnam where Coca Cola, Foster Beer, and Lipton tea signs now appear even in small towns, there is nothing time-bound or out of place about the courage Nguyễn Minh Châu demonstrated as a writer and critic. His literary culture bequeathed him one vision of the role of a writer, to serve and praise the current political order, but he developed another vision, not a completely different vision perhaps, but one that nevertheless revealed remarkable powers of self-transformation.

Notes

1. My teachers were Lại Văn Hùng, Nguyễn Bích Thu, Phạm Thu Hương, Tôn Phương Lan, and Vũ Tuấn Anh. These scholars taught me a great deal about the Vietnamese short story. Unless otherwise indicated, however, judgments concerning Nguyễn Minh Châu’s contributions are my own.

2. Nguyễn Ngọc—writer, critic, and former head of the Writers’ Association—says that “perhaps now [1991] the short story is surpassing the novel.” See “Văn xuôi sau 1975: Thử thăm dò đôi nét về qui luật phát triển” (Prose after 1975: Searching for some rules of development), *Tạp Chí Văn Học* (Journal of Literary Studies) 4 (1991): 12. At a conference on the short story held at the Temple of Literature in Hanoi in 1991, the critic Nguyễn Đăng Mạnh said that “now I sense the short story is more serious-minded than the novel.” Other writers and critics at this conference expressed their enthusiasm for recent developments in the short story, many of them citing the works of Nguyễn Minh Châu to support their claims. See “Truyện ngắn hôm nay” (The short story today), *Văn Nghệ* (Literature and Art) 48 (30 Nov. 1991): 14-15.

3. See Greg Lockhart, “Nguyễn Huy Thiệp and the Faces of Vietnamese Literature,” the introduction to Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, *The General Retires and Other Stories*, trans. Greg Lockhart (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1992): 1-38; Greg Lockhart, “Nguyễn Huy Thiệp’s Writing: Post-Confucian, Post-Modern?” in *Vietnamese Studies in a Multicultural World*, ed. Nguyễn Xuân Thu (Melbourne: Vietnamese Language and Culture Publications, 1994): 158-181; Peter Zinoman, “Nguyễn Huy Thiệp’s ‘Vàng Lửa’ and the Nature of Intellectual Dissent in Contemporary Vietnam,” *Viet Nam Generation* 14 (Spring, 1992): 61-

64; and Peter B. Zinoman, "Declassifying Nguyễn Huy Thiệp," *Positions* 2 (Fall, 1994): 294-317.

4. Unfortunately only two of Nguyễn Minh Châu's stories and one of his essays have, to my knowledge, been translated into English. "Moonlight in the Forest" (Mảnh Trăng) appears in *Distant Stars* (Hanoi: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1976), 156-176; "A Ferry Stop in the Country" (Bến quê), trans. by Linh Dinh, can be found in *Night Again: Contemporary Fiction from Vietnam*, ed. Linh Dinh (New York: 7 Stories Press, 1996), 145-151; and "Writing about War" (Viết về chiến tranh), an essay trans. by Huỳnh Sanh Thông, appears in *Vietnam Review* 3 (Autumn-Winter, 1997): 438-446.

5. Xuân Thiều mentions this incident in "Với Nguyễn Minh Châu" (With Nguyễn Minh Châu), in *Nguyễn Minh Châu: Con người và tác phẩm* (Nguyễn Minh Châu: The Person and His Works), ed. Tôn Phương Lan and Lại Nguyên Ân (Hanoi: Hội Nhà Văn, 1991): 8.

6. See Phạm Gia Lâm, "Tác phẩm của Nguyễn Minh Châu ở Liên Xô" (Nguyễn Minh Châu's works in the Soviet Union), in *Nguyễn Minh Châu: The Person and His Works*, p. 233-236.

7. Mai Hương, "Lời giới thiệu: Nguyễn Minh Châu và di sản văn học của ông" (Introduction: Nguyễn Minh Châu and the legacy of his literature), in *Nguyễn Minh Châu: Toàn tập* (Nguyễn Minh Châu: The Complete Works), vol. 1 (Hanoi: Văn Học, 2001), 31.

8. Tôn Phương Lan, *Phong cách nghệ thuật Nguyễn Minh Châu* (The Artistic Style of Nguyễn Minh Châu) (Hanoi: Khoa Học Xã Hội, 1999): 57.

9. "Nguyễn Minh Châu và bài học đổi mới tư duy nghệ thuật (Nguyễn Minh Châu and the lesson of renovation in artistic thinking), *Sông Hương* (Perfume River) 39 (1989): 64.

10. "Sự dũng cảm rất điềm đạm: Nguyễn Minh Châu và nghề văn" (A calm courage: Nguyễn Minh Châu and the writing profession), in *Nguyễn Minh Châu: The Person and His Works*, p. 19.

11. Xuân Thiều, "Với Nguyễn Minh Châu," p. 37.

12. This article has been translated by Huỳnh Sanh Thông. See Nguyễn Minh Châu, "Writing about War," *Vietnam Review* 3 (Autumn-Winter, 1997): 438-446. It originally appeared in *Văn Nghệ Quân Đội* (Army Literature and Art) (Nov., 1978).

13. Other writers in this prestigious group were Nguyễn Khải, Nguyễn Ngọc, Nguyễn Thi, Nguyễn Văn Bông, Lê Khâm, Đào Vũ, and Giang Nam. For more information on the different factions within the Vietnamese literary community in the late 70's and early 80's, see Nguyễn Mộng Giác, "Sự phản kháng của văn nghệ sĩ Việt Nam dưới chế độ cộng sản" (The opposition of Vietnamese writers and artists under the communist regime), *Văn Học Nghệ Thuật* [Westminster, CA] (Literary Studies and Art) 1 (May, 1985): 24-39.

14. Page references for all three stories discussed here are to the following anthology of Nguyễn Minh Châu's short stories: *Nguyễn Minh Châu: Selected Short stories* (Nguyễn Minh Châu: Tuyển tập truyện ngắn), comp. Nguyễn Văn Lưu (Hanoi: Văn Học, 1999).

15. This collection took its title from "Fast Train," the longest story in the book: *Người đàn bà trên chuyến tàu tốc hành* (Woman on a Fast Train) (Hanoi: Tác Phẩm Mới, 1983).

16. Vietnamese call long stories like "Fast Train," stories that are longer than the usual short story but shorter than the usual novel, "medium-length stories" (*truyện vừa*).

17. See *Nguyễn Minh Châu: The Person and His Works*, p. 12.

18. Secretary Linh spoke of untying the strings (cởi trói) in a speech ending an unprecedented two-day meeting with a hundred writers and artists in Hanoi, October 6 and 7, 1987. "You've talked a great deal about the need to 'untie the strings' to provide room for the full development of art and literature. Who's going to do this? I think the action must be initiated by the Party, which must

'untie the strings' in organization, in policies and regulations" (119). See this translation of the Secretary's speech: Nguyễn Văn Linh, "Let Writers and Artists Actively Contribute to Renovation," *Vietnamese Studies* (New Series) 21 (1991): 117-125. For the original Vietnamese version, see "Đồng chí tổng bí thư Nguyễn Văn Linh nói chuyện với văn nghệ sĩ" (General Secretary Nguyễn Văn Linh talks with writers and artists) *Văn Nghệ* (Literature and Art) 42 (17 Oct. 1987): 3.

19. The interview occurred on November 21, 1988. See "Trò chuyện văn chương với Nguyễn Minh Châu" (Chatting about literature with Nguyễn Minh Châu) *Văn Nghệ* (Literature and the Arts) 49 (3 Dec. 1988): 3.

20. Xuân Thiều, "With Nguyễn Minh Châu," p. 42.

21. The oral remarks made at this meeting were printed in two consecutive issues of *Văn Nghệ* under the title: "Trao đổi về truyện ngắn gần đây của Nguyễn Minh Châu" (Discussing the recent stories of Nguyễn Minh Châu). See *Văn Nghệ* (Literature and Art): 27 (6 July 1985): 1-2; and 28 (13 July 1985): 2-3. They are also reprinted in *Nguyễn Minh Châu: The Person and His Works*. My page references are to *Literature and Art*. See Xuân Trường, p. 3 (13 July 1985).

22. "Discussing the recent stories of Nguyễn Minh Châu," p. 3 (13 July 1985).

23. Nguyễn Kiên, "Discussing the recent stories of Nguyễn Minh Châu," p. 2 (6 July 1985).

24. Lại Nguyên Ân, "Sáng tác truyện ngắn gần đây của Nguyễn Minh Châu" (Recent short story creations by Nguyễn Minh Châu), in *Nguyễn Minh Châu: The Person and His Works*, p. 204.

25. Apparently no women attended this discussion of Nguyễn Minh Châu's stories. If women did attend and speak, their remarks are not printed in *Literature and Art*.

26. Nguyễn Thị Minh Thái, "Ảnh hưởng về nhân vật nữ của Nguyễn Minh Châu" (The impact of Nguyễn Minh Châu's female characters), in *Nguyễn Minh Châu: The Person and His Works*, p. 162.

27. "Discussing the recent stories of Nguyễn Minh Châu," p. 3 (6 July 1985).

28. *Ibid.*, p. 3 (13 July 1985).

29. *Ibid.*, p. 3 (6 July 1985).

30. *Ibid.*, p. 2 (13 July 1985).

31. *Ibid.*, p. 3 (6 July 1985).

32. *Ibid.*, p. 2 (13 July 1985).

33. *Ibid.*, p. 3 (6 July 1985) and p. 3-4 (13 July 1985).

34. "Trò chuyện văn chương với Nguyễn Minh Châu" (Chatting about literature with Nguyễn Minh Châu) *Văn Nghệ* (Literature and the Arts) 49 (3 Dec. 1988): 3.

35. "Hai ngày đáng ghi nhớ mãi" (Two days to remember forever) *Văn Nghệ* (Literature and Art) 42 (17 Oct. 1987): 1.

36. *Ibid.*

37. *Ibid.*, p. 2.

38. "Let Writers and Artists Actively Contribute," p. 119.

39. *Ibid.*, p. 122.

40. Three of these works have been translated: Lê Lưu, *A Time Far Past*, trans. Ngô Vĩnh Hải, Nguyễn Bá Chung, and Kevin Bowen (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1997); Dương Thu Hương, *The Paradise of the Blind*, trans. Phan Huy Đường and Nina McPherson (New York: William Morrow, 1998); and Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, *The General Retires and Other Stories*, trans. Greg Lockhart (Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1992).

41. *Văn Nghệ* (Literature and Art) 49-50 [Two issues combined and printed together] (5 Dec. 1987). Reprinted in *Nguyễn Minh Châu: The Complete Works*, vol. 5, pp. 116-128. My page references in parentheses are to this second source.

42. The editors of *Nguyễn Minh Châu: The Complete Works* include this information in a footnote. See vol. 5, p. 116.

43. This is a well-known line from a famous verse narrative called *Truyện Kiều* (The Tale of Kieu). It was written around 1800 by Nguyễn Du.
44. “Nguyễn Minh Châu and the Lesson of Renovation in Artistic Thinking,” p. 65.
45. “Chút kỷ niệm nhỏ với Nguyễn Minh Châu” (Some small memories of Nguyễn Minh Châu), *Nguyễn Minh Châu: The Person and His Works*, p. 67.
46. Hòa đồng cùng nhân loại” (Uniting with humankind), in *Trăm hoa vẫn nở trên quê hương: Cao trào văn nghệ phản kháng tại Việt-nam, 1986-1989* (A Hundred Flowers Still Bloom in the Homeland: The High Tide of Opposition Literature and Art in Vietnam, 1986-89) (Reseda, CA: Lê Trần, 1990), 98. Originally published in *Văn* [Ho Chi Minh City] (Literature) 2 (1988). This article is reprinted in *Nguyễn Minh Châu: The Complete Works*, vol. 5, pp. 134-138, but with the passage I’ve quoted left out. Glasnost in the former Soviet Union led to the communist party’s fall from power, so editors remove comparisons between glasnost and *đổi mới* (renovation).
47. “Uniting,” p. 97.
48. Phương Kiên Khanh, “Glasnost in Vietnam: Limits to Openness,” *Indochina Report* No. 25 (Oct.-Dec., 1990): 20.
49. Thi Vũ, “Lời giới thiệu” (Introduction), in *Ly Thân* (Separation) (Paris: Quê Mẹ, 1990), 5.
50. Nguyễn Ngọc made this comment in a talk held at the first anniversary of Nguyễn Minh Châu’s death. His remarks appear in *Văn Nghệ* (Literature and Art) 7 (17 Feb. 1990): 3.
51. Chatting about Literature with Nguyễn Minh Châu, p. 3.
52. Heng, Russell Hiang-Khng, “Media in Vietnam and the Structure of Its Management,” in *The Mass Media in Vietnam*, ed. David G. Marr, Political and Social Change Monograph 25 (Canberra: Australian National University), 38.
53. “The Short Story Today,” p. 14.
54. Ibid.
55. Mai Hương, “Introduction,” p. 34.
56. Ibid., p. 56.
57. Huỳnh Như Phương, “Văn xuôi những năm 80 và vấn đề dân chủ hóa nền văn học” (Prose in the 80s and the democratization of literature) *Tạp Chí Văn Học* (Journal of Literary Studies) 4 (1991): 15. The story ‘Giát Market,’ which Nguyễn Minh Châu wrote on his deathbed, also features the character of Khúng.
58. “Nguyễn Huy Thiệp and the Faces of Vietnamese Literature,” p. 24.
59. “Post-Confucian, Post-Modern,” 164.
60. Ibid., p. 169.
61. This story has been translated by Peter Zinoman. See *The Việt Nam Forum* 14 (1994): 18-25
62. “Nguyễn Huy Thiệp and the Faces of Vietnamese Literature,” p. 24.
63. Ibid., p. 28.
64. “Post-Confucian, Post-Modern,” 165.
65. “Introduction,” p. 38.
66. Tôn Phương Lan, *Artistic Style*, p. 67.

