

CHAPTER THREE

THE VIETNAMESE LAND REFORM
PROGRAM AS LITERARY THEME

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*Scholars first, farmers second,
Rice all gone, look all around,
Farmers first, scholars second.*

Vietnamese folk poem (ca dao)

"Unity, unity, a grand unity. Success, success, a grand success!"¹

Hồ Chí Minh

"The monster is real. It lived. It ate the flesh of many children,
and it seems it still exists in this land of ours."

Đỗ Hoàng Diệu (2006)

In Vietnam the nationalist revolution to reclaim independence led to the founding of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in 1945 and the defeat of the French at Điện Biên Phủ in 1954. The social revolution, which involved the dismantling of the landowner class and the political empowerment of peasants, occurred as the military struggle was near completion—during the land reform campaign (cải cách ruộng đất) that began in 1953 and ended in 1956. Because this program was crudely applied and led to excesses, it was for years a sensitive topic and writers avoided it. After the Socialist Republic of Vietnam implemented its policy of renovation (đổi mới) in 1986, which lifted some restrictions on writers, the land reform program became a safer topic and a host of novels exploring its effects appeared. In this paper I discuss three of these novels: Dương Thu Hương's *Paradise of the Blind* (Những thiên đường mù)

¹ This slogan, which Hồ Chí Minh first used in 1951 during the war against the French, was repeated often during the American War and is still frequently quoted. See Borton (2007, 134).

1988/1993),² Ma Văn Kháng's *Marriage without a License* (Đám cưới không có giấy giá thú) (1989/1990),³ and Tô Hoài's *Three Different People* (Ba người khác) (published in 2006; written in 1992). I compare and contrast the way these three novels treat the land reform program and then suggest some reasons why this program that took place fifty years ago still casts a long shadow across the literary landscape of Vietnam.

The Land Reform Program

Land reform was an early goal of communist revolutionary leaders. Marxist doctrine argued for it and there was the need to win poor peasants to the revolutionary cause. Many peasants were landless; they had to rent land from landlords or rent themselves out as laborers to make a living. Despite its obvious appeal to poor peasants, land reform had to be postponed because to fight the French revolutionary leaders needed to establish a broad united front. They needed the support of landlords and rich peasants and so they put the land reform and the class struggle on the back burner as they waged their nationalist struggle against the imperialists and their allies. When land reform began, it proceeded in four stages.⁴ First a team (đội) of land reform cadres would enter a subdistrict

² Dương Thu Hương's novel was originally published in Hanoi in 1988. My references are to the English translation published in 1993. See "Works Cited."

³ Ma Văn Kháng's novel was first published in 1989. My references are to the second edition published in 1990. See "Works Cited."

⁴ This summary of the four stages of the land reform program is based on the following sources: Trần Phương (1968), White (1981), and Moise (1983). I am most indebted to White's account, which draws heavily on Trần Phương's (as does Moise's account). A word on these sources. In 1964 Hoang Van Chi wrote *From Colonialism to Communism*, which portrayed the land reform program as a cruel and brutal undertaking that led to the death of five per cent of the population—over 500,000 people (212). Hoang Van Chi worked for the Saigon government's Ministry of Information in the mid-1950's and as a translator for the U.S. Information Agency. Porter argues that *From Colonialism to Communism* was funded by the C.I.A., and he blames its author for "abusing important documentary evidence" to suggest a bloodbath occurred during the land reform period (7). In the late 1960s and early 1970s President Nixon referred to this "bloodbath" to justify continued American involvement in Vietnam (see Porter, p.54, for citations). Porter, White, and Moise do not deny that landowners were executed, but they estimate the total number killed to be much lower. Moise, for example, estimates that roughly 5,000 landlords were executed (222). All three of these scholars inevitably rely on official DRV sources, especially *Nhân dân* [The People] and Trần Phương's authorized account, *Cách mạng ruộng đất ở Việt Nam* [The Land

(*xã*)⁵ to publicize land reform policy and to recruit what were called roots (*rễ*) from the ranks of the poor peasants and laborers. These roots were to recruit other activists, called beads (*chuỗi*), in a process called "Getting roots and stringing beads" (*bắt rễ khâu chuỗi*). From the roots some peasants were chosen to be village leaders, who were called "*cốt cán*" (pillars, backbone elements). These *cốt cán* wielded considerable power during the land reform process.

An important part of stage one was ideological mobilization (*phát động tư tưởng*). Land reform cadre had to increase class consciousness among the peasants, make them aware of their exploitation, and stir up their anger against it. A key technique used to accomplish this was called "*tố khổ*," to denounce suffering. At neighborhood meetings first *rễ* and *chuỗi* and then other peasants would "denounce suffering," which in most cases involved denouncing also those landlords responsible for it. Based on information gleaned from these sessions and other sources, land reform team members compiled lists of landowners and their crimes. This first stage ended with a trial, before a Special People's Court, of landowners guilty of the worst crimes, those considered to be first class or "ringleader" landowners, a category called "ringleader traitorous, reactionary, despotic, dishonest, and cruel landowners" (*địa chủ Việt gian phản động, cường hào gian ác đầu sỏ*).

The key event in the second stage was the demarcation of classes (*phân hóa giải cấp*). Other landowners (*địa chủ*), besides those labeled ringleaders in stage one, were identified and other residents were classified as rich peasants (*phú nông*), middle peasants (*trung nông*), poor peasants (*bần nông*), or laborers (*cô nông*).

In the third stage property (land and goods—houses, tools, livestock, etc.) belonging to landowners was inventoried and then redistributed in such a way that no poor peasant had less land than the average held by all those residing in the village (Trần Phương 177; White 364). Stage three

Revolution in Vietnam] (1968). The fact that Tô Hoài's *Three Different People* could be published may indicate that soon writers and researchers will be given a freer hand in investigating the land reform program. If new information comes to light some facts and conclusions found in Trần Phương, Porter, White, and Moise—and in my summary here, which relies on their accounts—may have to be corrected.

⁵ Some people translate *xã* as "village" or "commune" but I prefer "subdistrict," reserving the English word "village" to refer to what Vietnamese call *làng* or *thôn*. As White explains, the *xã* is often an administrative convenience; the *làng* or *thôn* is an "organic social community," what might be called "the natural village" (322). Generally each *xã* has two to five *làng* (or *thôn*).

ended with two important events: a “sharing of the fruits” of the struggle (chia quả thực), a portioning out to peasants of the landowners’ goods; and a “planting of stakes to receive land” (cắm thẻ nhận ruộng), the marking out with stakes, by the new owners themselves, of the land they were to receive. A lot of fanfare surrounded this last event. Drums and horns blew as the peasants marched out to take possession of their land.

In the fourth and final stage, summing up meetings were held in each village and subdistrict organizations were reorganized (chỉnh đốn tổ chức). The key organization to be reorganized was the local Party⁶ cell. The Party used the land reform process not simply to distribute land to peasants but also to weed the Party of landowners and reactionary elements that had joined the Party in earlier years of the resistance, a period when class status and personal history were not carefully examined. In stage four these suspect previous members were replaced by peasant activists, usually *rễ* and *chui* trained during the land reform process.⁷

The Correction of Errors Campaign

Because the novels I discuss dramatize errors brought to light during the correction of errors campaign (sửa chữa sai lầm), it is necessary to discuss it briefly. The land reform program succeeded in the sense that land was taken from landlords and redistributed to poor peasants, but the program had some disastrous results. In April, 1956, the Party leadership began a correction of errors. In August Hồ Chí Minh briefly summarized the errors in a short letter to people in the countryside and cadre. In September, the Central Committee of the Party removed Trường Chinh, a key architect of the land reform program, from his position as general secretary of the Party, replacing him with Hồ Chí Minh. In October the Central Committee issued a communiqué and Võ Nguyên Giáp, the hero of the war against the French, made a speech in which these errors were spelled out in more detail.⁸

⁶ “Party” here refers to the Vietnam Workers Party (Đảng Lao Động Việt Nam), which is what the Vietnamese Communist Party was called from 1951 to 1976.

⁷ Tạ Duy Anh’s novel *Lão Khố* [Old Man Khố] (2006) features a character who is caught up in the reorganization phase of the land reform program. See Appendix.

⁸ All three documents—Hồ Chí Minh’s letter, the Central Committee’s “Communiqué,” and Võ Nguyên Giáp’s speech—were printed in *Nhân dân* (The People), the official newspaper of the Party. Complete citations can be found in my “Works Cited” under Hồ Chí Minh, Communiqué of the Tenth Plenum, and Võ Nguyên Giáp respectively. Both White (1981) in her Chapter 10 and Moise (1983)

The error emphasized the most was a faulty demarcation of classes. Focusing on the needs of the poor and landless peasants (bần cố nông) was correct, Võ Nguyên Giáp says in his report, but in the process unity with middle peasants was not achieved: good middle peasants were not inducted into the Party, or adequately represented on boards of peasants' associations. Alliances were not established with rich peasants and sometimes they were criticized severely and treated almost like landlords. "As for landlords," Võ Nguyên Giáp says, "the determination to overthrow the landowner class was correct; the error lay in attacking landowners uniformly, without applying different treatment, in some places not making allowances for landowners who supported the resistance; or for the family of a landlord whose children were in the army, or were cadres or revolutionary officials; or for landowning families that had contributed to the revolution" (1956, 2).

In explaining the wrong thinking that led to errors in demarcating classes, Võ Nguyên Giáp discusses classism, a slighting of the anti-imperialist struggle, and "leftist errors." By classism (chủ nghĩa thành phần) Võ Nguyên Giáp means the faulty assumption that "class standing determines everything" (1956, 2). Just because someone is a landowner, he suggests, this does not mean that he can not contribute to the revolution. The Party had two purposes in launching the revolution: to oppose imperialism (phản đế) and to oppose feudalism (phản phong). Both tasks are important but "while carrying out the anti-feudal task, we slighted—there were even areas where the cadres denied—the achievements of the anti-imperialist struggle. The land reform was separated from the Resistance and the revolution; there were even places where they were set in opposition to each other" (2)⁹

Both the Communiqué of the Tenth Plenum and Võ Nguyên Giáp in his report identify "leftist" deviationism (tả khuynh) as the cause of many errors, including the arresting and punishment of innocent people. At the start of the campaign, the Communiqué says, the policy of "opposing rightism and preventing 'leftism'"¹⁰ (chống hữu phòng "tả") was correct. Serious problems arose when leftist errors were committed but not corrected and a single-minded policy of opposing rightism was pursued.

in his Chapter 12 translate key passages. When I include a passage from these documents that White or Moise has translated I indicate this in a footnote.

⁹ Translated by Moise (1983, 247-248).

¹⁰ In documents concerning land reform, including those announcing the correction of errors phase, there are always shudder quotes around "leftism" but none around "rightism," indicating that land reform leaders didn't really believe it was possible to be too far to the left (see Moise 1983, 227-228).

“While carrying out attacks on the enemy,” Võ Nguyên Giáp says, “we overemphasized attacking decisively, did not attach importance to taking precautions against deviations, and did not emphasize the necessity for caution and for avoiding unjust punishment (*xử trị*)¹¹ of innocent people” (2).¹² We “went to the point of overestimating the enemy and thinking there were enemies everywhere” (2).

Class Struggle and Class Unity: Swings of the Pendulum

It is useful to see the land reform and correction of errors campaigns in larger historical perspective.¹³ In the 1940s Hồ Chí Minh and his followers emphasized class unity as they sought to enlist landowners and urban bourgeoisie in the anti-imperialist struggle. In the mid-1950s DRV policy moved back and forth between the poles of class unity and class struggle. The implementation of the land reform program in 1953 was a move toward class struggle, though in its early years class unity and the importance of a united front were still emphasized, particularly in urban areas. The situation changed when the U.S.-backed Diệm regime began to make clear its opposition to a general election called for in the Geneva Accords of 1954. As Hanoi leaders began to fear sabotage by reactionary landlords who might be encouraged by American intervention and the dimming of prospects for an election, the pendulum swung back toward class struggle. At the Seventh and Eighth Plenums of the Central Committee of the Party, the former held in March, the latter in August, of 1955, it was decided to move to a more radicalized land reform policy, one that emphasized class struggle and classism and the purging of reactionary elements from the Party (White 1981, 264-269; 281-191; and Trần Phương 1968, 185-188).

This new policy was implemented in waves four (June to December, 1955) and five (Dec., 1955, to July, 1956). It was during these waves that leftist excesses and classism reached their peak, creating a situation that

¹¹ Hoang Van Chi’s mistranslation of *xử trị* in Võ Nguyên Giáp’s report as “to execute” led to reports that over a half a million people had been killed during the land reform period and promoted the idea—some have called it a “myth”—that the land reform program was a bloodbath. See Hoang Van Chi (1964), (Porter (1972), White (1981, 406-407, n2), and Moise (1983, 217-218).

¹² Translated by Moise (1983, 248).

¹³ This account of swings between class unity and class struggle is based on White (1981), especially her chapters six and seven; and on Trần Phương (1968).

cried out for correction¹⁴ (Moise 1983, 202, 233; and Phạm Quang Minh 2004, 93). The correction of errors campaign represented a shift of the pendulum toward class unity. It, says White, “marked a move away from the radical ‘classism’ of the final year of the land reform campaign” (1981, 450). “Unity is our invincible force,” Hồ Chí Minh said in his letter to the people on August 18, 1956, the letter in which he admitted mistakes in the land reform program.

Dương Thu Hương’s *The Paradise of the Blind*

The main action of both *Paradise of the Blind* and *Marriage without a License* takes place many years after the land reform program ended. The fact that characters in these novels are still haunted by it suggests the power of its lingering effects. In Dương Thu Hương’s novel, Hằng, the young female narrator, was not yet born when land reform took place in her village—she learns about it and its disastrous effects on her family later from her mother, Quế, and her deceased father’s older sister, Aunt Tâm. She learns how this program has influenced the life she now leads.

Hằng becomes aware that six months after the end of the first Indochina war, her mother, whose family never owned any paddy land, married a man named Tôn, a teacher who had received a Western-style education and whose mother had inherited a few acres of rice paddy. Though she was educated, Tôn’s sister, Tâm, helped with rice production, wading herself into the paddies to plant and cultivate the seedlings. At harvest time she cooked meals for some hired workers from two neighboring villages. Despite its very modest holdings, the fact that Aunt Tâm’s family owned land and hired workers resulted in Tâm and Tôn and their mother being classified as landowners—as exploiters of the people—when the land reform team arrived in their village.

The head of that land reform team was Hằng’s Uncle Chính (her mother’s brother), the character who in this novel embodies the excesses of the land reform program. After his land reform team classified Tôn as a landlord, Uncle Chính told his sister she had to leave her husband and marry someone with the proper background. “You must not let yourself be influenced by others, or betray your class,” Uncle Chính told his sister. “We must crush the landowning classes, these cruel oppressors, and return the land to the peasants. If you don’t listen to me, you’ll be forced out of the community and punished according to revolutionary sanctions” (23).

¹⁴ Moise reports that 83% of the people who experienced land reform did so during waves four and five (1983, 234).

He tells her that if she “continues to mix with these landowners and someone denounces me to my superiors, my authority and my honor will be ruined” (31).

Most novels about the land reform program emphasize how it put into power uneducated people who had no social prestige in the village and no administrative or political experience. The “roots” or *rễ* that land reform cadre recruited were supposed to be peasants or agricultural workers who had “clear histories” (*lịch sử trong sạch*), meaning no connections to landlords or the old Party apparatus, which was commonly suspected of being infiltrated by enemy agents. The result was that the roots that were recruited, and who later became “backbone elements” (*cột cán*) with considerable power, were sometimes very young and/or inexperienced and were not respected by villagers (White 1981, 426-427; Trần Phương 1968, 118-119).

In *Paradise of the Blind* the villagers that Uncle Chính chooses to be the pillars or backbone elements (*cột cán*) are caricatures of what was referred to as the “rotten root” (*rễ thối*). One was a good-for-nothing named Bích who was rumored to have been expelled from the French colonial army for drunkenness. No one knew who his parents were, but he was tall and handsome and, according to rumors, had slept with all the female officials in the village. The other was a woman named Nần, a glutton who pilfered food from her neighbors and even from her own household. Her husband had to padlock the family’s rice bin because she kept taking rice out to sell so she would have money to buy sweets. Neither of the two, who were supposed to be pillars of peasantry, actually worked the fields. Bích was too lazy and incompetent and Nần too obsessed with eating.

Bích and Nần were the primary accusers of Hăng's grandmother Nhiêu and her Aunt Tâm at two public denunciation sessions. In the second session they were made to squat in a deep pit so that they, evil landowners, would be forced to look up at their new superiors, the “pillars” Bích and Nần. The humiliation broke Grandmother Nhiêu and led to her death but Aunt Tâm remained strong. Fearing her brother could not stand the humiliation, she convinced him to flee the village, which he did, linking up again only briefly with his wife to father Hăng, the narrator. He dies of humiliation when he is unable to return for her birth.

In *Paradise of the Blind* the land reform program creates disunity: it divides villager from villager and husband and wife. It hardens Hăng's Aunt Tâm whose primary goal becomes seeking revenge for the way her family has been treated. She gets some revenge when she is reclassified as a middle peasant during the correction of errors and gets her land back.

She commits no acts of violence. Her revenge is achieved by living well and refusing to forget, or let Hăng and her mother forget, the evil caused by Uncle Chính. The past, says Hăng, had “poisoned life for her, taking with it all joy, all warmth, all maternal feeling, all the happiness the world might have offered her. Aunt Tâm was living her vengeance now, crushing everything that blocked her way” (81).

Though she loves her aunt, Hăng refuses to be caught up in her quest for revenge. She knows that the price for victory in that quest is too high: the loss of youth and love, the “renunciation of existence” (248) “We can honor the wishes of the dead with a few flowers on a grave somewhere,” she concludes. But “I can’t squander my life tending these faded flowers, these shadows, the legacy of past crimes” (258).

Ma Văn Kháng’s *Marriage without a License*

Characters in *Marriage without a License* also struggle to escape the legacy of past crimes committed during the land reform movement. The main characters are the teachers and administrators in a secondary school in an unidentified city in Province L. The present time of the story is late May and June, 1982, the beginning of summer in north Vietnam, and the flame tree blossoms, symbols in this novel of youthful hopes but also of blood and leftist excesses, are in full bloom. It is exam time and the principal, Cầm, is in a difficult situation. Most parents of students in the school are high and middle-ranking government officials who expect their children to do well on their exams. Most of the faculty and his office clerk, Thống, are of petty bourgeois backgrounds and he fears that they won't all go along with his schemes to ensure a good passing rate. He is most worried about Tự, the main character, a popular, talented, widely read, and principled teacher of literature.¹⁵

The educational system in this school has completely broken down. Teachers take financial gifts from students supposedly for good teaching

¹⁵ Tự’s life parallels his creator’s in certain respects. Like his main character, Ma Văn Kháng studied literature in college and was teacher in a highland area. He graduated in literature from the Hanoi Pedagogical University and was a teacher and headmaster of a school in Lào Cai Province in Vietnam’s northern highlands. Other offices he has held include Editor in Chief of a newspaper in Lào Cai and Editor in Chief of the Labor Publishing House and of the Foreign Literature Review section of the Vietnam Writers Association. He is currently head of the prose section of the Writers Association. See information included in an English translation of Ma Văn Kháng’s novel *Ngược dòng nước lũ* (Against the Flood), trans. by Phan Thanh Hao and Wayne Karlin (Willimantic, CT, 2000), 308.

but actually to ensure favorable treatment. Students are lazy and press their teachers to reveal exam topics ahead of time. How did things come to such a state? The problem, well understood by Tữ, is that “teachers aren’t acting as teachers, students aren’t acting as students” (68, 158). The traditional moral principles governing teacher student relations (đạo nghĩa thầy trò) are threatened by “an ideology of practicality and profit” (68). How did things come to such a state. The primary explanation offered by this novel is corrupt and ignorant leadership. The two hardest working and most principled adults at this school are Tữ, the literature teacher and main character, and his good friend Thống, the school clerk. At the close of the story Tữ is fired and the sixty-year old Thống suffers a brain hemorrhage when he and Tữ return to the school one night and are shocked to find Cầm, the principal, changing grades on student exams.

Why aren't Tữ and Thống, or people like them, in positions of leadership at this school? Why instead is this school controlled by the immoral Cầm and his partner, a rather pompous, minimally-educated, small-minded man named Dương, the secretary of the Party cell for the school? The answer suggested by this book lies in the land reform campaign and the social revolution it was designed to bring about. More specifically it lies in classism, the belief that social class determines everything; the belief that all landlords are bad even if they owned only a few acres of paddy and supported the revolution or had sons and daughters who died in the Resistance. It is the belief that a person of peasant background, no matter how incapable, will always make a better leader than a capable intellectual with a petty bourgeois background. Classism was, of course, denounced by Hồ Chí Minh, Võ Nguyên Giáp, and the Central Committee at the start of the correction of errors campaign in 1956. This novel suggests that this error remained uncorrected in the 1980s.

The life of Thống, the sixty-year old school clerk, illustrates problems that have their root in the land reform program. He is only the school clerk, but if integrity and ability were considered, not class background, he would occupy a much higher position. He had been active in the Resistance. A machete in his hand, he led a group of villagers in an assault on the district offices of the colonial authorities. After the August Revolution of 1945, he was chair of the Provisional Revolutionary Committee in his village. Thống's father, however, was a Confucian scholar and the family raised silk worms, and so during the land reform period he was classified as a landowner. When Thống's father was interrogated by land reform cadre, he refused to accept his classification as an exploiting landlord and later hung himself to avoid further humiliation.

Thống, because he was a landowner's son, was forced to surrender his position as chair of the village committee. He became a part-time teacher but lost this job as well when he was accused of "passionately upholding a feudalistic, out-of-date literature and morality that served the exploiting class" (151).

"How can it be?" Tữ asks himself. "He [Thống] and I—we are both products of those same traumas" (153). Though Tữ is seventeen years younger than Thống, he also suffers because of attitudes and policies that emerged at the time of the land reform program. Like Thống, he suffers from having a father who was a Confucian scholar. Tữ's father was a village teacher, not a landowner, and was active in the Resistance. When his province was taken over by French forces, his superiors in the Resistance sent him to a mountain area near the Chinese border where he taught school and, at one point, acted "like a cadre of the masses" behind enemy lines. When the war ended, he hoped to join the Party but was denied entrance because he taught his children Confucian virtues and Chinese characters—"the language of that gang of feudal landowners." Scorned and sneered at by the new leadership and denied entrance to the Party, he returned to his home province where he hid his disappointment until he died (194-96).

Marriage without a License portrays anti-intellectualism and a scorning of book learning as the most harmful legacy of the land reform movement. The rejection of Confucian learning and disrespect for formal study in general by new cadre recruited during the land reform program left, this novel suggests, a moral and intellectual vacuum in Vietnamese organizations that in the 1980s had not yet been filled. It left people in key positions who were uneducated in Confucian or modern Western learning and whose knowledge of Marxism and Leninism was narrow and incomplete.

Dương, the Party secretary in the school, received only a fourth grade education before joining the revolution. Cầm, the principal, is the son of a town crier, one of the lowest positions in the traditional village. He became a physical education teacher after winning a running race. He studied literature at the University only because that major field lacked Party members; he got bad grades but graduated anyway because he was a Party member and because he pleased his superiors by controlling bourgeois students in the all-university student association. The rejection of intellectuals and the promotion of cadre—people like Dương and Cầm—based solely on class background and service to the Party produced a situation, Tữ realizes, in which "Those who spoke didn't know and those who knew couldn't speak" (87).

After he graduates from the university, Tữ is sent to a highland school to teach literature. In this town some good government officials who came from educated families had been replaced during the land reform period by people with little or no formal education—by people like Ông Lại, who is the Party secretary of the Town Committee (bí thư thị ủy). Ông Lại is the most powerful person in this town. A former butcher, Ông Lại despises intellectuals. In a talk on the opening of school, he tells students that because their parents weren't proletarians they didn't deserve the education they were getting. "Don't get haughty," he warns them. "Don't let your little bit of knowledge make you proud. Remember, intellectuals aren't worth a piece of dry dog shit!" (86).

When Tữ slaps Ông Lại's son, a dim-witted and ill-mannered student, for making an impertinent comment, Tữ's troubles escalate. The local authorities, led by Ông Lại, falsely accuse him of burning down the school and other misdeeds and force him to leave town and enlist in the army. Because he believes, wrongly it turns out, that the love of his life, a student named Phương, let herself be drawn into Ông Lại's plot against him, he loses her also in this incident. While fighting the Americans in the South, he receives a bad chest wound, but is carried to safety by a former student. He recovers and eventually returns to teaching. He marries a country girl named Xuyên whom he met in a library in the city where she was working on the staff. Xuyên was from a village described as "perhaps the poorest rural village in the country" (224). In the city she worked a few years as a nanny for a cousin and his wife before taking a training course that made her eligible for the library job. When the novel begins Xuyên is in her mid thirties, five years younger than Tữ. She has quit her government job and is selling cigarettes and wheeling and dealing anyway she can to make a profit. Poor all her life, she "hungers for material things and dreams of a happy life with enough to eat" (225). She is frustrated with her morally pure but poor husband whose teaching job brings in little money. It's clear that Tữ and Xuyên have little in common and that their marriage is in trouble. As the novel progresses, we get hints—later confirmed—that Xuyên is having an affair with a man named Quỳnh, also a wheeler-dealer but on a larger scale. Against regulations he is constructing a multi-story building next to Tữ's and Xuyên's that will prevent fresh air from reaching their home. Xuyên objects, but she and Quỳnh quickly realize they share an appetite for sex and money.

The true love of Tữ's life is not Xuyên. He has two true loves: Phương, the student he met at the highland school he taught in twenty years ago, and the Communist Party. Policies and attitudes engendered by the land reform program, especially the promotion of ignorant cadre like Ông Lại,

prevent him from officially marrying either of his loves. He loses Phuong when he wrongly suspects she cooperated with Ông Lại. His marriage to his second true love, the Communist Party, is blocked when an investigator that Duong, the Party watchdog in the school, sends to the mountain town he taught in years ago returns and reports that Tữ slapped the son of a high-ranking cadre, burned a school and had an improper relationship with a student (Phuong). Before that report came in, Tữ was hopeful of joining the Party.

He has always loved the Party's humanist ideals and so is bitter that this marriage to the Party can't take place. In the end he decides on a "marriage without a license": "A poet and an ideal—that is a natural marriage. For that wedding you don't need a license. . . . Just like a lover who in defiance of the rules insists on loving passionately the beauty he adores" (313). This novel suggests that what Vietnam needs is a wedding of what Tữ represents—intellect, talent, and integrity—with the best aspects of Marxist-Leninism.

This novel was published as Vietnam was beginning to move toward a market economy and Quỳnh, Tữ's wife's paramour, represents a new breed of entrepreneur. When he first appears in Tữ's and Xuyên's neighborhood to erect a building, apparently illegally, on public land, he sports the status symbols of an emerging consumer society: he is wearing an alligator shirt (probably a Lacoste shirt or a knock-off version) and Adidas shorts and is smoking a Capstan cigarette (27). Both his sexual relationship with Xuyên and the business deals he gets her involved in are presented as sordid affairs. Xuyên joins Quỳnh's wife in a smuggling operation, and they have plans to convert Tữ's beloved study into a storage room for the rubber boots they intend to sell. Xuyên, the poor girl from the poorest village in the country, is on her way to becoming a player in the new economy.

Xuyên is described as being too interested in sex and money and Quỳnh as sleazy and morally deficient. Despite these undesirable traits, they appear better adapted to the newly emerging market economy than is the more virtuous and retiring Tữ. Characters like Xuyên and Quỳnh and the ladies in Xuyên's investment/smuggling group are in some ways modern urban counterparts of the uneducated peasant "pillars" that got promoted to positions of power during the land reform program. By having Xuyên come from "perhaps the poorest village in the country" the author emphasizes the similarity. Like these pillars in the countryside, these new wheeler-dealers in the city hold intellectuals like Tữ in contempt and have no use for books. One woman in Xuyên's investment group talks like Ông Lại, the Party Secretary of the Town Committee who

said intellectuals weren't worth dog shit. "I don't hate anyone as much as I hate books," she says. "Intellectuals are stupid. An intellectual couple that lives next to me are poor and hungry and so sometimes quarrel all day long" (219).

In the traditional hierarchy of occupations that Vietnam inherited from China the order was as follows: first scholars (sĩ), second farmers (nông), third craftsmen (công), and fourth merchants (thương). But a well-known Vietnamese folk poem suggests that circumstances could force a rearrangement of the first two occupations. The poem goes like this: "Scholars first, farmers second, / Rice all gone, look all around, / Farmers first, scholars second." This folk poem is cited twice in *Marriage without a License*—not approvingly but as indicating an uninformed and harmful anti-intellectualism. "That folk poem," one of Tữ's good students says, "no matter how you feel about it, also reflects the primitive thinking of one segment of society" (300; see also 87).

In *Marriage without a License* Ma Văn Kháng is concerned about the way scholars are treated in post-war Vietnam. The Party needs intellectuals, this novel suggests, but not exactly the type represented by Tữ and the clerk Thống. Ma Văn Kháng in this novel appears to be arguing for a certain selectivity when drawing on Vietnam's rich Confucian tradition. Some Confucian concepts and virtues should be kept, others should be set aside. The concept of "right names" (chính danh), this novel suggests, should be kept. "There is government," Confucius says in the *Analects*, "when the prince is prince, and the minister is minister; when the father is father, and the son is son" (Legge 1971, 256; see also 263-2). In other words, people have to perform well in the positions they occupy.

Tữ's father, the narrator explains, "left for Tữ a noble spiritual legacy and a lifelong debt that Tữ had to pay in every way he could: He had to become a useful person and at the same time had to achieve a correct name [chính danh]" (197). He struggles to achieve a correct name, but in a time when "teachers were not acting as teachers and students weren't acting as students" (68, 158), when a thirst for private gain and profit was sweeping the land, he was, as he himself realizes, "like a book left in the wrong place" (264). On a hot summer day after he has learned of Xuyên's infidelity, Tữ visits a neighborhood market where he observes a frenzy of buying and selling and witnesses a market manager extorting fines from some women by falsely accusing them of using illegal scales. Consumerism, he reflects, "was spreading everywhere, knocking down icons, crushing under its feet all the sacred spiritual values. Consumerism enters love and kills it, enters the family and destroys it" (245).

Readers are encouraged to sympathize with Tữ's repulsion at the consumerization of life, but also to fault him for lacking the boldness and initiative exhibited by people caught up in it. Kha, a reporter and friend of Tữ's, comments that he and Tữ are the descendants of poor peasants and also, more recently, of Confucian scholars. This novel argues that while both groups have contributed to Vietnamese society, the Confucian scholars are not, as Kha puts it, "appropriate in a highly developed, complicated society." They are "impotent and naive, full of good will but impotent; they lack the strength to fight; they often hesitate and become embarrassed; they pray for peace and give birth to a pessimistic attitude." And they tend to value aesthetics over practicality, "preferring to praise an orange tree for its beauty not for the fruit it bears" (315). On the other hand, they are also educated, morally upright, and believe in doing their job well. What Vietnam needs to do, Ma Văn Kháng's novel suggests, is to draw on the best traits of both traditions. It needs to combine the raw energy and practicality of the peasant tradition with the intellectual power and integrity of the scholar tradition. This novel reveals that an error identified during the correction of errors period still needs attention—the error of elevating people to positions of power based solely on class background without assessing their resourcefulness, talent, ability, education, and moral integrity.

Tô Hoài's Three Different People

Tô Hoài's *Three Different People* is less didactic than *Marriage without a License*. The author recounts what happened in several villages in Hải Dương Province when a land reform team arrived, letting readers draw their own conclusions. Bối, the narrator, tells his story in a playful way, fully admitting that he's a lazy fellow who, despite some previous experience with land reform in Thanh Hóa Province, doesn't really know how to handle his current responsibilities. He includes some humorous and embarrassing situations that he gets himself into, most of these having to do with women. His tone remains calm as he describes the confusion and terror that results when his team begins work in Hải Dương Province. Though he hates the sight of blood and is relieved when he doesn't have to preside over a meeting at which a "reactionary" (tên phản động) is going to be shot (120), Bối often seems more amused than horrified at the chaos around him. The power of this novel stems in part from the clash between the narrator's calm tone and the nightmare he describes.

When it was published in 2006, *Three Different People* caused quite a stir in literary circles in Vietnam. On December 22, 2006, the Hanoi

Writers' Association Writer organized a discussion of his work at the Institute for Literature which was attended by prominent writers and critics, including Tô Hoài, the author.¹⁶ Almost everyone who attended this discussion as well as critics who reviewed this novel in the press praised Tô Hoài's work. One critic also praised the courage of the publisher who dared to publish it and almost everyone seemed pleased that a novel like this, a work that pulls the curtain back and reveals the truth about one of the most tragic periods in Vietnamese history, could be published in Vietnam.

The author was himself a member of a land reform team and his novel is very autobiographical. "The story is true with a few imagined elements," Tô Hoài says. Like Bồi, the first person narrator, Tô Hoài was a city dweller who knew little about rice cultivation and peasant life before working in the land reform program. Like Bồi, Tô Hoài first was assigned to a land reform team in Thanh Hóa Province and then moved with his team to Hải Dương Province in the north. Drawing on his first-hand knowledge, Tô Hoài is able to fill his novel with a wealth of detail, vividly describing how land reform team members worked through the different stages—finding "roots," demarcating classes, etc.—of the land reform campaign in the villages of Am, Địa, and Chuôm.

The land reform proceeded in waves, as we have explained. Hải Dương was one of the provinces that experienced the last wave (wave five) of the land reform program, the wave in which the worst errors occurred. Hải Dương was an area in which "battles between Viet Minh and French supporters continued until 1955" (Phạm Quang Minh 93) and where reactionary elements were believed to be everywhere, even within local Party cells. Wave five occurred after the Eighth Plenum, which linked land reform to the hunt for enemy agents within the landlord class. It was conducted like a military campaign. The Executive Committee of the Central Committee called it a "Điện Biên Phủ against feudalism in the North" (White 1981, 292). In other words, Tô Hoài's novel describes the land reform program when and where fear of enemy agents and rightist extremes were most prevalent. This needs to be kept in mind in judging the behavior of characters like team leader Cự, a man whose concern about enemy agents appears to border on paranoia.

Through flashbacks, both *Paradise of the Blind* and *Marriage without a License* include accounts of what happened during the land reform period, but these novels focus on how the program has affected later

¹⁶ See "Tọa đàm về *Ba người khác* của Tô Hoài" (A Discussion of Tô Hoài's *Three Different People*) in my "Works Cited."

generations. *Three Different People*, however, describes the immediate effects the program had on villagers. And unlike these other two novels, which reveal a great deal about the thinking of the victims of land reform but little about those implementing it, this novel is told from the point of view of a member of a land reform team. We learn what motivates him and his fellow team members and gain insight into why they did the things they did.

What motivates the leader of Bối's team, a man named Cự, is "hiếu thắng," an eagerness for victory, a determination to beat other teams by finding more landowners and punishing them more quickly than land reform teams operating in other areas. The problem is that in the villages where they have been assigned no one has much land and everyone is poor and struggling, so it is not easy to find a landowner. Cự finds three landowners in Địa, but Bối can't find one in Am, the village he is assigned, and is scolded by Cự for his failure. The only possible candidate is the current head of the village, a man called Tư Nhữ, but Bối concludes that, although he has a little land, it is not enough to make him a land owner or a rich peasant. Then Đình, the cadre assigned to Chuôm village, is accused of working secretly for the Quốc Dân Đảng¹⁷ and is arrested. Bối is moved to Chuôm village and Cự takes over in Am. After only half a day of "thăm nghèo hỏi khổ" (listening to the poor, asking about suffering) he identifies Tư Nhữ as a landowner. Cự reports that he found some wires hung up near Tư Nhữ's house, an antenna for a wireless radio that, Cự claims, he is using to get messages from the French. Tư Nhữ says it is to listen to the Resistance radio station. Cự also says he learned that Tư Nhữ had hired people to help him with planting and harvesting. After being denounced by the village's *rẽ* and *chuổi*, Tư Nhữ is forced to sign a statement confessing to being an agent of reactionary elements and is put under house arrest.

Tư Nhữ escapes before he is sentenced, but Thìn, who owns five *mẫu* of land (about 18,000 square meters) in Chuôm village, is not so fortunate. When Bối first enters Am village looking for a *rẽ* he finds one in the first house he stumbles into. The head of this household, the man who becomes a *rẽ*, is Diệc, who is married to Khoèo, a mute cripple who is the daughter of Thìn. Diệc and Khoèo have four children, including an earthy and sexy daughter named Đom. In talking with Thìn, Bối learns that Diệc, an orphan (his parents died of cholera), was a tenant farmer on Thìn's land for many years. When Thìn became aware that Diệc was sneaking into his

¹⁷ Vietnamese Nationalist Party, a party modeled and named after Sun Yat-sen's *Guomindang* (Nationalist Party) in China.

kitchen to sleep with his disabled daughter, he offered to give him a little land and build him a house if he would live as husband and wife with Khoèo. Diệc, who saw no other way of acquiring land or a wife, accepted. Thìn doesn't seem so evil to Bối, who generally brings little enthusiasm to the hunt for landowners. Cự, however, quickly concludes that Thìn is not only a landowner, but a despotic, dishonest, and cruel one (địa chủ cường hào gian ác).¹⁸ In making his case, Cự brings up his relationship with Diệc, but gives it an insidious twist: he says that Thìn forced Diệc to marry his crippled daughter to pay off a debt he owed him.

The denouncing of Thìn, the confiscating of his property, and his execution are key events in the story. The scene when the search and confiscation unit arrives¹⁹ at Thìn's property is richly drawn. Pandemonium breaks out as people scramble for goods they think they deserve. Cối, the head of the confiscation unit, is illiterate, making it impossible for him to mark down what is seized. Bối hurriedly has to try to write out a list. Thìn's wife, who has been paralyzed for many years, is lying in bed. Newly empowered villagers yank off her blanket to see if she is hiding anything under it. Then they start carrying off goods, supposedly to a central point for proper distribution, but Bối suspects they are taking them home to bury them for later use. A mentally unbalanced man named Vách, whom Cự has made a *chuổi*, arrives in a loin cloth so he can try on and claim a pair of Thìn's trousers (148-149). Bối tries to call them to order but fails. The only way that he can stem the chaos is to announce that it's time to move on to landowner Tư Nhỡ's house.

An intriguing aspect of *Three Different People* is the dishonesty and hypocrisy of both Cự and the narrator. While Cự is exhorting team members at a meeting held just before the team was to begin work in the villages, Bối sees some corn cakes sticking out of Cự's knapsack. The team had eaten some corn cakes for lunch but Cự has secretly stashed away some for himself to eat later. Everyone is near starvation in this area: Bối has seen women bringing children to the district market in baskets "to sell like jack fruit." The women needed money to buy food to prevent the

¹⁸ Here's what Moise has to say about the use of the label "despot": "In theory, the despots were supposed to be a subcategory of the landlords, but some land-reform cadres applied the label 'despot' promiscuously to anyone they considered an enemy, including (perhaps even especially) those who were well thought of by the peasants" (1983, 216).

¹⁹ The narrator explains that four units (tổ) were formed: a unit to bring the landowners to be denounced, a unit to search and confiscate the landowners' goods and property, a unit to take the seized goods to a designated place, and a unit to maintain order and keep records (145).

rest of their family from starving. Land reform team members were to observe the “Three With’s” (ba cùng)—live with, eat with, and work with the people—and so this squirreling away of food for oneself is a serious breach of discipline. And Bôi, the narrator, becomes complicit in this act when he sneaks some of Cự’s corn cakes into his own knapsack, confident that Cự won’t dare cry foul.

Cự comes across as the worst hypocrite. Bôi shouts slogans and feigns zeal for the land reform program, but he is honest with his readers, freely admitting he is a “lazy guy” (thằng lười) and confessing to various minor crimes, stealing Cự’s corn cakes, for example, and (this occurred earlier) substituting cheap sugar for expensive MSG on a shopping errand. Bôi also is squeamish about violence and appears frightened by the hatred and looter mentality generated by the denouncement (tố khổ) sessions. Bôi’s sexual liaisons are more innocent, less devious than Cự’s. Bôi gradually realizes that Cự has a clever way of “manufacturing” (chế tạo) sex partners by making them *rể*, then sending them off on assignment to another province so he can seek other partners.

Both Cự and Bôi sleep with Đòm, who becomes a *chủi*, and Duyên, who becomes head of the people’s guard. Though Đòm is more naive and less sexually experienced than Duyên, who has a husband in another province, both women enjoy sex as much if not more than their male partners. Both women are animalistic, not delicate, in their love making. In describing their sexual appetites the narrator frequently uses animal imagery. He describes Đòm as waiting for love trysts “like a hungry quail waiting for prey in the bushes” (128). After describing a love-making session with Duyên (“She put her rifle in the corner and drew me down on the ground”), he comments that “women and men here ate, slept, and joked with each other like chickens, any time and any place would do” (138).

As the passages quoted above suggest, Duyên and Đòm were frequently the aggressors. Đòm waits to prey on Bôi, Duyên pulls him down. They pursue both Cự and Bôi not just to satisfy their sexual appetites but also to satisfy other cravings—for food, for power, and for land. In *Three Different People* these four cravings are very closely related: two or more of them are brought together continually throughout this novel. During a period when food was very scarce, Bôi explains, Duyên had to arrange her body in a special way when making love so her bony hipbones wouldn’t get in the way (141). After a bout of lovemaking in which Duyên has thrown him down on the ground like a wrestler, Bôi marvels at how girls from this area threw themselves into sex even when they “were so hungry they were breaking out in a cold sweat” (140). At a

contentious and chaotic meeting to divide up land and goods, one man says “Good land, bad land, salty land, sour land—we’ll take it all. We poor peasants have waited generations, hungering for land like a baby hungers for its mother’s milk” (155).

Peasants need land to get food and power, something Duyên, driven strongly by all four cravings but especially by a craving for land, understands well. Sex for her is a means to satisfy her other cravings. “If you don’t get me some top quality land,” Duyên tells Bối, “don’t you touch me anymore or I’ll break your bones” (154). “First the [land reform] team member, second god” [Nhất đội nhì trời] Vietnamese say in talking of this period. The land reform team was the supreme authority in villages, more powerful than the local Party apparatus. Duyên knows the powerful land reform cadre can help her satisfy her desires.

Đa Huyền says *Three Different People* could be called a post-naturalistic (hậu duy nhiên) novel because its style deconstructs the old way of writing and because the author looks very “clinically” (lâm sàng) at old memories (2006, 7). I’m not certain exactly what Đa Huyền means by post-naturalistic, but what he may be reacting to is Tô Hoài’s portrayal of people like Duyên, people who appear to be driven by compulsive instincts and economic forces. In this sense I believe this novel does have a naturalistic quality. In a naturalistic novel, M. H. Abrams says, characters are “victims both of their glandular secretions within and of sociological pressures without” (1988, 154). Characters in *Three Different People* do seem naturalistic in this sense. Like rats in a maize they run helter-skelter, driven by bodily urges and confused by the social upheaval and new opportunities brought by the land reform program.

Bối, the narrator, is a complex character. He is definitely not heroic. None of the important characters in this novel is heroic, with the possible exception of Đình, who, along with Bối and Cự, is one of the “three different people” referred to in the title. Đình is falsely accused of being an agent for the Quốc Dân Đảng and is sentenced to death by a people’s court. When the correction of errors is about to be launched, however, he is saved when a secretary from the zone (khu)²⁰ brigade office arrives and announces a decision from above to halt all executions. Bối meets him twenty years later in Hanoi. Although he and his wife and children are homeless and are surviving by picking up garbage, he is optimistically planning to go to a new economic zone in Lâm Đồng Province in the south.

²⁰ White explains that zones (khu) were “military and administrative territorial units which grouped several provinces” that “were set up during the Resistance and were retained for a few years after the end of the war” (1981, 318, n3).

Bối lacks Đình's resilience and initiative but he is not as devious or as irrational as Cự, who finds landowners and enemy agents everywhere. Bối appears to lack moral sensitivity. He goes along with Cự, who accuses people on little or no evidence. Bối does nothing to halt Thin's execution though he feels it is unjustified. Bối knows Thin owns land and so is clearly a landowner but there is no evidence that he should have been categorized as a "despotic, dishonest, and cruel landowner" (địa chủ cường hào gian ác). It is possible, he thinks, that Thin would have been forgiven during the correction of errors (135). Bối sleeps with the same women as Cự, and when he leaves Hải Dương both Đóm and Duyệt are pregnant. He never reveals any concern for their welfare. When the correction of errors team arrives to replace the land reform team, Bối is writing, on orders from Cự, a "summation of victory" report highlighting the program's successes. Because the story Bối is narrating reads like an exposé of problems with the land reform program, one might think that he would be amused by the irony of his situation—writing a victory report when the correction of errors team arrives—but he expresses only frustration. Bối doesn't feel that he or his team has made any errors. "Whatever the powers above told us to do, we did," he says. "I didn't see any errors anywhere" (208).

One wonders about the relationship of Bối to his creator. In refusing to accept any individual responsibility is Bối expressing attitudes shared by Tô Hoài, the author? Tô Hoài says his novel is true with only a few "imagined elements." He gives his narration a playful tone and doesn't stop to pass judgment on the actions he describes, but Đỗ Hoàng Diệu (2007) says one can easily imagine Tô Hoài smiling an "anguished" (đầy đau xót) smile as he tells his story. Like his character Bối, Tô Hoài was a member of a land reform team in Hải Dương and had the exact same rank and assignment: assistant team leader in charge of the court (đội phó phụ trách tòa án). "I went into land reform following the slogan 'Cultivable Land is a Battlefield'" (đồng ruộng là chiến trường) Bối says (181).²¹ It seems that both Bối and his creator were "good soldiers" who did what their superiors told them to do. As this novel makes clear, land reform cadres were wracked by fear as well as hunger. A superior's accusation of misconduct could get a team member fired or shot. Bối has to be especially careful because he is not a peasant, but a petty bourgeoisie from the city who can't distinguish regular rice from glutinous rice (163). Đình is almost shot and is rendered homeless. Bối himself is fired for forging

²¹ The saying "Đồng ruộng là chiến trường" comes from a speech given by Hồ Chí Minh in 1952. See Bùi Đình Thanh (1966, 83).

documents claiming he is a Party member and has to scrounge for a living in Hanoi. Tô Hoài portrays both team members and villagers as totally focused on survival. Moral sensitivity, this novel suggests, was a luxury they couldn't afford. Tô Hoài's creation of a narrator who refuses to pass judgment may be a realistic touch.

Though not explicitly didactic like *Marriage without a License*, this novel does have a message. An error emphasized in *Three Different People* is one Moise calls "commandism": "Leaders and cadres decided what should be done and then issued the appropriate orders without really consulting the peasants very much" (226). In *Three Different People* Tô Hoài portrays land reform as a top down operation from start to finish. Team leader Cự has his hand in every important decision and reserves the right to override his assistant Bội. Who becomes a *rê*, who gets classified as a landowner, who gets inducted into the Party—Cự has the final word on all these matters. There is little adaptation to the reality on the ground. Leaders in Hanoi said approximately four or five per cent of households were headed by landlords (see Trần Phương 1968, 157; White 1981, 424). Feeling this pressure from above, Cự is determined to find landlords in Địa, Am, and Chuôm. Landowners like Thìn and Tư Nhõ do own some land but do not appear to fit the category Cự rushes to push them into—that of "despotic, dishonest, and cruel" landlords.

Three Different People also illustrates a dilemma faced by land reform leaders, one that White explains in a section of her thesis entitled "Revolution from Above" (1981, 315-317). The idea was to mobilize the peasants and get them to implement the land reform law. In other words, White says, land reform was not a jacquerie—not a spontaneous peasant revolt. It was a "guided jacquerie": peasants were to rise up under the watchful eye of experienced land reform cadre. Party leaders were afraid that if the process was not guided from above landowners would bribe poor peasants or peasants would attack middle peasants. To avoid chaos, land reform cadre were to direct the process. But once peasants realized what they could gain it wasn't easy to make them follow regulations. In *Three Different People* Bội frequently loses control of the peasants he has mobilized and pandemonium ensues, as it does in the scene, described above, when peasants confiscate landowner Thìn's property (148-149).

Three Different People also reveals problems caused by haste and a refusal to use the intellect to analyze the situation. At an early meeting Đình proudly boasts that he has already had the former village head arrested and locked up in a stable for water buffalos. Bội, responsible for court matters, says he is supposed to get a paper signed first. "Work quickly but observe the law," he urges. But team leader Cự overrides him.

We can't dawdle, he says, or the evildoers will escape. "As the mouth speaks, the hand acts. Hurry up. Hurry up," he orders (53). The team is guided by simplistic slogans. No one stops to analyze the situation carefully. Thin, the landowner from Chuôm village, is executed before the people's court grants final approval (135). Bồi is the only team member with any skill in reading and writing, which is why he was put in charge of courts, but intellectual skills such as careful analysis and accurate recording are not highly valued. Books in both Chinese and Vietnamese are burned, including land registers, to remove all feudal traces.

Why So Many Novels about the Land Reform Program

Why was the land reform program an important topic in these novels written during the Renovation period?²² Why does it continue to cast a shadow over contemporary literary and political life? I believe there are five reasons.

1) An "Earthshaking Revolution"

In both Vietnam and China, the land reform program was the most important stage of the social revolution led by communist revolutionaries. Its aim was not simply to distribute land more equitably but to destroy the power and prestige of the landlord class. To accomplish this, program leaders forced people to treat fellow villagers, and even members of their own family, in ways that ran counter to traditional beliefs and practices that had existed for centuries. Land reform was, as Hồ Chí Minh said, an "earthshaking revolution" (một cuộc cách mạng long trời lở đất) (1956, 1) and it would be surprising if writers did not wish to talk about an event of this magnitude, particularly after restrictions on writers were lessened in 1987.

Tô Hoài's *Three Different People* provoked a lot of commentary when it appeared last year. In this commentary the land reform program is referred to as a "nightmare," an "unhealed wound," a "trauma," and a

²² The renovation period is not defined precisely but is usually considered to begin in 1987 when then General Secretary of the Party, Nguyễn Văn Linh, loosened the strings (cởi trói) on writers. Some see it ending in 1989 when those strings were retightened somewhat. The writer Phạm Thị Hoài speaks of a post-renovation Vietnam in which the rule for writers is "Do anything you want to do as long as it's not political" (2004). The problem, of course, for writers and publishers lies in determining what the authorities will consider political.

“monster”²³—terms which suggests the powerful hold this “earthshaking” program continues to have on the Vietnamese psyche. It has a powerful hold, critics suggest, because while land reform has not been exactly a taboo topic, it has been a dangerous one to write about. Until Tô Hoài published *Three Different People*, writers had treated it fairly gingerly—too gingerly, those who praise Tô Hoài’s novel say, to rattle the ghosts completely out of the closet, to heal old wounds, to make the monster disappear. Before this book appeared, says the young writer Đỗ Hoàng Diệu, we knew that “the land reform program had taken place, but we didn’t know how it had taken place. *Three Different People* tells us: It took place like this!” (2007).

Its boldness and explicitness is what makes people hope this book will have a therapeutic effect. Books like *Three Different People*, says the critic, Lại Nguyên Ân, are “a way to lessen one of the traumas of our society.” The authorities have erred in forbidding people to talk about “spiritual traumas” like the land reform program because only by talking about them can we “not only cool down the trauma but also prevent similar catastrophes from affecting the community” (2007). The writer Nguyễn Xuân Khánh agrees: “Bringing the anger hidden in the collective unconscious into the clear light of the conscious mind,” he says, “will help the community prevent unhealthy things in the future. Because Tô Hoài was able to write boldly about those difficult things, we greatly admire him and are grateful to him” (2006).

2) New Freedoms for Writers

Although errors committed in the land reform program were very publicly admitted during the correction of errors phase launched in 1956, it remained a sensitive topic. However, after renovation was launched and Party Secretary Nguyễn Văn Linh urged writers to “portray bad people and bad things to arouse public indignation and censure” (1987: 122), the land reform program and its lingering effects became an obvious and reasonably safe target for further censure. Dương Thu Hương’s *Paradise of the Blind* was banned but only after selling 40,000 copies, and it might have continued to circulate if she had not become an unrelenting critic of the regime. This criticism got her expelled from the Party in 1989 and she spent seven months in jail in 1991 for smuggling documents containing

²³ For example, Nguyễn Ân calls it a nightmare and an unhealed wound (2007); Lại Nguyên Ân calls it a trauma of Vietnamese society (2007); and Đỗ Hoàng Diệu calls it a monster (2007).

“state secrets” out of the country. These documents were manuscripts of other novels. Dương Thu Hương now lives in France and publishes abroad.²⁴

Ma Văn Kháng, a Party member and now head of the prose section of the Writers' Association, is the consummate insider. His *Marriage without a License* is exactly the kind of book Secretary Linh was calling for: a work that finds faults with the current system but accepts as a given that the Party must continue to lead the country. Perhaps encouraged by the freer atmosphere that accompanied renovation, Tô Hoài, also a Party member, wrote *Three Different People* in 1992 but couldn't get it published and so set it aside until he found a publisher in 2006. His novel is the most explicit and shocking novel about the land reform program to appear so far. The critic Lại Nguyên Ân sees its publication as a sign that “freedom in publishing has been opened a little wider” (2006), but only a little.²⁵ He doesn't feel its appearance signals any significant lessening of censorship. In recent years Vietnam's economy has grown at the rate of 7%, and Vietnam has joined the World Trade Organization and hosted the APEC Conference (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation). Probably those regulating cultural production decided that these recent successes have insulated them from any harmful effects that might result from the publishing of a book like *Three Different People*.

3) A Reaction to Anti-intellectualism and the Consumerization of Society

During renovation some writers probably wrote about the land reform program because as intellectuals and/or petty bourgeoisie themselves they felt personally threatened by the radical anti-intellectualism and rigid classism that were the hallmarks of the program. Setting their novels during the land reform period enabled writers to argue for the things that most writers believe in: respect for intellectuals, humane moral values, good literature, and a modern education system that encourages students to

²⁴ For more information on Dương Thu Hương see “A Note About the Author,” in *Paradise of the Blind*, trans. by Phan Huy Duong and Nina McPherson (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), 268-270.

²⁵ In 2006 three other novels about land reform were published, another sign that censors are becoming less concerned about books on this topic. The novels are: *Lão Khố* [Old Man Khố] by Tạ Duy Anh, *Biểu tượng một dòng họ* [Symbol of a Lineage] by Hoài Minh, and *Dòng đời* [Current of Life] by Nguyễn Trung. See Appendix for complete citations. See Nguyễn Ân (2007) for brief descriptions of these three works.

think. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, when most of the books listed in my appendix were published, it was easier for writers to argue for these things and not, I believe, just because Secretary Linh had loosened strings on writers. The arrival of peace and the move toward a market economy created a need for educated workers and managers. Immediately after the American war ended the rule was “redness over expertise” (hồng hơn chuyên), but leaders began to realize that to succeed in the new global economy revolutionary zeal was not enough. Ma Văn Kháng in *Marriage without a License* suggests that Vietnam can not modernize and develop if government and business are run by the immoral and the uneducated. You can change grades and let students pass, teacher Tữ thinks, but the bridges built by those who become engineers will collapse (264). The Confucian principle of “right names” still applies: people in important positions must be capable and honest.

Peace and the market economy produced more opportunities for corruption, more chances to wheel and deal for personal aggrandizement. After years of sacrifice during and immediately after the war many people were determined to live well, and some were not about to let moral scruples get in the way. Unscrupulous wheeler-dealers are key characters in many Vietnamese post-war novels, including the three discussed here. In *Paradise of the Blind*, Uncle Chính, sent to Russia on government business, gets involved with a group smuggling luxury goods. Xuyên and Quỳnh in *Marriage without a License* are also involved in smuggling and other shady deals; and the school where Tữ teaches has become consumerized, turned into a store where good grades can be bought like any other commodity.

Three Different People talks about the worship of money and corruption not after but during the American war. Tữ Nhỡ, the landowner who narrowly escaped execution, changes his name to “Thanks to Money” (Tạ Xin), and opens a beef noodle soup restaurant in Hanoi called the “Thanks to Money Noodle Soup Shop” (Phở Tạ Xin). Rice noodles and beef were contraband items at this time (during the American War), but Tữ Nhỡ is in cahoots with a high level cadre, and his youngest daughter works in a state meat store, so he has no trouble getting supplies.

The wheeler-dealers who succeed economically in these three novels are complex characters. In *Paradise of the Blind* Uncle Chính is clearly disreputable, but Aunt Tam embodies a mixture of good and bad qualities. Readers are encouraged to admire her wealth and industry but to reject the motivation that has enabled her to succeed: a desire for revenge. Xuyên and Quỳnh have few desirable traits, but they do reveal a raw energy and practicality that Tữ, the literature-loving teacher, lacks. Tữ Nhỡ deals in

contraband goods and is not to be trusted, but as the novel ends he is surviving better than Bối, the most literate member of Cự's land reform team.

I believe these characters reflect the ambiguous attitudes toward modernity that followed the move to a market economy. Philip Taylor explains that immediately after the American war modernity was associated with the Soviet Union and the DRV's own brand of socialism. Mass mobilization and collective effort were emphasized. Authorities tried to eradicate all neo-colonial vestiges in the south. They also wanted to dampen this region's enthusiasm for consumerism and individualism and prevent it from infecting the north. After renovation and the move to a market economy, however, these qualities—a passion for commodity relations, and individualism—became associated with modernity and therefore desirable—things to be encouraged, not eradicated. By the early 1990s, however, Hanoi leaders and some southern intellectuals began to worry that consumerism and social evils associated with the market economy—corruption, depraved foreign videos, etc.—were ruining traditional values. In the early 1990s, Taylor says, “modernity was reinvented as threat” (119; see also 119-138). By peopling their books with greedy, corrupt business men and women, novelists writing in the late 1980s and early 1990s did their part to help those factions in Hanoi who viewed modernity as threat. Seen in this light, their works about land reform—especially works in which immoral, corrupt, and uneducated land reform cadre share the stage with immoral, corrupt, and uneducated denizens of the new market economy—appear less bold than some critics have suggested.

4) “Unity, Unity, Unity, a Grand Unity”

A fourth reason for writing about land reform has to do with unity, or *đoàn kết*. Although unity was seen by Hồ Chí Minh and many others as a key to Vietnam's successful struggle against foreign invaders, it was threatened during the land reform program. To mobilize the peasants Party leaders emphasized class struggle and denied that landlords and peasants had any common interests. Some peasants resisted mobilization, at least at first, because they did not see themselves as members of a class; instead they thought of themselves as belonging to an extended family (*đại gia đình*), a lineage group (*dòng họ*), a village, or an ethnic group. Land reform cadre had to make peasants aware of how they, as a class, were being exploited. In doing so, they had to encourage hatred that often did not exist. At a team meeting Cự, the team leader in Tô Hoài's novel, tells

team members that each village should lay a heavy sentence down on one landowner guilty of crimes against the peasants because “only in that way can the spirit of the peasants be raised” (120). Cự also asks permission of the brigade office to execute the secretary of the existing Party cell. “If that doesn’t happen,” he tells his team members, “the momentum of the peasants [to overthrow the landlords and the old Party apparatus] won’t increase” (227). Those who owned land, even if only a few acres, were set against those who had no land and Confucian scholars and teachers, like TỰ’s father in *Marriage without a License*, were set against their students. The excesses of the land reform program generated hatred and a desire for revenge that were passed down from generation to generation. *Paradise of the Blind* is a story about one woman’s long struggle to escape this legacy of hatred bequeathed her by her aunt.

Paradise of the Blind emphasizes antagonisms created by land reform within the family; *Marriage without a License* highlights divisions within schools and, by extension, other work environments; and *Three Different People* emphasizes how the land reform program set villager against villager. In expressing their appreciation for Tô Hoài’s novel, critics have praised it for its vivid portrayal of how the land reform program trampled on traditional cultural values, including those associated with village life (see Nguyễn Ngọc, Nguyễn An). Like the three novels discussed here, those listed in the Appendix also highlight how the land reform program created divisions in families, work environments, and villages.

For politicians as well as writers the land reform program has become an object lesson from history about the dangers of division. In launching the correction of errors program, Hồ Chí Minh and Võ Nguyên Giáp called for unity. Almost fifty years later in a speech given in Ba Đình Square on the sixtieth anniversary of the August Revolution, former prime minister Võ Văn Kiệt echoed their cry, arguing that disunity had slowed up modernization. Speaking under a banner displaying Hồ Chí Minh’s famous slogan celebrating unity (see epigraph, p.180), he drew parallels between the land reform period and more recent history, arguing that in both periods the government turned away talented, virtuous, and patriotic individuals for no good reason, relying instead on less qualified people. In discussing people associated with the former regime Võ Văn Kiệt argued against adopting an arrogant “We’re victors, they’re losers” attitude. Instead, he said, we should invite them to join in the work of modernizing the country (2005).

5) Leftist Extremism

Finally, renovation novelists write about land reform to remind readers about the dangers of leftist extremism. It becomes the closest thing Vietnam has to the Chinese Cultural Revolution, the Cambodian massacres under Pol Pot and other horrors committed in the name of Marxist-Leninism. Thông, the school clerk in *Marriage without a License*, who loses his teaching job during the land reform program, feels thankful that at least—unlike a teacher in China also accused of being a bourgeoisie—he wasn't stripped of his clothes, painted red, and left to bake in the sun (149, 151). Writers talk about the land reform program to warn their readers, and perhaps themselves as well, that the excesses that occurred during it—or even worse excesses—could occur again if one isn't vigilant.

Vietnamese critics praise Tô Hoài's *Three Different People* for the warnings it contains, warnings that, says the novelist Nguyễn Xuân Khánh, can prevent future errors:

The writer Tô Hoài, an assistant leader of a land reform team, . . . turns his memories into literature, into good literature. How precious that is! An experience like his is sad to remember but it must be written; because it is the experience of leftist deviationism, of extremism; and anytime there is extreme leftist deviationism (tả khuynh cực đoàn) our country becomes caught up in error (2006).

Bằng Việt, a poet and chair of the Hanoi Coalition of Literature and Art, praises Tô Hoài's novel for similar reasons:

Works like *Three Different People* are hugely significant. They look in a straightforward and impartial way at our past errors. It is not only the land reform program, but also the collectivization of agriculture and the transforming of capitalist, privately-run industries and businesses. Those actions reduced our power to produce. And have even led people to worry whether the current “renovation” is real, or whether after a while the bourgeoisie will be hit again. We have to courageously look at errors; only in that way can we derive lessons for the present and the future (2006).

Conclusion: Testing the Limits of Freedom

During the American war President Nixon justified his war policy by claiming that during the land reform campaign “half a million, by conservative estimates . . . were murdered or otherwise exterminated by

the North Vietnamese.”²⁶ Most scholars now accept Moise’s estimate of 5,000 (1981, 222), and so Nixon’s was certainly not conservative. Exaggerated estimates of the number of people killed during the land reform period led to what Porter refers to as “the myth of the bloodbath” during land reform. Arguments that there would be another bloodbath if U. S. troops withdrew were common in the early 1970s.

In 1957 when people in four Catholic villages in Nghệ An Province, the homeland of Hồ Chí Minh, revolted, officials in President Ngô Đình Diệm’s government wrongly portrayed it as a revolt by peasants against the land reform program (White 1981, 407-408). A film written and produced by Vĩnh Noãn called *We Want to Live* (Chúng tôi muốn sống), which dramatizes the horrors of the land reform program, was shown in South Vietnam in 1956 and continues to be circulated by anti-communist Vietnamese in the diaspora.²⁷

Exaggerations of the land reform’s horrors in anti-communist propaganda and the reluctance of communist authorities in Vietnam to allow frank, open and unrestricted discussion of the program have probably helped it persist in the popular imagination. The writer Đỗ Hoàng Diệu, who is 31, says that by restricting discussion of land reform the government has turned it into a “con quái ợp”—a monster or boogiemán. Like many people her age, Đỗ Hoàng Diệu has heard stories about it from her parents, like one her father told her about a man suspected of belonging to the Quốc Dân Đảng who was forced to descend from a high pole made of bamboo trunks cut to expose strips as sharp as knives. But, Đỗ Hoàng Diệu says, she has never understood what really happened. Then comes Tô Hoài’s *Three Different People*, which has led her to this conclusion: “The monster is real. It lived. It ate the flesh of many children, and it seems it still exists in this land of ours. It’s not just an affectionate threat uttered by a kind mother” (2006).

But, she says, her friends really aren’t interested in land reform. Tô Hoài tells the truth and we should thank him for that, but the story he tells is a story for old men. It won’t help the country any. But there are other monsters hiding out there, Đỗ Hoàng Diệu says, that need to be written about. A desire to be free to write about any monster that threatens the country and the well-being of its citizens is a common thread connecting all of my suggestions as to why novelists have been attracted to land

²⁶ Cited in Porter (1971, 54).

²⁷ Vĩnh Noãn has written and published a book based on the film with the same title: *Chúng tôi muốn sống*. It and a DVD of the film are available in bookstores in Orange County, California.

reform as a topic. Writing about it has been a way to test the limits of freedom.

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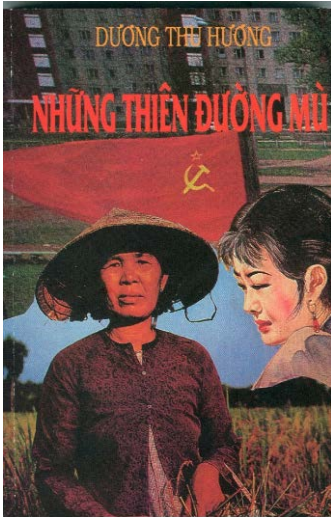
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APPENDIX

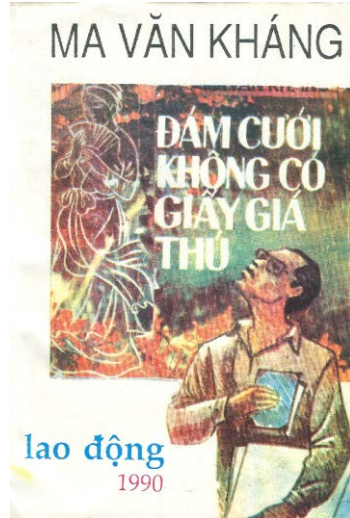
**Novels in Which the Land Reform Program
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Book Covers



Paradise of the Blind



Marriage without a License



Three Different People

