

THE COLLECTIVE AND THE INDIVIDUAL
IN
TWO POST-WAR VIETNAMESE NOVELS

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*In the late 1980s, when Vietnam's renovation policy loosened restrictions on writers, novels emerged that described the characters' private dreams and fears in much greater detail than had been done before. Two of these more inward-looking novels are analyzed here: Lê Lưu's *A Time Far Past* and Trần Mạnh Hào's *Separation*. Both novels argue that limits should be placed on "collective concern" and that individuals should have more say in choice of marriage partners and in other aspects of their lives. The article relates this argument to current issues and to past literary debates, and it considers how life and literature in Vietnam might change if collective concern becomes severely weakened.*

Until the late 1980s, Vietnam's communist leaders required novelists to support the national endeavor by authoring stereotyped works that featured typical characters and themes and that focused on the goals of the collective struggle. The liberalizations of the renovation policy announced in 1986 encouraged the appearance of more creative works such as Lê Lưu's *A Time Far Past* (Thời xa vắng), published in 1986 (Lê Lưu 1997/1986), and Trần Mạnh Hào's *Separation* (Ly thân), published in 1989 (Trần Mạnh Hào 1990/1989). These two novels deviated from previous norms by featuring atypical characters and situations, exploring the inner lives of their characters, and criticizing the collective concern that restricted the characters' individual choices. *A Time Far Past* uses the term "collective concern" (*tập thể quan tâm*) to refer to the notion that a group, or collective, should instruct an individual in how to lead his

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or her life (104). In the Confucian-influenced society of pre-revolution Vietnam, the most important collectives had been the family (*gia đình*), the extended family (*đồng họ* or *dại gia đình*), and the country (*đất nước*). Since 1945, communist leaders had been encouraging Vietnamese to be loyal instead to the nation, the Party, and party-controlled collectives such as military units and work teams. The two novels argue for limiting the family's and the party's power to restrict and direct a person's choice of marriage partner, showing that collective concern could harm individuals' lives in the same way that it had been corrupting the authenticity of Vietnamese literature. The novels' fates reveal the touchy nature of the issue: *A Time Far Past* received the highest award from the Vietnam Writers' Association, while *Separation* was confiscated soon after it was published.¹

As they highlight the tension between collective concern and individual desire the novels evoke a number of long-standing questions that affect all aspects of Vietnamese life. Is the group to concern itself solely with collective well-being? Is it to balance the needs of the individual and the group? Should it promote the well-being of individuals on the grounds that contented individuals serve the collective more effectively? Should it promote individual happiness even when the group does not benefit? And the most seditious question of all: If the way to make individuals happy is to grant them more freedom, should the collective leave them alone? These age-old questions, which the two novels raise primarily in the context of love, marriage, and the arts, are perhaps the most important ones in post-war Vietnam. Exploring how the novels address these questions can teach us a great deal about recent social

¹ A copy of *Separation* made it to France and the book was republished in Paris in 1990. The novel has never been translated. In his introduction to the Paris edition, Thi Vũ says Trần Mạnh Hào's novel "had just been on the market for a few days when it was immediately taken back. The secret police suddenly entered Printing House Number 3 at 387 Trần Hưng Đạo, District 1, Saigon and confiscated all the copies that had not yet been distributed" (Thi Vũ 1990:5). Bùi Bích Hà, writing in a California journal, says that she "doesn't believe the rumors that *Separation* was confiscated in Saigon" (1990:36). However, in July, 1999, a friend recently returned from Vietnam told me that *Separation* was still not available in bookstores in Hồ Chí Minh City.

and literary trends and about the issues likely to occupy Vietnamese in the twentieth-first century.

The tension between individually-oriented love and group-oriented duty is an old issue whose revival in post-war literature reflects young peoples' growing resistance to the involvement of the Party and the *co' quan* (state-sector workplace) in their marriage plans. Not only do the novels promote individualism by highlighting this struggle, but they also exemplify the recent emergence of works that present a more individualistic perspective by exploring the psychological lives of their characters. This emphasis on individualism has precursors in the literature of the 1930s, and some critics have even sought evidence for individualism in premodern literature. But individualism comes at a price. A previous literary move to radical individualism by the New Poets of the 1930s led to some remarkably expressive poetry but also to psychological confusion. Accustomed to collective concern, these poets found Western-style individualism attractive but destabilizing, in part because it promised freedoms that they could not, as colonial subjects, enjoy. If Vietnamese completely liberate themselves from collective concern in matters of love and marriage, the effect on life and literature will be profound. Such a development could, for example, spell the demise of the sentimental novel and usher in a more cynical literature. Yet one of the novels holds forth a less extreme possibility, suggesting that the quest for love and for truth serves both the individual and the collective.

The "Untying of the Strings" in the Late 1980s

When the second Indochina war ended in 1975, Vietnamese readers and writers anticipated that great works would be written about it. By the end of the 1970s they were already asking why none had emerged. In Hanoi, literary critics such as Nguyễn Minh Châu (1978) and Hoàng Ngọc Hiến (1979) blamed the stereotyped writing that featured typical characters and stressed collective struggle. This literary focus on the collective was required by the socialist realism that the Vietnamese communists had adopted from Soviet and Maoist sources, especially from Mao Tse-tung's (1967/1942) Yanan talks on literature and the arts. Reinforcing this emphasis on the stereotypical was the requirement laid down by Mao and by Vietnam's revolutionary leader, Hồ Chí Minh, that literature must

serve politics.² Critics suggested that while a focus on the collective and the typical was appropriate during the war, it was no longer necessary now that victory had been achieved and peace restored. The critics were particularly disturbed by the notion that literature should serve as government propaganda. The critics had to make these points indirectly, for example by alluding to socialist realism with euphemistic phrases such as “wishful realism” or “doctrinaire realism.”³ They also avoided direct attacks on the notion that literature must serve politics. Nevertheless, they felt that literature should pay attention to the private battles of particular people and should express the hopes and fears of individuals.

The literary climate became more open after Nguyễn Văn Linh, a progressive southerner, became General Secretary of the Party and announced at the Sixth Party Congress (1986) a policy of *đổi mới*, or renovation, which is sometimes referred to as Vietnam’s glasnost. Responding to an array of problems including corrupt officials, bureaucratic inefficiency, shortcomings in education and training, and the economic stagnation brought on by a rigidly centralized economy, renovation’s moves toward a market economy were accompanied by greater freedom for writers. The Hanoi leadership had apparently decided to open the pressure valve a little, avoiding an explosion of pent-up anti-government sentiment by allowing some manageable criticism.

In October, 1987, Secretary Linh called an unprecedented meeting with writers and artists. Instead of lecturing them, he asked them to explain why works since liberation were “poorer than before” (1991/1987). He received some incredibly frank explanations. The critic Hồ Ngọc for example, stated bluntly that the problem was that

² See Hồ Chí Minh’s speeches collected in *Về Công Tác Văn Hoá Văn Nghệ* [On Literary and Artistic Tasks]. See especially pages 33 and 59. In the novel *Separation*, the characters attribute this principle to Mao (Trần Mạnh Hào 1990/1989:63)

³ Nguyễn Minh Châu (1978) said Vietnamese literature had described a “hiện thực đang hy vọng” (wishful reality), not actual reality; Hoàng Ngọc Hiến (1979) said recent literature had been written according to the principle of “chủ nghĩa hiện thực phải đạo” (doctrinaire realism), which he contrasts with a literature focusing on the truths of existence.

literature had become propaganda, an instrument of politics.⁴ In response, Secretary Linh promised to “untie the strings” (*cởi trói*) a bit. He told writers that while they should not abandon socialist realism, they should feel free to “portray bad people and bad things to arouse public indignation and censure” (Nguyễn Văn Linh 1987:122). “You are engineers of the soul,” continued the Secretary. “Don’t depict people as saints. You must perceive their failings in order to make them better” (123-4). *A Time Far Past* would probably not have been published in Vietnam, and *Separation* wouldn’t have been written at all, without this untying of the strings. Written before *đổi mới* was officially inaugurated, *A Time Far Past* breaks with the socialist realism mold but refrains from strident criticism of Party policy and officials. *Separation*, on the other hand, clearly takes to heart Secretary Linh’s advice to “portray bad people and bad things.” It reads like a catalogue of communist failings, beginning with the disastrous land reform program of the mid-1950s and continuing through the New Economic Zones of the post-war era.

Collective Concern in Lê Lưu’s *A Time Far Past*

The main character of *A Time Far Past* is Giang Minh Sài, a man from the small village of Hạ Vị in northern Vietnam. In 1954, when the French are defeated at Điện Biên Phủ, the ten-year-old Sài is already married. Traditional families commonly arranged marriages when children were still young, and Sài’s father is described as having “old-fashioned Confucian attitudes” (1997/1986:6).⁵ The collective concern manifested in this arranged marriage leads to a host of problems. Sài dislikes his wife and soon falls in love with a classmate, Hương. He later joins the army, not because he loves the revolution, but primarily to get away from his wife. His exploits in the military, including the single-handed downing of an American plane, earn him the status “Emulation Soldier.”⁶ But his continued love for Hương gets him in trouble. His superiors discover that he has been keeping a diary filled with romantic fantasies (he writes

⁴ Hồ Ngọc is quoted in an article about the meeting with Secretary Linh, “Hai Ngày Đáng Ghi Nhớ Mãi” [Two Days to Remember Forever], that appeared in *Văn Nghệ* [Literature and the Arts], No. 42, Oct. 17, 1987, 1-2.

⁵ Page references are to the English translation published in 1997.

⁶ An “Emulation Soldier” (*chiến sĩ thi đua*) is a model soldier. Sài was elected to this honor within his infantry regiment (84).

that his wife has died of throat cancer and he imagines spending happy times with Hương). Because his diary “reeked of quixotic petit-bourgeois thinking” (60), they isolate Sài from new recruits until the political officer Đỗ Mạnh intervenes and establishes that Sài’s attitude toward labor and study is fine. Sài’s troubles are not over, because later his superiors demand that he love his wife as a condition for joining the Party. The superiors make it clear that they have in mind both emotional and physical love. “Can you do that?” a deputy political officer asks (85). Dutifully agreeing to love his wife, Sài returns home and gets her pregnant. This act of obedience only makes things worse. Hương had been waiting for him on the understanding that his marriage had never been consummated. When she hears that his wife is pregnant, she marries someone else. To compound his tragedy, Sài is then denied Party membership because his wife’s father had been a deputy canton chief with close ties to the French.

The political officer Đỗ Mạnh, a generally admirable character, recognizes that Sài’s chances for happiness have been destroyed by the excesses of collective concern that had been inflicted on him first by his old-fashioned Confucian parents and then by Party officials. Sài’s case troubles him:

“I must admit that I feel very depressed about this matter of ‘living other people’s lives,’ about the so-called collective concern. Feel free to demand from every individual their utmost contribution to the needs of the society and community. But as a community, our concern must take into account what he needs, what he himself is hungry or thirsty for, not what we want him to be” (104).

Sài’s superiors eventually allow him to divorce, and later he marries a city girl. This marriage also fails, but for different reasons. The woman, to whom Sài was introduced by a friend of his uncle Hà, was desperate to marry because she was secretly pregnant by an older married man with whom she had been having a long affair. Despite this new disaster, the novel ends on an optimistic note. Sài returns to his home village and becomes a very successful Chairman of Agriculture. In just three years he improves production of peanuts, potatoes, and soybeans and directs a commune that includes a daycare center and a two-story schoolhouse.

In *A Time Far Past*, the collective concern of the Party merges with that of the family: both Sài's uncle Hà and his brother Tính are Party members and important district officials, while Đỗ Mạnh, the well-meaning political officer, is a friend of the family. Promoting family harmony and administering the socialist state are one and the same enterprise. Furthermore, the army officers and Party officials are presented as admirable characters who mean well. Though the Party makes a mess of his affairs, its familial and political concern for Sài's love life is well-intentioned, unselfish, and benign.

Collective Concern in Trần Mạnh Hào's *Separation*

In Trần Mạnh Hào's *Separation* the collective concern at first appears to be similarly well-meaning, but it is later revealed to be a deliberately manipulative administrative technique wielded by officials who turn out to be cynical, corrupt, and hypocritical. Though *Separation* mocks self-criticism sessions, it is itself a work of communal self-criticism. In its attempt to expose corruption and curb extreme tendencies it would appear to be the kind of work Secretary Linh invited in his talk to writers in October, 1987.⁷ Yet the novel's post-publication suppression also reveals the Party's discomfort with such criticism.⁸

⁷ Some members of the Vietnamese exile community have detected this aspect of *Separation* and have warned against considering the novel "dissident literature" (*văn chương phản kháng*). Bùi Bích Hà (1990), for example, argues that the gun that Trần Mạnh Hào uses in *Separation* to expose official misdeeds "is only a fake gun, the effect of which is to make things prettier, to increase—not to damage—the prestige of the regime in the eyes of the people" (36). Recent reports from Vietnam that Trần Mạnh Hào has made an abrupt turn and is now aligned with conservative elements within the Party have made Vietnamese exiles even more suspicious of his motives in writing *Separation*. Other exile critics—Vũ Huy Quang (1990) and Thi Vũ (1990), for example—are more willing to accept *Separation* as the work of a true dissident.

⁸ It seems clear that while in *Separation* Trần Mạnh Hào did not criticize communist society enough to satisfy all exile dissidents, he criticized it too much to please the authorities in Vietnam. In a vitriolic review published in 1990, Hanoi critic Lê Thành Nghị faults *Separation* for its one-sided, completely negative view of people and programs during the two wars of resistance. "[B]ecoming excessively angry at the past is not the way to become a renovation writer," this critic says. "Literature can write about the

Separation is the fictitious autobiography of a man named Trần Hưng. Born in 1928, Hưng fights bravely in the war against the French, especially after he gets the news (untrue, he learns later) that his girlfriend has married someone else. As a reward for his heroism, he is admitted into the Vietnam Workers' Party at the young age of nineteen. Hưng is wounded twice in the war, once in 1947 and once in 1953. His second injury is too serious to allow him to return to his unit and he is assigned to write for *Victory*, his division's newspaper.

Hưng's supervisor, the paper's general editor, is a model cadre named Trầng Giang whom the narrator portrays as a paragon of collectivism who had purged himself of all petit bourgeois individualism. "Trầng Giang had almost nothing left that was personal to him," says Hưng. "His entire life, both materially and spiritually, belonged to the organization, to the collective" (61).⁹

Hưng admires Trầng Giang but soon realizes that Trầng Giang's devotion to the collective has reached absurd proportions. Trầng Giang is such a caricature that his prominence directs the novel's attack not at socialism or communism as a system but rather at the system's excesses. In one scene Trầng Giang, in a dramatic show of contrition, owns up to taking a tasty morsel from a communal plate (73). In another passage, after the Geneva accords had removed the threat of bombing, Trầng Giang is disturbed that the men of Hưng's unit are going out alone to contemplate the full moon in solitude. The arch collectivist Trầng Giang tells his men that "only the exploiting classes, only the feudal colonialists withdraw into their individual minds when they are happy, when they watch a flower bloom, when they wait for the moon to rise." But we are socialists, he continues, and "in our collectivist ideology there is no private ownership" (82). He organizes a collective viewing of the moon in which the men sit together quietly and listen to the advice of a

missteps and wrongs of our society, but the challenge is to make sure one's book doesn't give people the idea that these wrongs belong to the nature of the society, to the system of thought. . . . Literature opens up painful wounds, but in doing so it must make readers healthy; it must make them believe that today is better than yesterday" (99-100).

⁹ Page references are to the Vietnamese-language edition republished in France.

"collectivist moon," which Trầng Giang personifies and calls "comrade political official."

A key event in Hưंग's life is the land reform campaign of the mid-1950s, a program that Hanoi leaders later admit was mishandled. During this campaign Hưंग's father is accused of being a landowner, though he is only a moderately successful farmer. In addition, Hưंग's girlfriend's father is falsely accused of being a reactionary spy, and the girlfriend, Oanh, is reactionary by association. Hưंग denounces his father and his "bourgeois" girl friend in order to save his father from death and prevent his own expulsion from the Party. In this act, Hưंग says, he "abandons his own nature in order to follow the organization" (96).

After this event, Hưंग becomes a cooperative tool of the Party, which he variously calls the "collective" or the "organization." His superiors order him to write a series of novels, the first being a work based on his own experience that illustrates and promotes the land reform campaign. Hưंग dutifully produces a thinly disguised autobiography featuring a character who abandons his landowner father and his reactionary girl friend.

While he is working on this novel, the Party assigns a girl to serve him food and clean his room. This girl, whose name—Mộng Ruộng—means "Dream of Rice Fields," is a poster girl for the land reform program. Her parents had died of starvation and a landowner had tried to rape her, but she was saved by guerrilla soldiers and nurtured by the Party. Hưंग knows that his superiors hope that Ruộng will take his attentions away from Oanh and thereby "proletarianize his love" (107) so that he will continue propagandizing for the Party. He finds Ruộng physically unattractive and objects to her blind allegiance to Marxist dogma, but in a moment of weakness he kisses her and then decides to marry her for fear that otherwise he'll be accused of taking advantage of her.

Hưंग's loveless marriage to Mộng Ruộng destroys his hopes for a happy life. Furthermore, the programs in support of which he writes—the land reform campaign of the 1950s, the collectivization of agriculture, and the New Economic Zones—are all revealed later to be failures. Hưंग undergoes reeducation through forced labor for his role in promoting the first of these. To make matters worse, when the American war ends, his superiors abandon their revolutionary virtues and begin living like the mandarins of colonial times. Revolutionary cadres used to be described by the popular slogan,

“First to suffer hardships, last to enjoy pleasures.” In Trần Mạnh Hào’s post-war Vietnam, aging revolutionaries and Party leaders such as Trầg Giang have reversed the priorities. Trầg Giang’s new young wife is described as having been born “not for revolutionary work but for the work of the bed” (168). In another passage, Trầg Giang has become so absorbed in promoting a book of his own mediocre poetry that he can’t be bothered when told of a granary fire and a pest-infested rice harvest (281-82).

In *Separation* collective concern destroys not only love and individual happiness but also literature. *Separation* is an answer to Secretary Linh’s question: Why are no great works being written? The narrator learns from hard experience that neither loving nor writing can be done according to instructions from a collective. Remembering Trầg Giang’s early praise for Chairman Mao’s lectures on literature and art, particularly his point about literature being an instrument that must serve politics (63), Hưg comments that for thirty-odd years he has tried to write according to these edicts but never produced anything of lasting value.

Hưg’s sober assessment of his own output applies only to works that have been published up to that point. He does produce two honest works, which, if published, might be judged to have lasting value. *Living Next to the Dead*, a novelistic account of the Resistance War against the French, was written in response to a suggestion by Trầg Giang. In this novel Hưg sought to portray war realistically as tragic, not fun, while highlighting the individual soldier’s often-lost struggle with cowardice and selfishness. His novel describes soldiers who fight heroically in many battles but then, finally losing this internal battle with cowardice, desert or surrender to the enemy. The cultural division of the secret police prohibits publication, objecting particularly to the novel’s portrayal of some soldiers as cowards. When Hưg insists that some soldiers indeed act cowardly, the police throw Engels’s definition of literature at him: “Literature is typical characters in typical situations, don’t you get that? If you write that our soldiers surrender that means our army surrenders” (124).

The other honest work, which has purportedly made its way into the reader’s own hands, is an autobiography titled *Separation*. Hưg wrote this work after he had bravely separated from his wife and

from his acquiescence to the Party's direction.¹⁰ For most of the novel, Hưng, like Sài in *A Time Far Past*, has been a hero on the battlefield but a coward in his personal life. His writing of *Separation* is an act of belated heroism on his own behalf, a decision to find freedom through a devotion to revealing the truth.

Earlier, Hưng's fear of the collective had estranged him from both truth and freedom. Hưng had been keeping a diary in which he secretly wrote sad, romantic poems that he feared would get him in trouble with the "organization." His wife seized this diary and threatened to turn it over to the cultural police if he didn't at least pretend to be a proper husband. She was seeking a high position within the Party and needed the appearance of a happy marriage in order to get the promotion. Her blackmail worked for a while, but Hưng eventually conquered his fear, separated from her, and began to write a novel in which he confesses all and cleanses his soul. At the end of the book Hưng is in conversation with his rebellious daughter, who bears his hopes for the future. She has conceived a child with a young writer who, as courageous as Hưng is cowardly, has been killed in prison for writing the truth. This couple and their child are described as "precious products of the Revolution" (273).

While the novel *Separation* expresses hope for more literary freedom, it provides evidence that the hope may be wishful thinking. Hưng's novel about the war with the French never gets published, the outspoken writer whom his daughter loves is killed in prison, and when the book ends it is not certain if the fictional *Separation* will ever be published. The real-life novel suffered similar difficulty, being confiscated soon after it began to be distributed, though not before a copy reached Paris.¹¹ Both in fiction and in real life, collective concern definitely still meant concern for the collective's well-being at the expense of the individual writer's freedom.

¹⁰ The work's title refers to "marital separation," that is, a situation in which a husband and wife are legally married but do not live together. Thi Vũ suggests that since Hưng's wife is so closely associated with the Party, the "separation" of the title refers also to separation from the Party (1990: 24). Those who do not see Trần Mạnh Hào as a true dissident (see note 6) would probably not interpret the title in this way.

¹¹ See note 1.

Love and Duty in Law and Literature

Community concern about choice of lovers is common throughout the world, but its application in these novels has particularly Vietnamese resonances. Throughout the ages stories from all cultures have featured couples whose love is not condoned by parents or existing social rules. Romeo and Juliet had problems with collective concern. Many traditional Vietnamese stories likewise featured a young man and a young woman who loved each other but could not marry because their parents had arranged for them to marry other people. In those traditional stories it was usually the family that controlled whom young people would marry, while in *A Time Far Past* and *Separation* it is the Party that blocks the way to love and happiness.

In traditional Vietnam a girl's parents sought to arrange marriage alliances with families that were materially and socially equal or superior. Traditional marriages exchanged a daughter for a brideprice paid by the husband's family. When a newly married woman moved in with her husband's family, she was expected to serve her mother-in-law even more respectfully and obediently than she had served her own mother. This family system was justified by references to Confucianism, that collectivist system of social relations against which Vietnamese are constantly rebelling. Confucianism is based on hierarchical bonds between king and subject, parent and child, and husband and wife, with each bond being an extension of the others. The system honors obedience, not individual initiative. Accordingly, the bride's submissiveness to her new family was justified by reference to Confucian teachings.

The communists objected on several grounds to the customs and rules of the traditional Confucian family, including the custom of arranged marriages. First, for the communist revolutionaries, the traditional family was an outdated remnant of feudalism, because the Confucian stress on loyalty to the emperor was an extension of loyalty to parents. Second, because the tight-knit Vietnamese family directed attention primarily to king and to kin, it hampered the communists' goal of fostering loyalty to new social formations. Communist leaders addressed these conventions by redirecting toward country and people the Confucian loyalty (*trung*) previously directed toward king and the filial piety (*hiếu*) previously directed toward the family. "Be loyal (*trung*) to the Party and pious (*hiếu*) to the people," Hồ Chí Minh would tell revolutionary troops, using the traditional Confucian terms. Yet even while they considered the

traditional Vietnamese family a remnant of feudalism, the communists also viewed it through the lens of Marx and Engels's critique of the bourgeois family. As such, the traditional Vietnamese family system was objectionable because it was associated with accumulation of private property, usually in the hands of the husband, and because it perpetuated inequalities such as the exploitation and oppression of women (Phạm Văn Bích 1999:48).

The revolutionaries consequently enacted several liberalizing reforms, but owing to their desire to forge a Party of loyal and like-thinking members the communist leaders also undercut some of the liberalizing measures. The 1946 Constitution and later decrees outlawed forced marriages and polygamy (Phạm Văn Bích 1999:57-58). Yet according to Hoàng Văn Chí, these progressive guarantees were followed by a 1951 decree that gave the Party a strong say in whom soldiers and Party members could marry. The decree stipulated that "cadres of village level and soldiers must inform the party before they marry, that cadres of district and provincial levels and non-commissioned officers must obtain the party's agreement to their marriages, and that the marriage arrangements of high-ranking officials in the party and of officers in the People's Army are the party's affair" (Hoàng Văn Chí 1964:145).

The 1960 Law on Marriage and the Family took liberalization further by allowing young people to choose their own marriage partners, and by banning child marriages, bride-price, and wife-beating (Phạm Văn Bích 1999:57-58). As Phạm Văn Bích notes, this 1960 law "emphasized first of all the principle of free choice of marriage partner, monogamy, equality between husband and wife, and the protection of women's and children's interests" (1999:58). However, the two novels suggest that even after 1960 soldiers and Party members were limited in their choice of marriage partners, because the Party had taken on itself the role once played by the family. Characters in the two novels comment on this change. In thanking Sài's superiors for finally getting Sài to love his wife, Sài's mother acknowledges that a "word from the superiors is worth more than tens of thousands of words from parents, brothers and sisters at home" (95). Hưng's friend Hai Giôn complains that the "organization" is even stricter about the marriage choices of its members than the Confucian elders had ever been with their daughters (110).

I do not mean to suggest that governmental interference with individual choice of mates is unique to Vietnam. In both these novels the primary victims of collective concern are soldiers, and even in individualist America soldiers are not free to love whomever they wish. While I was reading these works, American officers were being expelled from the military because their superiors objected to their choice of lovers. Yet, unlike in these two novels, the American military's interference does not go so far as to direct the soldiers' selection of civilian spouses. Even if it did, the situations in the two novels would still resonate as uniquely Vietnamese, for as it took on the directive role once reserved for the family's elders, the Party replicated the Confucian conventions that it sought to displace.

Many modern Vietnamese novels have criticized family involvement in personal marital choices, and the two novels extend this criticism to the Party. Many prewar stories attacked not only parentally-arranged marriages but also the mother-in-law's dictatorial power over her daughter-in-law. In Nhất Linh's 1935 novel *Đoạn Tuyệt* [Breaking Off],¹² which is perhaps the most famous modern Vietnamese novel, the heroine Loan's life is nearly destroyed when her family forces her to marry a man she doesn't even know. Our authors Lê Lưu and Trần Mạnh Hào are cut from different political cloth than the anti-communist nationalist author of *Breaking Off*, but they share with him an aversion to anyone—parent or Party official—who would tell people whom they should love and marry. In *A Time Far Past*, Sài's family arranges a poor marriage for him, and the Party makes things worse when it tries to intervene. In *Separation* the Party achieves equally poor results when, acting in place of the traditional family, it arranges for Ruộng to be Hưng's mate.

Even when they are not explicitly attacking traditional family structures, Vietnamese stories are persistently romantic statements of faith in the ability of individuals—if freed from collective concern—to select life partners with whom they can build happy lives. Vietnamese sometimes contrast the competing virtues of "*ái tình*" (love) and "*nghĩa vụ*" (duty). In their dreams and in the literature that embodies those dreams there is always the possibility

¹² The novel and its famous author are discussed by Jamieson (1993), who translates long excerpts. The full novel has been translated by James Banerian (Nhất Linh 1997/1935).

of *af tình*, of finding one's soul mate and living happily ever after. However, because the Vietnamese are never free from collective concern, and because they also feel a strong sense of duty to parents and society, their faith in love is rarely tested. Both the tension and its typical outcome are exemplified in *The Tale of Kiều* (Nguyễn Du 1983/c.1800), in which Thúy Kiều, the most beloved of Vietnamese heroines, has to choose between her love for Kim and her duty to help her father, who has been falsely accused of a crime. Deciding that duty to parents is a "heavier" virtue than her love for Kim, she marries a man she does not love in order to obtain a bride payment that she can use to save her father.¹³ The tension is also illustrated in the pre-war works of the New Poets Xuân Diệu and Lưu Trọng Lư¹⁴ and in Hoàng Ngọc Phách's sentimental novel *Tổ Tâm* [Pure Heart] (1963/1925)¹⁵ about a girl who died of a broken heart because her parents would not let her marry the man she loved.

A Time Far Past and *Separation* portray people making similarly difficult choices between love and duty. Both novels can be seen as romantic stories of lovers unjustly kept apart by the rules of society. In this sense, the novels are similar to pre-war works that communist critics had rejected as examples of self-absorbed, bourgeois romanticism. However, in contrast to those earlier works, the novels suggest that even society would have been better off had the main characters been free to choose love over duty. The forbidden women Hương and Oanh are admirable characters who wish to serve their country, and both are more admirable than the unwanted mates that the collective chooses for Sài and Hưng. The "bourgeois" Oanh, for example, is active in the resistance against the

¹³ The particular duty that Thúy Kiều demonstrates is filial piety (hiếu).

¹⁴ For English translations of some of Xuân Diệu's poems, see Huỳnh Sanh Thông (1996) and Nguyễn Khắc Viện and Hữu Ngọc (1983?: 661-667). I translated three poems of Lưu Trọng Lư, including his most famous, "Tiếng thu" (The Sound of Autumn), for a collection edited by Jacqui Chagnon and Don Luce (1974:27-29). For a translation of "Tiếng thu II" (The Sound of Autumn II), which Lưu Trọng Lư wrote in reply to his earlier pre-war poem, see Nguyễn Khắc Viện and Hữu Ngọc (1983?: 604). Additional discussion of the New Poets appears below, beginning with the section titled "Vietnamese Literature and the First Appearance of 'I.'"

¹⁵ For critical discussion of this novel, which has not been translated, see Cao thị Như-Quỳnh and John C. Schafer (1988).

French. She later becomes a doctor and is killed while trying to aid victims of an American bombing raid. During the land reform campaign, as she says from her grave, "they cut me off from the revolution, but I was the revolution" (145).

Why not rebel against collective concern? The question is raised in both novels. As Political Officer Đỗ Mạnh asks Sài, "Why couldn't you openly say, 'This is a coercive situation. My feelings will not allow me to live with that woman?'" (140). Speaking from the grave, Oanh similarly wonders why Hưng, who had been so brave in battle, had surrendered so easily on the "battleground of conscience" (145). In both works the main characters eventually realize that though they may have been victims of collective concern, they might have avoided tragedy had they taken more responsibility for their own lives. The trouble with a collective making decisions for you, whether that collective is one's Confucian family or the Party, is that you may never learn to make decisions for yourself.

Rebellion against the Workplace as Matchmaker

In recent years the Vietnamese have indeed been rebelling against the Party's self-appointed role of matchmaker. Until recently the Party was not only taking a direct interest in the selection of soldiers' and officials' spouses, but it was also playing an indirect role in the marriage choices of other Vietnamese. Phạm Văn Bích's study of the Vietnamese family suggests that for state employees who worked in urban areas, not all of whom would be Party members, the "*co quan*," or workplace in the state sector, played a crucial role in spouse selection.¹⁶ Employment in the state-sector workplace, especially in urban areas, was desirable because it provided opportunities for social mobility and for obtaining material benefits such as housing, coupons for food and clothes, access to health care, and travel permits (1999:132-38). Because of the advantages accruing from employment in state-sector positions, many young people were "instructed by their parents to choose another state employee as a

¹⁶ In his analysis of the role of the workplace in choice of marital partners, Phạm Văn Bích relies heavily on research by Belanger and Khuat Thu Hong (1995), which focuses only on state employees in urban areas. Phạm Văn Bích's supplements this material with references to his personal experience (he lived in Hanoi until at least 1993) and to studies, including one by Binh Minh (1991), that focus on rural families. However, his analysis is most reliable for urban areas.

marriage partner. Another frequent practice was for people to choose their marital partner themselves, then report to their workplace, which would approve or disapprove of their choice on the ground of class endogamy" (138). There were some advantages to marrying a state employee. The workplace sometimes helped an employee find a spouse and helped him or her keep wedding expenses down. However, whether the workplace would typically intervene as directly as it does in Trần Mạnh Hào's novel is a question that, Phạm Văn Bích says, "needs to be confirmed by hard scholarly evidence which is not yet available" (138)¹⁷

Thus, at the time the two novels were published, Party officials at the workplace sometimes played a more paternalistic role than did the parents. Yet though peoples' cooperation with the Party's direction seemed voluntary, the novels' contents suggest that many had been silently objecting to the workplace's interference. In the late 1980s resistance to that interference was becoming more obvious. During the war many Vietnamese had followed Hồ Chí Minh's model by sacrificing family life for national life. Protests against state-sector interference had been muted either because people feared the Party or because they accepted the message that they had to suppress their individual dreams, purge themselves of all soft bourgeois emotions, and dedicate themselves to achieving the grandiose collective dream of independence and freedom from foreign domination. After the war, young people became less willing to suppress their individual dreams. Now that peace had come, they were more reluctant to accept Hồ Chí Minh's redefinition of family, a formulation which directed attention to "the people" or (in some versions) the working-class people of the entire world, yet which somehow overlooked concrete family members (see Phạm Văn Bích 1999: 60). After 1986, under the new freedoms of renovation, they began openly practicing individual choice. These changing attitudes increased resistance to state interference in personal marital choices.

In recent years the desire for individual choice has become ever more obvious, as there has been a trend away from the state involvement and toward family-ratified individual choice of spouse. In the late 1980s, the state sector became less important in people's

¹⁷ Hưng is a Party member. Perhaps the Party interfered more directly in his marriage plans than it would in the plans of a state worker who was not a member of the Party.

economic and social lives. With the promotion of a market economy, young people could find work and marriage partners in the private sectors instead of relying on the state agency. According to Phạm Văn Bích, in urban areas young people now choose their own partners but get their parents' approval (139-40). This convention is a compromise between the traditional marriage arranged by parents and the western-style modern marriage arranged solely by the young people.

Yet in the midst of this change the state continued trying to impose norms of family life. The 1987 Law on Marriage and the Family represents a more positive view of the family than that promulgated during the war. It saw family loyalties not as obstacles on the road to socialism but as ways of hastening the journey. But the family must be a socialist or "new culture family" based on equality, not the hierarchical "feudal" family:

In the socialist family, husband and wife are equal, love and help each other to make progress in all aspects, actively participate in socialist construction and national defence, and bring up their children to become useful members of society.
(1987 Marriage and Family Law)

This sounds promising until one realizes that the law's requirement of harmonious socialist family life is similar to the collective concern that motivates Hưng's wife to blackmail him into staying with her against his will. Thus the state-directed collective concern protested by the two novels remains an important force in contemporary Vietnam.

From Outward-looking to Inward-looking

The two novels exemplify individualism not only in their views on marriage and family but also in their selection of detail and in their very manner of presentation. In the early 1990s, Hanoi literary critics identified the 1980s as a time when writing became "inward-looking" (*hướng nội*). They mentioned Lê Lưu and Trần Mạnh Hào—especially Lê Lưu—as pioneers of a new kind of novel that distinguished itself by being inward-looking. According to Nguyễn Ngọc Thiện, *A Time Far Past* "marked a movement to a new literary period" because it "'tried to describe life and people just as they were—hectic, various, multifaceted, and often complicated and

irrational'" (31).¹⁸ The development was also noted by Nguyễn Ngọc, then the head of the creative section of the Writers' Association, who wrote in 1990,

Literature [now] pays more careful attention to a person as a rich and individual world—complicated, multifaceted, multidimensional, and multi-layered—who relates in many also complicated and multifaceted ways to the whole society and to himself or herself. (Previously it concentrated only on seeing a person at the level of citizen and stressed that citizen's relations to society.) One can say that literature has become more inward-looking, more directed at the complicated inner world of a person. (Quoted by Nguyễn Ngọc Thiện 1990:31)

In addition to our two novels, Nguyễn Ngọc points to the example of Bảo Ninh's (1990) *Nỗi buồn chiến tranh* (The Sorrow of War), which explores the inner world of Kiên, a war veteran haunted by memories of lost comrades and overcome by nostalgia for a more innocent time before the war. Also said to fit the inward-looking category was Dương Thu Hương's (1988) *Những Thiên Đường Mù* (Paradise of the Blind).¹⁹

Nguyễn Ngọc (1991) sees the inward-looking novel replacing another kind of post-1975 work that he calls "tiểu thuyết phóng sự" (novels of reportage). "Phóng sự" resembles what Anglo-American critics call new journalism: it contains a great deal of realistic description and blurs the distinction between fiction and non-fiction prose. Often it is used to expose societal evils and government malfeasance. However, it criticizes society without revealing the inner worlds of characters. As examples of this type of novel Nguyễn Ngọc mentions three novels: two 1983 works by Nguyễn Mạnh Tuấn—*Đứng trước biển* (Standing Facing the Sea) and *Cù lao Tràm* (The Mangrove Island)—and Nguyễn Khắc Trường's (1990) *Mảnh đất lắm người nhiều ma* (Land of Lots of People and Many Ghosts).²⁰ These three novels detail the corruption and incompetence of officials in rural Vietnam after the war. By presenting Party officials

¹⁸ Nguyễn Ngọc Thiện quotes another critic, Hồ Phương.

¹⁹ Both these novels have been translated into English. See the references list for details.

²⁰ None of these novels has been translated into English.

as less than heroic, these “journalistic” novels differed from works of socialist realism written during the war, but, in the words of Nguyễn Ngọc, they presented “a picture of society” without exploring the inner world of individuals (13). In some ways, *Separation* fits this category, for Hưng appears at times to be not a living, breathing person, but rather a narrative device that the author uses to lead us, in journalistic fashion, through a history of Party errors and excesses.²¹ But, as we will soon see, in other ways *Separation* is inward-looking.

The critic Huỳnh Như Phương (1991) sees the inward-looking novel as another step in the “democratization” of literature. Now that the war is over, he says, writers no longer pose the problem of sacrificing individual happiness for a great undertaking. Instead they describe “the search for individual happiness and the thirst for love between a man and a woman” (15). According to Huỳnh Như Phương, Lê Lựu and other writers are suggesting that even while engaged in a great undertaking we should never forget the importance of individual happiness:

In considering both the responsibility of the individual in regard to society and the responsibility of society in regard to the fate and happiness of the individual, we shouldn't view one as lighter than the other. Humanity and the democracy of literature rest on that point, on the realization that the individual is not the fuel of history but rather its center and driving force. (15)

Huỳnh Như Phương identifies the widespread use of the diary motif in current novels, including *A Time Far Past* and *Separation*, as a sign of increased respect for the inner **life of individuals**. In *A Time Far Past*, after Sài's diary is discovered, Đỗ Mạnh lashes out at superior officers for invading Sài's privacy. How would you like it, he asks them, if I seized all your letters to your wives and lovers? “Our law stipulates a certain freedom for all people, and you have violated this principle. Who instructed you to politicize others' thoughts in this way?” (61). In *Separation*, Hưng also keeps a diary, the very diary his wife uses to blackmail him. The truth-revealing

²¹ According to the critic Bùi Bích Hà (1990:36), “In grammar and style Trần Mạnh Hào in this novel [*Separation*] tends toward reportage [phóng sự]

autobiography he later writes, *Separation*, is written in the first person: in a way yet another diary.

Separation emphasizes the irrepressible and uncontrollable inner life of individuals in yet other ways. When ordered to participate in the collective viewing of "comrade moon," Hưng looks at his fellow soldiers and observes: "Their eyes gaze at the moon but it's not certain the moon is on their mind." As for himself, he says, "I had a private moon of my own"—his beloved Oanh (82). When he requests from the arch collectivist Trầng Giang permission to visit Oanh, who is studying medicine in a nearby town, Trầng Giang tells him that he can go, but that he shouldn't kiss her. "Forget private matters and serve the organization," he instructs. Hưng can't restrain himself, and he kisses Oanh passionately and clumsily, "like a buffalo bites an ear of corn" (72). Later, speaking to Hưng from her grave, Oanh says that "people can direct the material life of a person, putting them in the framework of the organization, but they can't control the inner life, not the life of feeling" (150).

Vietnamese Literature and the First Appearance of "I"

How new is this attention to the individual, the "I," in the history of Vietnamese literature? The question has provoked controversy and confusion. Some critics—both Vietnamese and Western—have suggested that the "I" arrived in the 1930s with the romantic verse now known as New Poetry, with the novels of the Self-Strength Group, and with new forms of reportage and autobiography.²² All these developments were the result of French influence, as Vietnamese writers who had read French literature in Franco-Vietnamese schools were beginning to experiment with new styles and genres. In 1942, in a now-famous work of literary criticism, two brothers from Huế, Hoài Thanh and Hoài Chân, published an influential critical anthology of Vietnamese New Poetry. As these critics make clear, the 1930s New Poets (a group including Xuân

²² For critical discussion of the New Poets, see Jamieson (1992) and Jamieson (1993: Chapters 3 and 4, 100-233). For more on the Self-Strength Group, see Jamieson (1993:111-159 and *passim*). For examples of new forms of reportage and autobiography, see the selections in Lockhart (1996). In his introduction to this collection, Lockhart discusses the arrival of the "active 'I'" which he associates with the destruction of the monarchy and the emergence of lower working classes in cities.

Diệu, Huy Cận, and Lưu Trọng Lư, among others) were influenced not by the French poets of their own period but by the symbolists and romantics of the nineteenth century—Chateaubriand, Lamartine, Vigny, and Musset, for example. The highly romantic New Poets abandoned the restraint and rigid rules of traditional Vietnamese prosody. Their poems were wildly exuberant and emotional cries of the heart.

As Hoài Thanh and Hoài Chân tell the story, a great deal of the New Poets' exuberance derived from their discovery of the individual perspective, a perspective supposedly new to Vietnamese literature:

The first day—who can say exactly what day it was—that the word “I” appeared in Vietnamese poetry it was truly surprised. It was as if it were lost in a strange land. This is because it brought with it a perspective that had not been seen in this country: the individual perspective. Since ancient times there was no individual in Vietnamese society. There was only the collective: a large one, the country, and a small one, the family. As for the individual, the individual aspect was submerged in the family and in the country like a drop of water in the sea. (51-52)

This argument for the recent appearance of the individual perspective would seem to be supported by the simultaneous appearance of first-person narration and the generalized first-person pronoun. The first-person point of view was rare in “classical” Vietnamese literature. Traditional Vietnamese storytellers presented their stories as third-person retellings of ancient tales, not as completely original first-person accounts of their own life and times. “By lamplight turn these scented leaves and read a tale of love recorded in old books,” is the way Nguyễn Du introduces his purported retelling of an old story in his verse narrative *The Tale of Kiều*.²³ Even modern prose novelists have preferred the third person to the first person. This preference for the third person was rooted

²³ This is Huỳnh Sanh Thông's translation of *The Tale of Kiều*, p. 3. A note explains that in ancient China events were recorded on green bamboo slips. Hence the reference to “leaves” (169). For a discussion of the differences between traditional verse narratives such as *The Tale of Kiều* and the modern Vietnamese novel, see Cao thị Như-Quỳnh and John C. Schafer (1988).

partly in the Vietnamese language. In pre-modern Vietnam there was no generalized first-person pronoun. The first person pronoun used today, “tôi,” meant “servant” or “subject” and until recently writers found it too self-deprecatory. As Phan Khôi noted in 1930, writers avoided the word because they felt that “‘I’ (tôi) is the way slaves refer to themselves” (1930:13). Consequently, in order for the pronoun “tôi” to become available for use by modern writers, it had to be sprung loose from its associations with a hierarchical and monarchical world order. This did not happen until the 1930s (see Lockhart 1996: 6-13).

Despite this avoidance of the narrative and linguistic forms that Western literatures use to mark individualism, some Vietnamese critics, including novelist Trần Mạnh Hào (1996), argue that a form of individualism has been evident in Vietnamese literature all along. For example, Trần Mạnh Hào argues that the assumption that the individual perspective was introduced by the New Poetry is an error inspired by wrongly equating French “classicism” with Vietnamese classical literature, *văn học cổ điển*. Just as French classicism was succeeded by French romanticism, so also was Vietnamese classical literature followed by the New Poets who drew on those very French romantics. Consequently, many people have assumed that the Vietnamese classical literature, which lacked the linguistic forms of “I,” must have been as anti-individualistic and anti-emotional as the French classical school. Trần Mạnh Hào argues that while the equation of romanticism and New Poetry is a just one, the equation of the two types of classical literature misses the mark. French classicism truly expressed an emotionally distanced approach to literary expression, but the same is not true of the so-called Vietnamese classical literature. French classicism may have been deliberately “phi ngã” (free of self), or “non-moi.” It may have glorified reason and ignored individual feelings. But Vietnamese literature was not like this. Trần Mạnh Hào argues that Vietnamese classical literature—a diverse collection of pre-twentieth century materials that encompassed ancient myths, folk poetry (*ca dao*), and nineteenth century verse narratives—gave expression to the people’s yearnings for freedom, self-expression, and individualistic development:

The feudal regime did not recognize the individual, but literature expressed the yearning for individual liberation,

demanded the right of people to develop as individuals, to express their individualism. *The Tale of Kiều* by Nguyễn Du, the most celebrated literary work of our people, is primarily a call for individualism, for the liberation of the individual from the doctrine of feudalism. (65)

Trần Mạnh Hào's position is controversial. His case is strongest if we consider individualism in a psychological vein rather than in terms of literary forms. Traditional writers certainly expressed the moods, emotions, and feelings of their characters. Folk poetry and verse narratives powerfully expressed both the joys and sorrows of love. Yet traditional stories were not psychological in the same way as modern stories. For example, in *The Tale of Kiều*, Nguyễn Du used forms that allowed him to convey inner feelings more effectively than did poets who favored the old style. He wrote in a popular verse form called *lục bát*,²⁴ which was used also for folk poetry, and he employed colloquial expressions and folk idioms. Nevertheless, he was limited by poetic conventions. Nguyễn Du conveyed Kiều's moods not through inner first-person monologues but through poetic diction and by means of allusions to well-known Sino-Vietnamese texts. Kiều's emotions were therefore filtered through the language and rhythms of a fixed poetic form with rigid rules regarding meter and placement of tones. Even poetry written in the *lục bát* form tends to purify feelings and present them as objects for aesthetic appreciation. When the critic Nguyễn Ngọc Thiện argues that one of the distinguishing features of the verse narrative genre—of which *Tale of Kiều* is the most famous example—is its tendency “to devote little attention to the exploitation of the inner feelings of characters” (32), he is probably referring to the genre's stylistic constraints. Yet the *Tale's* popularity with later lovers suggests that the epic's emotions resonate with individuals' experience despite that emotion's expression through meter and allusion.

By arguing that individualism existed in classical literature, Trần Mạnh Hào makes more palatable his own plea for greater tolerance of individuality in life and literature. To a Marxist-Leninist like Trần

²⁴ The Vietnamese term “*lục bát*” means “six-eight” and refers to the number of syllables in the first and second lines of a couplet, the constituent unit of poems employing this verse form. For a good discussion of Vietnamese verse forms, see Huỳnh Sanh Thông 1996:1-25.

Mạnh Hào's character Trầg Giang, individualism is a petty bourgeois quality associated with Western colonialism. Trần Mạnh Hào evades the charge by finding individualism also in folk poetry and in the popular *Tale of Kiều*. Trần Mạnh Hào implies thereby that over the whole of Vietnamese literary history it is not individualism but obsession with collectivism that is the aberration; his novel *Separation* implies furthermore that the most recent form of this aberration was not even Vietnamese in origin, since it was introduced by Chairman Mao's Yanan lectures.

The End of Sentimentalism?

I said earlier that because Vietnamese are never free from collective concern, and because they also feel a strong sense of duty to parents and society, their faith in love is rarely tested. This collective experience of the romantic ideal of unrequited love may explain why Vietnamese literary works have been so persistently sentimental. If this is so, then the increased personal freedoms of recent years may spell the end of literary sentimentalism.

Separation remains romantic, but *A Time Far Past* does not. The latter novel includes scenes suggesting that freedom from collective concern won't guarantee happy marriages, and it presents an unsentimental view of sexual freedom. In *A Time Far Past* Sài enters his second marriage fairly free of interference from family or Party, yet the marriage is a disaster because his spouse had secretly been maneuvering to avoid the public disgrace of a pregnancy gotten through her affair with another man. The novel also includes a passage that paints the following bleak picture of the world the new sexual freedoms have created:

In the late morning, in offices all across the city, it was common for people to be absent from their desks. Lovers usually scheduled their rendezvous during these times. With parents at work and children in daycare or school, the collective housing projects were as deserted as graveyards. For a few hours, lovers had their privacy in these apartments. Then, they returned to their work and became, once again, respectable members of the community. (158)

These noontime liaisons in the housing projects appear unromantic and dreary—affairs driven more by lust than love.

A Time Far Past is not the only post-renovation work to hint that the new freedoms have created new problems. In a celebrated and controversial short story by Nguyễn Huy Thiệp (1992/1987), a woman employed in a maternity hospital brings home aborted fetuses to feed to Alsatian dogs that she is selling to make extra money. Though the availability of the fetuses may indicate poor family planning rather than the adulterous encounters mentioned above, Nguyễn Huy Thiệp's story nevertheless hints at coming troubles as the Vietnamese adapt to new sexual and economic freedoms.

In an environment in which all liaisons are possible and in which people freed from collective concern make their own bad choices in marriage, perhaps cynicism, irony, or despair will replace sentimentalism as the dominant mood of Vietnamese fiction. Should sentimentalism pass away, Vietnamese writers and readers may soon wax nostalgic for collective concern.

Swings of the Pendulum

Of course, it is hard to imagine Vietnam becoming an individualist culture. Vietnamese see themselves not as free-floating ions but as particles constrained by a network of social bonds. Their language reinforces these bonds: kinship terms double as personal pronouns, and every first-person pronoun except *tôi* (I) refers not to oneself alone but also to one's relationship with the person to whom one is speaking.²⁵ For the New Poets of the 1930s, individualism was like a powerful drug that collectivist upbringing had left the poets ill-prepared to withstand. Eventually, this drug brought the New Poets to the brink of personal disintegration. The most famous case is that of Lưu Trọng Lư, perhaps the most romantic of the group, who allegedly became addicted to opium in the mid-40s and lived apart from his wife in a wretched hut on the outskirts of Huế (Nguyễn Vỹ 1969:100-113). Hoài Thanh and Hoài Chân (1968/1942), the early 1940s critics who helped make the New Poets famous, acknowledge the poets' psychological problems, linking the psychological turmoil to the vain attempt to live within the "I":

²⁵ Because it contrasts with the other more intimate first-person pronouns, the more impersonal "*tôi*" may be selected when one wishes to create social distance. In other words it also can be used to define a relationship, but generally not a close one.

Our lives lie within the sphere of 'I.' Having lost breadth, we seek depth. But the deeper we go, the colder it becomes. . . . Never before has Vietnamese poetry been so sad or in such turmoil. Along with our sense of superiority we have lost the peace of mind of previous times.

(53-54; translation by Neil Jamieson)

Many of the New Poets eventually regained their peace of mind by returning to the collective. The most prominent of them eventually joined the revolution, as did their promoter Hoài Thanh. In doing so they experienced what Hoài Thanh called a "miraculous resurrection": "In the new atmosphere of the homeland, we, the victims of the century of individualism—victims or the guilty—we realize how little our individual life means in the immense life of the community" (quoted by Nguyễn Khắc Viện and Hữu Ngọc 1983?:145). According to Neil Jamieson, this

syndrome of psychic and social "rebirth" experienced as a "miraculous resurrection," especially insofar as it characterized many of the more articulate and influential members of the intelligentsia, is an important element in explaining the resurgence of the ICP [Indochinese Communist Party] in the years immediately preceding (1944-1945) and especially immediately following (1945-1947) the August Revolution.²⁶ (209)

Writers who went north later than the New Poets—in 1954 after the end of the First Indochina War—have described their conversion to communism in similar terms. Nguyễn Sáng says that "it was like an escape from the 'I,' that 'I' that was the cause of so much pain; it was like being released from a small cage into an immense outer world." According to Anh Đức, joining the resistance enabled "the uniting of

²⁶ That revolutionary activity, which involved sharing hardships and dangers, could generate intense camaraderie and be a transforming experience seems undeniable, but one suspects literary hyperbole was also involved in some accounts of these "miraculous resurrections." For example, though Nguyễn Vỹ and others describe Lưu Trọng Lư's pre-revolutionary years in Huế as unhappy and bleak, the poet suggests otherwise in a memoir published two years before his death (Lưu Trọng Lư 1989).

the communal and the private; the intentions of the Party and my own soul came together as one with no interfering elements" (Quoted by Phan Cự Đệ 1979: 31-32).

Thus Vietnamese literature has experienced wild swings of the pendulum between individualism and collectivism. In the 1930s the New Poets brought a swing toward individualism. Then the pendulum moved to the collectivist side with the August Revolution in 1945, as the necessity of collective action to defeat two world powers in two wars brought acceptance of socialist realism and of the doctrine that literature should serve politics. Then came peace and Secretary Linh's loosening of the strings restricting writers, allowing a move away from extreme collectivism toward some more central point.

Toward a Sustainable Individualism?

In contemporary Vietnam there are still limits on the retreat from collectivism, as suggested by the fictional death of the writer to whom Hung's daughter is espoused and by the real-life post-publication suppression of Trần Mạnh Hào's novel. The Tiananmen incident in China and the fall of communist parties in Eastern Europe made Hanoi leaders fear openness and led almost immediately to a tightening of the strings Secretary Linh had loosened in 1986. In June 1988 a resolution of the Fifth Plenum of the Sixth Congress warned writers not to stray from the Party line (*Nhân Dân* 22 June 1988: 1). In August, 1989, in the wake of the Tiananmen incident, a resolution of the Seventh Plenum called for more caution in implementing reforms (see Heng 1998:40). The difficulty Trần Mạnh Hào had in distributing his novel *Separation*, which was published the next month, was probably related to the restrictions reimposed by these resolutions.

Up to the present renovation has not led to any significant increase in freedom of speech, and even literary critics have muted their calls for liberalization. In his article about the growing democratization of literature in the 1980s, Huỳnh Như Phương (1991) argues that an individual's responsibilities to the collective should be balanced with an awareness of the collective's responsibilities to the individual. However, he does not mention the individual's responsibility to him or herself, nor does he say what should happen when an individual's responsibility necessitates opposing the collective. As Vietnamese become more accustomed to a de-

centralized economy, and as individual initiative becomes a more respected virtue in economic contexts, individualism may become more tolerated in other contexts as well. But what will happen if a society accustomed to collectivism becomes suddenly more individualistic? Will the individualism be a truly self-realizing one, or will it be another yearning—never satisfied in practice—against yet another set of social constraints? And if individualism is realized in practice, will it be a healthy individualism, or will it be the exciting but psychologically debilitating type that the New Poets first embraced and later sought to escape?

The recent record of Vietnamese literature, with its strong opposition between “I” and “we” and its radical swings between the individual and the collective, might warn writers to be wary of too much freedom. *A Time far Past* indeed expresses that wariness. Nevertheless, in *Separation* Trần Mạnh Hào searches for ways out of the dilemma, and in doing so he forefronts the values of love, good humor, and truth.

Separation pleads for people to make love, not politics, the “general in control.”²⁷ Trần Mạnh Hào shows unquestioned faith in the ability of individuals to choose their own mates, and his novel suggests that the opposition between the individual and the collective can be broken down through sacrificial individualistic love. In a philosophical passage Hưng says that the story of his love for Oanh is the “tragedy of the period,” because it represents the opposition between the individual and the collective, the *I* and the *we*. Hưng’s love for Oanh is the hateful *I*. Even the power of this love couldn’t defeat his fear of the collective that opposed the relationship, so he plunged himself into “the grandiose collective *we*” (148). He has realized too late that his love could have dissolved the destructive opposition between *I* and *we*, for when we sacrifice for those we love we are also living for ourselves. As he says, “Only love has the power to harmonize the two elements into one . . . We or I, I or we—that’s not at issue any longer when we have love” (201).

²⁷ Trầg Giang says that “politics is the general, the soul of each individual and every period” (72). Speaking from the grave, Oanh contradicts the arch collectivist: “The general of the world of the spirit can only be love” (150). Hai Giỡn, Hưng’s friend and the most admirable character in the novel, blames the mistakes of recent leaders on the fact that “political doctrine” has been “the general in control” (211).

Another character in *Separation* hints at the possibility of freedom through good humor and through devotion to truth. This character is Hai Giõn, one of a group of southerners who went north after the 1954 Geneva Accords. Hai Giõn and Hưng first meet when Hai Giõn becomes Hưng's assistant during the land reform period. Hai Giõn is a model of the independent, romantic spirit that outspokenly and with good humor devotes himself to truth in life and literature. Hai Giõn is "cheerful night and day and could find something humorous in every situation" (85). He also finds courage to speak the truth and to preserve his individuality in defiance of the collective's direction. Consistent with his personality, Giõn's given name means "joker," a fact that disturbs the leader of his unit. "Our socialist society is a serious society," says the leader. "A cadre and Party member with a humorous name is unacceptable" (86). Ordered to change his name, Hai Giõn does so, but later he changes it back. Hai Giõn also demonstrates independence in his love life. After the Party prevents him from marrying his first love because she is Catholic, he lashes out at the Party for being an "organization that is fiercer than were Confucian elders with their daughters in previous times: they say sit here, you have to sit there, with no power to choose" (110). When he marries another woman later, he does so without informing the Party. Hai Giõn often criticizes the Party leadership, particularly its tendency to politicize everything, even scientific study. Consistent with his general outspokenness, in the early pages of the novel Hai Giõn urges Hưng to tell truthfully the personal story that eventually becomes the novel *Separation*.

Hai Giõn fits the stereotype of southerners as more easy-going, less formal, less bound by rigid rules, and more influenced by feelings and emotions than are northerners.²⁸ By making Hai Giõn the most admirable character in his novel, Trần Mạnh Hảo may be suggesting that as communication between the north and south improves, the north could become "southernized" a bit (More Hai Giõns, fewer Trầng Giangs!), and in this way the destructive oppositions between the heart and the mind, between I and we, could be softened. If communist officials in the north became more "southernized"—warmer, more flexible in applying rules and regulations—then perhaps harmony could replace conflict. Whether this harmony would provide opportunity for psychologically

²⁸ Many southerners agree with the stereotype.

healthy individualism is uncertain. What seems clear is that the issue of collective concern raised in these late 1980s novels will remain important well into the new millennium.

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