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LITERARY SPACE IN VIETNAMESE LITERATURE IN GERMANY

With a population of about 125,000 people, the Vietnamese community is the largest Asian diaspora community in Germany. However, when comparing the literature of this community in Germany to those in the United States, Australia, or France, it seems to be inferior. The best-known literary talent, who has been admitted to mainstream literature in Germany, is Jenny Mai Nuyen. Like *The Boat* by Nam Lê written in English, *Calumnies* (Slander) by Linda Le in French, *The Sympathizer* by Viet Thanh Nguyen in English, the use of German, an official language, has been a passport for Nuyen's books into mainstream literature. But the language used is not the only factor for a writer to be successful. Born in Munich in 1988 to German and Vietnamese parents, Jenny has been writing stories since she was five years old. She started writing the first fantasy novels at the age of 13 and was feted as a literary prodigy. Her debut novel, *Nijura – Das Erbe der Elfenkrone* (Nijura - The Legacy of the Elven Crown), marked her out as one of Germany's best new talents. The focus of Jenny Mai Nuyen's fiction is a young half-breed Nill, who helps the people of the Morrelfen against the Gray Warriors and their leaders. Revolving around the mysterious legend of the crown Elrysjar of the elf king, Jenny Mai Nuyen's first work sends a message of peace and human love while describing the dire consequences of the bloody battle between the factions to win the treasure. After the release of the first book *Nijura – Das Erbe der Elfenkrone* which sold 100,000 copies, the next works of Jenny Mai Nuyen in turn are *Das Drachentor* (Dragon Gate), *Nocturna* -

Die Nacht der gestohlenen Schatten (Nocturna - The Night of the Stolen Shadows), *Rabenmond - Der magische Bund* (Rabenmond - The magical covenant), *Die Sturmjäger von Aradon- Feenlicht. Band 1* (The storm hunters of Aradon Fairy Light Volume 1), *Die Sturmjäger von Aradon - Magierlicht. Band 2* (The storm hunters of Aradon – Magician’s light. Volume 2). All of them achieved significant sales.

However, Jenny Mai Nuyen is an exception. Unlike Nam Le, Viet Thanh Nguyen or Linda Le, she was actually defined as belonging to the 2.5 generation, who has a Germany-born mother and a Vietnam-born father. S. Ramakrishnan claims in his research that it is reasonable not to lump together the 2.5 generation with those in the second generation, who have no native-born parents, or with those in the third generation, who have no foreign-born parents. In most cases, “the presence of a native-born parent affords children with greater chances at higher education and more success in the mainstream economy.”¹ Besides, I believe the 2.5 generation not only experienced significant differences in terms of socioeconomic but also cultural outcomes. There is evidence showing that the presence of a native-born parent can help in shaping social status and ethnic identification of the second generation.² Therefore, while Jenny Mai Nuyen is a best-selling writer, she could not be said to represent the Vietnamese community of the expatriates, who are mostly concerned with their nostalgia, memories, and identity. Also, whereas Jenny Mai Nuyen’s works written in German are being received in mainstream literature, most works written in Vietnamese are facing a risk of being marginalized. Hence, my task is to synthesize and evaluate the contributions of Vietnamese writers in Germany since their appearance there.

¹ Ramakrishnan 2004, p. 397.

² Jensen 2001, pp. 21-56.

In general, Vietnamese writers have a relatively diverse background. The two largest groups of writers are boat people and former contract workers. In addition, some of the authors (such as Ngô Nguyên Dũng), are free immigrants, immigrated as a result of family reunion (like Phạm Thị Hoài, Lê Minh Hà and Đoàn Minh Phượng), or belong to a recent group of writers as social activists, such as Võ Thị Hảo and Bùi Thanh Hiếu. The main types of compositions chosen by these authors are short stories, and poetry, followed by longer works of fiction and essays. In the non-fiction category, there are several authors specializing in economics (Bùi Hạnh Nghi); medical books (Trần Văn Tích), political essays (Vũ Ngọc Long). In addition to printed books, some authors collaborate with online magazines or create their own websites to introduce and archive their works. For example, Lê Xuân Quang with *lexuanquang* blog, Phong Hưng Lưu Nhơn Nghĩa with *thatsonchaudoc*, Phạm Thị Hoài with *talawas*, *pro&contra*, Ngô Nguyên Dũng with *damau*. Besides, authors will submit their writings, mostly short stories, to foreign magazines, primarily in the United States before publishing collections. Ngô Nguyên Dũng, Lê Minh Hà, Thế Giang are typical cases. With the development of the internet, there is one author, Văn Tất Thắng who mainly publishes stories on *facebook*.

The common approach to classify overseas Vietnamese literature is the approach through themes or creative tendencies. For example, Nguyễn Mộng Giác, in his commentary on the stages of development of overseas literature, divides literature into two main lines: nostalgia and integration. In the line of nostalgic literature, there are sub-themes of customary literature (written about the life of the lower classes of the French colonial period), of memoirs (writing about the life of individual writers); of campaigning literature (typified by critiques of the regime), of historical literature (writing about historical characters and contexts). The literature of integration also has

typical topics such as writing about generation gaps among immigrants; the loneliness of the elderly; the integration experience of children; marital breakdown and so on. While the two lines of nostalgia and integration are prominent in the realm of migration literature, Nguyễn's sub-categories seem problematic, mixing as they do thematic and stylistic criteria.³ Bùi Vĩnh Phúc divided the foreign literature into detailed and specific branches such as: nostalgic literature; campaigning literature; literature of adaptation, sensitive literature.⁴ Again, he adopted a thematic approach in his synthesis of overseas Vietnamese literature.

To generalize about the subject of Vietnamese literature in Germany, I chose to classify works through the literary space shown in writings. The awareness of literary space in the text could be crucial to understanding the authors' encounters with the world. When analyzing the relationship between literary works and the world, David McLaughlin recognizes the research shift in viewing the interrelationship between the world created in the literary work and the historical context in which it was formed. He suggested that it was once commonly accepted in literary studies that the spaces of the works were “necessarily distanced from the space of the world. However, the studies of mobility as a theme in literary representations or histories of travel and writing suggest a new way of seeing the work and the world in which the work is necessarily bound up in the world, and the world is a part of literary works.”⁵ Since the formation of the immigrant community is the result of a transformation of the historical and social context in a certain age, I think viewing literary space is a pivotal way to find inspiration in the time and place in which works were created. There are two primary literary spaces

³ Nguyễn Mộng Giác 2004, pp. 237-309.

⁴ Bùi Vĩnh Phúc 2004, pp. 367-397.

⁵ McLaughlin 2016, p. 123.

covered mostly in works written by Vietnamese authors in Germany: i.e writing towards the home land (Vietnam) and towards the host land (Germany). Each literary space, however, shows a different perspective on how writers define their home and where they belong. In addition, the grouping of literary works makes it easy to identify two major themes which were often mentioned in immigrant literature: nostalgia and integration.

Towards the host land

Writing about Germany is becoming an indispensable topic in the writings of Vietnamese authors in Germany. Most of the authors focus on the life of the Vietnamese community in Germany, from material to spiritual life. In addition, some authors have observed and recorded stories about indigenous people. In the eyes of Asians, the life of Westerners is depicted with some prejudice, influenced by the mindset and perception of the writer. In search of the writings about Vietnamese lives in Germany, I noticed that there are some highlighted topics, such as the experiences of former Vietnamese contract workers or boat people and psychological changes undergone by non-political immigrants. While in the former case, the authors tend to characterize the character's behaviours, psychological development is the main focus in the later type of works. As a result, works belonging to the second type are considered to be more valuable.

Nguyễn Văn Thọ, Lê Xuân Quang, Đỗ Trường, Văn Tất Thắng, and Thế Dũng are the authors whose many works deal with contract workers' lives. In a study on Turkish *Gastarbeiterliteratur*, Arlene Teraoka raised a problem in the study of works written by and for guest workers. For those expecting to read a true account of the foreign workers' experiences, they could have been disappointed because there were a very few of the authors of *Gastarbeiterliteratur* (the literature of the guest worker) who were actually

Gastarbeiter (the guest worker). In addition, the possibility of guest workers as a targeted audience of such literature was questionable.⁶ While there have not many studies on the extent and composition of the readership of the guest-worker literature, the possibility of reading works by Vietnamese authors who were true contract workers is more realistic than that of the Turkish case. In general, the circle of former contract workers has been easily recognizable not only by their autobiographical references but also by themes in their writing. The number of writers is relatively large, including Thế Dũng, Nguyễn Văn Thọ, Đỗ Trường, Thế Giang, Mai Lâm, Văn Tất Thắng and Nguyễn Hoài Phương. Apart from the writers' coming from North Vietnam, the common point of these writers is that most of them write about the life of the contract workers in Germany. Examples are Thế Dũng's *Một nửa lá số* (A half of Horoscope), Nguyễn Văn Thọ's *Vàng xưa* (Old Gold), Nguyễn Hoài Phương's *Chuyện đồng hương* (The Story of Countryman), Đỗ Trường's *Không bao giờ thành sẹo* (Never Become a Scar) and so on.

Thế Dũng, one of the former contract workers, describes the journey of a Vietnamese intellectual from Vietnam to Germany to become a contract worker. The author was born in 1954 in Tuyen Quang, where his parents joined the resistance. He was a soldier in the fiercest war years from 1971 to 1976. After the war, he became a literary student in Hanoi Pedagogy University. Since 1984, he has been an Executive Board Member and Head of the Research and Theory Committee at the Hải Hưng Arts and Letters Association. In 1989, he went to Germany in the contract-worker programme. He began writing in 1974 in many genres: poetry, stories, novels and critical essays. His main writings include five volumes of poems: *Hoa hồng đến muộn* (Rose comes late) (1990), *Người phiêu bạt* (Wanderer) (1992), *Mùa*

⁶ Teraoka 1987, p. 84.

xuân dang dở (Unfinished Spring) (2003), *Tự vấn* (Self-questioning) (2003), *Từ tâm* (Philanthropic Heart) (2005); and 5 novels: *Tiếng người trong đá Giáp Sơn* (The Human Voice in Giap Son Stone) (1993), *Chuyện tình dang dở* (Unfinished Love Story) (2000), *Hộ chiếu buồn* (Sad Passport) (2003), *Tình Cuội* (Cuoi's Love story) (2006), *Một nửa lá số* (Half of Horoscope) (2009). His novels revolve around the struggles of living between Vietnamese and German societies. For example, *Half of Horoscope* is inspired by the context of Vietnam and its people, reflecting the fate of a generation of intellectuals in the 1980s, of which the author is one. Recognizing the inadequacies of Vietnamese society, where social status is more respected than personal ability, the protagonist exploits a legal loophole for his own benefit. The benefit here is a trip abroad in Germany. Nevertheless, the fact that the protagonist views East Germany as a 'real paradise' while this country is at its dying stage evokes an irony of fate. At the same time, the way the main character uses any tricks to enable him to travel overseas raises the question of recession not only of the national economy but also of identity.

One of the authors who mainly focus on contract workers' lives in his writing is Lê Xuân Quang. He was born in 1942 in Nam Dinh province, Vietnam. Arriving at Bulgaria as a contract worker, he moved to Germany after 1990 and has been living in Berlin since then. He has published 5 books, including *Những mảnh đời phiêu bạt* (Fragile Lives) (2002), *Những số phận không định trước* (Unfair Fates) (2003), *Dòng xoáy cuộc đời* (The Vortex of Life) (2004), *Đùa với lửa* (Joke with Fire) (2005) and *Canh bạc cuộc đời* (The Gamble of Life) (2005). It is difficult to find innovative or creative elements in Lê Xuân Quang's writing technique. However, his stories are filled with the harsh realities of life or challenges that the Vietnamese community really faced during a turbulent historical period. For example, in some stories Lê Xuân Quang shows bloody clashes between criminal gangs

for money, or how victims were killed horribly in ghettoized dormitories.⁷ These literary reports about smuggling or murder among rival Vietnamese gangs partly explain how the narrative of Vietnamese contract workers as ‘bad migrants’ was adopted by German media.

However, not all the Vietnamese migrants were involved in the gang wars smuggling cigarettes. Most of the former contract workers set up their own businesses by opening snack bars or flowers shops, a way of making a living in new surroundings. But the long working day, including the time to travel to the wholesaler to collect merchandise before opening, really exposes how much endurance and tenacity the former contract worker needed to build up a business in eastern Germany. For example, Nguyễn Văn Thọ in *Mưa thành phố* (City Rain) tells a story of a former contract worker selling fruit in a market. The work of selling fruit, though not requiring much technical skill is extremely heavy: “In the early morning, around 4 AM, he drove an ugly Trabant to the Fruit Wholesale Center, about fifteen miles from home. There, he received the goods as high as the mountains that Bali has arranged. Packing all the fruit into the car, then again he drove to the point of sale and unloaded all. It was cold snow, but after completely loading fruit at the

⁷ One of the core narrative dominating German media discourse during the mid-1990s was the emergence of a cigarette mafia of Vietnamese, usually in Berlin. The freedom of movement that people enjoy in post-cold-war Europe has turned Germany into a paradise for gangs of ethnic criminals, including the Vietnamese in USSR. When moving to Germany, most Vietnamese gangs’ business is cigarette smuggling because of its high profitability in the short term. With so much money generated by this business, Vietnamese gangs extended their interests into gambling, pirating of audio and video cassettes or prostitution. However, what was most problematic in these Vietnamese gangs was the escalation of criminal behaviour. In fact, the Vietnamese cigarette vendors were just pawns in the gang war. They were supplied by gang leaders who kept most of the profits. Most of the killing among gangs resulted from clashes among gangs to take control of lucrative sales spots.

opening time of the market, his underclothes were wet.”⁸ Fruit selling also requires a lot of labour: “Take a bag, bend down to pick up vegetables, fruit, give them to customers, receive money ... every move, to sell from 1 to 5 tons, even 7, 8 or 9 tons of fruit a day, enough to paralyze both arms.”⁹ However, the hardship of manual labour is less than the hardship of controlling the inherent greed of man. When the business thrives, the protagonist is assigned to manage a separate stall. Earnings are large, but the monthly salary is meagre, so he thinks of stealing money from the owner. He struggles between taking and not taking the money, or the struggle to determine his identity: “Be a hired worker or a thief! That simple thing is difficult!” Finally, he decides to tell the truth to the owner and receives sympathy and respect from him. The stories of Vietnamese businesses, reflected through works by Nguyễn Văn Thọ or Lê Xuân Quang are documentaries showing how difficult a new beginning was for a worker to work legally in Germany.

The greatest strength in writing about contract workers is its truthfulness in describing Vietnamese lives. However, the presence of a Vietnamese community engaging in illicit activities such as smuggling cigarettes, making counterfeit jeans, and living under the domination of the power of money makes enquiring, if any, about the identity of the first-generation immigrant community, or the assimilation of the second generation ridiculous. The forming of a black market by a group of former contract workers could be partly explained due to the unexpected end of the GDR, which led to their struggle for a livelihood by any means. However, it is worth noting here that the contract-workers programme was established as a form of temporary circular migration in the beginning. Their way of life reflected this lack of

⁸ Nguyễn Văn Thọ 2010, p. 128.

⁹ *ibid.*

assumed permanence as a real migrant community, which led to their unwilling integration in the host land later on. Having the expectation that after staying in Germany for a certain amount of time, they would return home, the contract workers took Germany as the economically profitable place, hoping to amass enough savings by the time the five-year contract expired.¹⁰ Moreover, the way businesses of contract workers have been accurately depicted, especially when not all activities were legal, is itself helped to create a stigma of Vietnamese identity in Germany. In their research, Bui and Glassey frequently questioned the justice of mainstream media in portraying contract workers as a bad example of an immigrant community, especially in comparison with the boat people community as a good one.¹¹ Here, through literary writings by some writers, we have to question why the authors portray their groups as bad images if this is not the truth?

Germany, in the memory of the Vietnamese, is not just a business area of former contract workers. For the boat people departing from the South, the journey to Germany includes their travel or time spent in refugee camps before being admitted to West Germany. The experience of boat people after their arrival in Germany is also quite different from that of the contract workers. Typical authors writing about refugee in Germany include Vũ Nam, Phù Vân (Tuỳ Anh), Huy Giang, Đan Hà, Trần Phong Lưu. Among them, Vũ Nam can be considered as a writer who recorded most detailed about the social activities of the refugees in Germany.

¹⁰ Huwelmeimer 2008, pp. 131-144.

¹¹ Bui 2004; Glassey in *Radical Criminology* No. 6, pp. 131-208.

Vũ Nam is a pen name of Lý Văn Vãn, born in 1954 in Phước Tuy Province.¹² He was a former soldier in the army of the South Vietnam government before 1975. In 1980, he escaped with his family and was rescued by the ship *Cap Anamur*. He resettled into Germany in 1981. Vũ Nam can be considered one of the most prolific among the boat people writers. Having started writing in 1985, he collaborated with many magazines in the United States (*Văn, Gió Văn, Cỏ thơm*), Canada (*Làng Văn, Sóng, Lửa Việt, Nắng Mới*), France (*Nhân Bản, Chiến Hữu, Tin Văn*), Norway (*Pháp Âm*), as well as Germany (*Viên Giác, Độc Lập, Tam Giác*). At the same time, Vũ Nam's short stories appeared in many collections such as *Tập san Văn bút châu Âu 1, 2 và 3* (The Collection of European Writers 1, 2 and 3) (1989, 1994, 1996), and *Tuyển tập Nam Phong* (Nam Phong Collection) (2006). He published works, including *Sau ngày tang* (After the Date of the Funeral) (1987), *Bên dòng sông Donau* (On the side of Danube River) (1990), *Bên này bức tường Bá Linh* (On this side of the Berlin Wall) (1993), *Nơi cuối dòng sông* (At the End of the River) (1994), *Câu chuyện từ con tàu Cap Anamur* (The Story of the Cap Anamur Ship) (1997), *Một đêm ở Geneve* (One Night in Geneve) (2004), *Hoa Liên Kiều* (Forsythia) (2008), *Quê người nhớ quê nhà* (Remembering the homeland in the host land) (2016).

If Thế Dũng described the outward journey of those who had departed from the North, Vũ Nam outlined another path of exile, equally grim and dangerous, of those who had departed from the South. For example, *At the end of the river*¹³ revolves around the life of Nhân, the main character, a soldier in the military school of the Republic of Vietnam. After the fall of the

¹² Phước Tuy Province was a province of the former South Vietnam. It now mostly corresponds to Bà Rịa-Vũng Tàu province, southeast of Ho Chi Minh City in reunified Vietnam.

¹³ Vũ Nam 1994.

South in 1975, he deserts and returns to live under a new regime. Initially, he is optimistic about his new life. Later, the difficulties of integration, such as the inability to find a job, the isolation in a new society, the struggle to make a living make him depressed and he tries to escape with his girlfriend. From the inability to integrate into the new political system, which leads to people's planning to illegally cross the borders, Vũ Nam explained the departure as a corollary of a new society which was haunted by the past and full of prejudices against people of the old regime. Besides the release from hard economic life, the departure of the boat people is also understood as an escape from the mental and psychological oppression. However, the tension between going or staying, obsessions, memories after leaving are all manifestations of the unfinished transmission of national identity for the boat people.

Similarly, in *The Story of the Cap Anamur Ship*,¹⁴ Vũ Nam describes the lives of those who crossed the border to refugee camps as part of the process of finding a free land. Although the book primarily focuses on a love story rather than depicting the psychology of characters, the story of the refugee's life on an island in the Philippines is worth considering. While on a tour to the refugee camp at Pulau Galang, Linda Ho Peché acknowledged the role of the refugee camp as “a part of the Vietnamese diaspora struggle to combat the (Vietnam) state's intervention in re-narrating the circumstances of their exile.”¹⁵ Especially, narrating or visiting memorials such as a refugee camp is the collective effort to re-inscribe the boat people into the popular memory of a war and to “reclaim a new narrative of perseverance, honor, and power.” Therefore, I consider the act of telling about a refugee camp in *The story of the Cap Anamur Ship* as the refugee writer's effort to educate the second

¹⁴ Vũ Nam 1996.

¹⁵ Peché 2016, p. 162.

generation about their history and to embrace the refugee legacy for those who have had no first-hand experience.

Vũ Nam is not a skilled writer in his early works. However, the more he writes, the better he communicates his observation and sensitivity towards the refugees' lives. For instance, writing about the settlers in Germany, Vũ Nam is particularly interested in the emotional life of the lonely. One of the misfortunes of life in exile is lack of love so that Vietnamese men in West Germany looked forward to the fall of Berlin Wall as an opportunity to get married (*On this side of Berlin Wall*). Another example, in *On the side of Danube River*, the writer describes the story of a woman living with a man with a Vietnamese wife and accepting being a single mother later on.

A group of writers who came to Germany in a family reunion or as students also select refugee life in Germany as a major theme in their works. The typical authors in this group are Ngô Nguyên Dũng (*Âm bản* (Negative Version), *Dòng chữ tâm tình* (The Words of Sentiments), *Mười hai hoa cúc* (Twelve Chrysanthemum), *Ngôn ngữ tuyết* (The Language of Snow), *Chuông đêm* (Night Bell)); Lê Minh Hà (*Những gặp gỡ không ngờ* (Unexpected Meetings)); Đoàn Minh Phượng (*Và khi tro bụi* (And when this Dust), *Mưa ở kiếp sau* (Rain in Life After Death)). These writers specifically focus on their characters' psychological processes. For example, Ngô Nguyên Dũng describes in several short stories the inner dynamics of exiles living abroad but always obsessed with memories: memories of family, of friends or of their hometown. At a first glance, it may be thought that the writer is not anti-Communist, but in fact his political view is expressed in the language used and characters' action. Similarly, Lê Minh Hà particularly focuses on the status of women who are far away from their home country, the gaps in their souls (*Nơi ấy, Trăng* (There, Moon); *Không cùng một hướng* (Not the same direction)). Especially, Ngô Nguyên Dũng, Lê Minh Hà, Đoàn Minh Phượng

have in common a grand narrative: the perception of the nihilism of the immigrant, of the human condition, of love and death. These new narratives present the new appearance of immigrant literature, giving an in-depth look at human psychology under the influence of space and time.

Towards the home land

If writing about a homeland becomes a manifestation of the integration process, or at least a sense of exploration, observation, and understanding of the land they live in, writing about the homeland becomes an impulse, the need to retrieve identity in the dilemma of rooting or uprooting into a new land. In other words, Vietnam is both a place of passion and a trigger of memory in which immigrants re-create their homeland. Vietnam, the home country, became the creative space of most Vietnamese authors in Germany, if not one of core spaces of Vietnamese immigrant literature. Depending on the degree of attachment between the author and a specific region or place in Vietnam, the homeland is described with a lot of love, memory, anger or obsession. Normally, the context of the South or North is related to the origin of the writer. For example, Hanoi becomes a literary space in the works of northern authors such as Lê Minh Hà, Nguyễn Văn Thọ, Thế Giang, Phạm Thị Hoài, Mai Lâm. Meanwhile, the characters in the stories of the South Vietnamese writers such as Ngô Nguyên Dũng, Vũ Nam, Huy Giang, Phong Hưng Lưu Nhơn Nghĩa live, behave, think in Saigon, Nha Trang or Southwest region in Vietnam. In short, the first characteristic of Vietnamese literature is localization.

Except for writing about homeland as a native place, the reappearance of Vietnam in immigrant literature is influenced by geo-political factors. In particular, the authors relate to Vietnam not as a general entity but focus on certain historical periods. The period most commonly described by most writers is the period of postwar Vietnam, which coincides with the departure

of the authors from both North and South Vietnam. However, if Lê Minh Hà, Nguyễn Văn Thọ, Đỗ Trường, Mai Lâm express many sentiments of the memory towards a faraway country, Phạm Thị Hoài or Thế Giang expose a picture of Hanoi as ugly, revealing a pessimistic and critical view of the future of the country. With the group of authors departing from the South, the year of 1975 was seen as a historic landmark that marked a shift in political views, followed by a change in the perception of the writer. In light of this, it could be expected that South Vietnam before 1975 will often be mentioned with much regret in the works. In contrast, Vietnam after 1975 will often be referred by the authors with some criticism and condemnation. Thus, the second characteristic of Vietnamese literature when writing about the homeland is politics.

The issue of politics is most evident through the themes of war appearing in some works. For example, Nguyễn Văn Thọ would write about the Vietnam War under the lens of the communist soldiers, fighting for a cause. The Vietnamese soldiers in the short stories *Ngọn lửa* (Flame), *Ám ảnh* (Obsession) in the collection of *Old Gold*; *Phố cũ* (Old street), *Vô danh trận mạc* (Anonymous in Battle) in the collection of *The guqin*; *30-4 Anh ở đâu* (30-4 Where are you?) in the collection of *City Rain*; *Lời hứa của chiến tranh* (The Promise of War) in the collection of *Dark Violet* are characterized by their outstanding character traits such as bravery and willingness to sacrifice their personal lives for the cause of liberation. In contrast, Vũ Nam describes the Vietnam War from the perspective of people living under the regime of the Republic of Vietnam, or from the perspective of the defeated. Thus after 1975, the life in the South was described as miserable, which was argued to be the consequence of the South government's defeat and the weakness of the administration of the Communist government. The short stories in *After the Date of the Funeral*, Vũ Nam's debut work, are examples. The collection of

short stories was composed shortly after Vũ Nam's arrival in Germany and published by Viên Giác in 1987. In this book, Vũ Nam presents many typical characters, like Hai Thạch, Tư Tấn, Hạnh who have experienced injustice in postwar society because they were previously involved in the old regime. In several other short stories, Vũ Nam expressed his support for the Ngô Đình Diệm's government and strongly condemned the communist government. On the one hand, the collection of short stories reflects realistically the mood of the refugees leaving for political reasons. Unlike the first generation of Vietnamese immigrants, the Vietnamese boat people in Germany belonged to the second wave. It was the boat people who crossed the sea from 1979 onwards who understood why they were leaving and what was left behind. Having lived under the communist regime and experiencing the harsh life after 1975, the second wave of refugees viewed literature as a mission, a writers' mission, to claim freedom and democracy, and to mourn for the lost country. However, because of the perception of literature as a weapon of political attitudes, *After the Date of the Funeral* only shows the author's viewpoint rather than his writing ability. In addition, it should be noted that while Ngô Đình Diệm's government almost controlled the Saigon metropolis, most rural farmers did not support this administration. This was perhaps because of the consequences of his land reform policy, which was considered as similar to the creation of a class of landowners in the French colonial period and caused resentment among farmers. Thus, the depiction of poor farmers still supporting the government was quite unrealistic. It reflects the author's bias in constructing a type of anti-communist characters that blindly support the South Vietnamese government, rather than literary images with psychological complexities.

A group of authors from the North, who are sympathetic to the Hanoi government, paint the homeland with affection. These authors include

Nguyễn Văn Thọ with the short stories *Làng bên sông* (Village on the riverside), *Miếu ông Bồi* (Boi's temple), *Hà Nội hoa* (Hanoi flowers), *Mưa thành phố* (City Rain), *Chuyện tình của cha tôi* (My father's love story); Đỗ Trường with the short stories *Đêm giao thừa nghĩ về mẹ* (Thinking of mother in new year eve), and *Phượng ơi đừng nở nữa* (Phoenix flowers Stop blossoming); Mai Lâm with *Từ xa Hà Nội* (Far from Hanoi), and *Xa rồi ngày xanh* (Away from green days) and so on. What these authors have in common is the unity of love for homeland and family, the village, the food or the local customs. In other words, familiarity with the lifestyle or customs of the family and surrounding environment is the source of the memory, from which it develops into love for the country.

However, as an immigrant, the homeland that is remembered and brought to life on the page is not the homeland of the present, or in other words, it is homeland-in-memory. Lê Minh Hà is one of the most successful in describing Hanoi. This city is the main theme in her literature. However, Hanoi is also depicted with some of bitterness and regret. Lê Minh Hà was born in 1962 in Hanoi, graduated from the Faculty of Literature and Pedagogy in 1983. Prior to settling in Germany, she had eight years of teaching at Hanoi-Amsterdam High School. She wrote in Vietnam and collaborated with many overseas magazines such as *Hợp Lưu*, *Văn*, *Văn học*, *Gió Đông* before launching her first book entitled *Trăng goá* (Last quarter of Moon) in 1988. Lê Minh Hà wrote a number of vignettes *Thương thế ngày xưa* (Beloved Old Days), novels *Gió tự thời khuất mặt* (Wind from the Unseen Time), *Phố vẫn gió* (Street is still windy), but has been more successful with collections of short stories *Trăng goá* (Last quarter of Moon) (1998), *Gió biếc* (Beloved Wind) (1999), *Những giọt trầm* (Drops of Silence) (2005), *Những gặp gỡ không ngờ* (Unexpected Meetings) (2012). Leaving Hanoi in 1994, when the city was just starting its transition to a socialist-oriented market economy,

Hanoi in the work of Lê Minh Hà is beautiful, poetic but dilapidated. This place contains a lost generation on their hard journey to make a living. For example, Ngân, in the novel *Wind from the Unseen Time*,¹⁶ goes back to the old Hanoi to find out about the turbulent past of a period of chaos. Ngân's search for the past is also a quest for the identity of the whole community, inquiring about the origins of the fabricated history, of a culture without identity, of a personality bound with dogma and confusion. So, literary space in the novel does not only refer to geographical but also to cultural space. Similarly, the novel *Street is still windy*¹⁷ is set in Hanoi from the years after the liberation of 1975 until the present. Lê Minh Hà recreates a Hanoi with two opposite extremes of old and new characteristics, where the heroine Ngân is disappointed and distressed by Hanoi as it now is. Having spent time in Vietnam's subsidy period¹⁸ and currently living in Germany, though Lê Minh Hà belongs neither to the contract workers or boat people groups, she shares a common writing technique with other immigration writers: i.e the use of flashbacks. The flashback really works well in portraying the juxtaposition of the elegant and charming old Hanoi with the chaotic Hanoi of the present, thereby questioning the validity of the war and the new government's rule.

In addition to Lê Minh Hà, other writers such as Phạm Thị Hoài, Thế Dũng, and Thế Giang also describe urban life in the North during the subsidy period to the renovation period, which displayed many paradoxes in society.

¹⁶ Lê Minh Hà <http://vanviet.info/van/gi-tu-thoi-khuat-mat-2/> Last accessed: 28 August 2017.

¹⁷ Lê Minh Hà 2014.

¹⁸ Subsidy period is the name used in Vietnam for a stage where most economic activity takes place under the planned economy, a feature of the economy under communism. Accordingly, the private sector was gradually removed to make way for the state-economy. Although the subsidy regime existed in the north under the regime of North Vietnam before 1975, the subsidy period is often used to refer to economic activities in the whole country of Vietnam from early 1976 to late 1986, i.e before the Renovation period.

Here, Phạm Thị Hoài is a very special case. She is considered a talented writer not only in the Vietnamese community in Germany but also in other countries such as the United States, France, Australia. Her websites *Talawas* and *Pro&Contra* are considered a valuable political, cultural, and social research resource. Her novels, short stories and essays reveal a critical view of the Vietnamese people's failings and at the same time point out the weaknesses of totalitarianism. However, most of her fiction was written before her settlement in Germany. Thus, as far as her fiction is concerned, she was a representative of Vietnamese literature in the period of renovation rather than an immigrant writer. In contrast, Thế Giang, with the short story collection *Thằng người có đuôi* (Man with Tail), can be considered a typical author of immigrant literature. He composed abroad, more specifically, his work reveals clearly anti-communist attitude. Born in Hanoi but moving to Saigon in 1975, Thế Giang belonged to the group of the boat people who escaped Vietnam in 1980. Though only one collection of short stories *Man with Tail* was published, Thế Giang caused a stir because of the strong voice of criticism of the communist regime in his writing. For example, the short story *Vũng nước đọng*¹⁹ (A Stagnant Water Place) shows a sombre realism, focusing on the sale of the bodies of poor prostitutes and sleazy guests. A stagnant water place is a metaphor for the inertia and muddiness of human dignity, not just that of the prostitutes, because no one is born a whore, nor that of the poor officers. Prostitutes and employees simply represent one class of people living at the bottom of society, those who have been promised a life of equality, prosperity and happiness in the socialist regime. Similarly, the true face of the socialist regime is nakedly exposed in the short story *Cay đắng nở hoa* (Bitterness blooms), where the duplicity, deceitfulness and

¹⁹ Thế Giang 1987.

artificiality of some of the leaders in the cultural establishment are portrayed as of Socialist officials.

In the group of Southerner authors, while localization is a characteristic in most writers' work, the degree of political expression depends on background and personality. For the boat people, the homeland is where they are always headed. However, love for the homeland is joined by hatred of the new government. The more they love and remember the nation, the more aggressive they feel towards the totalitarian regime. Writers of the boat people groups may be said to include Phù Vân, Vũ Nam. The poet Phù Vân was born in 1938 in Hue, Vietnam. He was a former engineer. After April 30, 1975, he went to prison for re-education and was released from prison in 1980. Afterwards, he emigrated and settled in Germany. Currently, he is the editor of the journal *Viên Giác*. Phù Vân has written in many genres, including poetry, prose, and letters. His themes are quite diverse: the most prominent is the feeling of exile, the love of home and family, and resentment of the incumbent government; some of his work is also Buddhist-oriented. However, while prose is just like the outward appearance, poetry is his soul. The collections of poems *Ngoài xa dấu chân mây* (The Faraway Trace of Cloud) (1994), *Khúc hát tiêu dao* (The Wandering Song) (2000) express the feeling of a person who is always tormented about the reality of the country, obsessive about the memory of loss, and full of queries about the future of the nation.

In contrast to Phù Vân or Vũ Nam whose work expresses political attitudes explicitly, Ngô Nguyên Dũng does not blatantly reveal the political tendencies in his work. Ngô Nguyên Dũng's literature contains complex ideas, combining many themes in one story, frequently uses the stream of consciousness to describe a character's psychology. In particular, like Đoàn Minh Phượng, Ngô Nguyên Dũng characterizes the human condition in

relation to nature and the universe, the finitude of the human, the complexity of psychological life in relation to external impacts. The examples are stories of *Núi man rợ* (Savage Mountain), *Người đi bên cạnh tôi* (The person who walks beside me) in the collection of *Negative Version*; *Những vì sao* (Stars) in the collection of *The Words of Sentiments*; *Chợ phiên đầu xuân* (Market at the beginning of spring) in the collection of *The Sound of Mountain*; *Ngôn ngữ tuyết* (The Language of Snow), *Chờ đê vỡ* (Waiting for the dike broken) in the collection of *The Language of Snow*. However, when studying the works of Ngô Nguyên Dũng, especially those on homeland, I found the characters' dilemma under the effect of historic changes particularly striking. Illustrations are the short stories *Canh bạc* (Gamble) in the collection of *Negative Version*, *Chốn tâm tình ẩn náu* (Place for hiding feeling) in the collection of *The Words of Sentiments*, *Say trăng* (Drunk for Moon) in the collection of *The Sound of Mountain*. In the short story *Gamble*, the writer expresses the confusion of the Southerners immediately before the take-over of the Communists in the South in 1975. The protagonist, like others, is in dilemma: either choose to live with a new regime (the Communist regime); or to escape it. In these chaotic days in Saigon, he is in a state of agitation, the feeling of waiting for something but not knowing exactly what he expects: "The last morning I walked around with Nguyễn, I took a mood of a hangover that was waiting but did not understand what I waited for [...] Go or stay. I caught the same concerning eyes of the city residents."²⁰ This is a common feeling of the locals who almost lose their motivation to live, those who do not see any sign of hope and faith in the new regime. That was why the protagonist spends the last days before the fall of Saigon gambling. His

²⁰ Ngô Nguyên Dũng 1994, p. 56.

boredom and hopelessness are shown in the way he spends his money in a rush in case the Republic of Vietnam falls.

It is worth remembering that Ngô Nguyên Dũng is not one of the boat people in Germany though he did come from the South. He belonged to the wave of immigrants who arrived in Germany in the 1970s to study, and subsequently stayed. However, he shared with other Southerners the nostalgia for the lost Saigon and a desire to rebuild a lost homeland in the host country. Their tragedy arises from the moment they build a lost homeland because it is essentially just a fantasy of a remembered land and its reflection will wither sooner or later. And then they are trapped in their imagination, partly wanting to build a real life for their children and partly wanting to return to their native land.

As mentioned above, while the level of political expression depends on the character and creative tendencies of the author, localization is almost the dominant feature of the whole literature. Almost all writers construct literary space and time based on personal experience and insight. In particular, some Vietnamese authors focus entirely on childhood experiences, or customs in the homeland. For example, Phong Hưng Lưu Nhơn Nghĩa almost exclusively writes about Khmer life in Chau Doc, An Giang, such as in the short-story collection *Như cánh chuồn chuồn* (Like the dragonfly wings). Huy Giang writes about the life of poor working people in the Southwest region, such as the stories *Nước mặn* (Salt Water), *Còn đây kỷ niệm* (Memory is still here), *Những nụ hoa bần* (The Flower Buds of Ban Tree). The strength of these authors is to recall many of the customs and practices of local people, such as the habit of picking fish in the flood season. The authors also include folksongs of the Mekong Delta and the southwestern border. These works of literature are valuable documents to help readers understand not only the or local cultures and languages but also the feelings of the Vietnamese.

Conclusion

In general, the Vietnamese community in Germany was usually thought of as two separate groups: either leaving because of economic or political motivation. The former were originally the contract workers and the latter were the boat people. However, there are currently people who arrive in Germany in the course of a family reunion, as students, and as asylum seekers. Since they are distinguished from each other in social and political backgrounds, these groups create different sub-cultures in reality, reflecting varied themes in their writings. In this paper, I introduce Vietnamese literature in Germany by approaching literary spaces. There are two chief literary spaces in the works: the host land and the home land. As for the former, Germany becomes an indispensable topic in the writings of Vietnamese authors in Germany. The group of contract-worker authors, such as Nguyễn Văn Thọ or Lê Xuân Quang, exposed the harsh reality that the Vietnamese faced after 1990. The refugees' experience of working and integrating in a new land was also told by authors, who had fled in dilapidated boats, spent their lives in refugee's camps, and experienced an immigrant's loneliness. Examples of this are works by Vũ Nam and Phù Vân. The boat people's stories have a sameness that can be summed up in the words: nostalgia and indignation. Apart from the host land, home land becomes a dominant theme in Vietnamese immigrant literature. In general, the two core characteristics of Vietnamese literature in Germany are localization and politics. In addition, it is worth noting here that Vietnamese literature in Germany is a diversified and fragmentary literature. There are the intellectuals of Vietnam who have chosen to live in exile because of grievances against the government reforms. The representatives of this group are Võ Thị Hảo and Phạm Thị Hoài. With their experiences of living through

a period of renovation in Vietnam, and of witnessing changes in economy and politics in contemporary Vietnamese society, they show the image of Vietnam which may be more modern than what has gone before but is also more concerned.

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