

The writer retires

Peter Zinoman



Nguyen Huy Thiep, left, 1995. Photo: Marcelino Truong

Nguyen Huy Thiep was born in Hanoi on 29 April 1950, midway through the First Indochina War, and raised by a mother who had evacuated when he was a baby to Viet Minh-controlled zones. Because his only brother had enlisted in the army during the Second Indochina War, Thiep managed to avoid military service and to enrol in the Hanoi Teachers' Training College after finishing high school in 1967. Graduating with a degree in history, he moved to the Tay Bac mountains, where he was assigned a teaching position in a school for cadres serving Thai and Hmong ethnic minority communities. He remained in Tay Bac for ten years. Conditions there were marked by deprivation and extreme isolation, but Thiep was able to pursue a regime of self-study after gaining access to the book collection of the library of Son La province.

The end of the war in 1975 brought jubilation but also anxiety about what was to come. 'Not only were my students, colleagues and I all thrilled, but the whole population of North Vietnam thought that the end of the war would bring happiness, would change our lives and our world,' he recalled decades later. 'Soon, however, we came to realise that despite the end of the war, we still had to continue along a new road—a road perhaps beset by even greater difficulties than those we had faced during the war.' He remained in Tay Bac until 1980, when he finally returned to Hanoi.

After trying many jobs including painting, ceramics, bricklaying and various businesses, Thiep began submitting short stories to literary magazines. Several months of rejection followed. 'Initially, my work was rejected,' he explained, 'because Vietnamese publishers were used to an older style of writing. Some said I didn't know how to write, that my writing was unpolished. I argued that my writing was not unpolished, just unadorned. I tried to make my writing as concise and spare as possible ... To write well, one must know how to employ a certain sparseness and

truthfulness.’ In early 1987, Thiep published his first important piece of writing: ‘The Winds of Hua Tat’, a collection of magical realist mini-tales inspired by the oral traditions of the ethnic minority communities of the Tay Bac region where he had lived.

The publication of Thiep’s first short stories in 1987 coincided with the inauguration by the Vietnamese Communist Party of a new liberal economic policy and a more progressive and open cultural policy known as *Doi Moi* (Renovation). The policy was shaped by the introduction of analogous reforms in China and the Soviet Union as well as the growth within Vietnam of a widespread sentiment that the country’s social and cultural life was languishing aimlessly alongside its stagnant economy.

As the policy was first taking hold in the summer of 1987, Nguyen Ngoc, the new editor of the journal *Van Nghe* (Literary Arts) and a critical national advocate for the *Doi Moi* policy, discovered a short story by Thiep entitled ‘The General Retires’ that had been sitting for six months at the bottom of a pile of old submissions. He recognised at once that the story represented something radically new in the history of modern Vietnamese literature. ‘In a cold, sharp-witted style,’ Ngoc explained in a 2008 essay, “‘The General Retires’ displayed a phenomenon never before seen in previous literature: the alarm and confusion of a war hero faced with the chaotic reality of postwar society. This work stirred up public opinion. Readers and also writers had many different opinions about it and about Nguyen Huy Thiep, but all writers, though they may not have said so openly, realized something very important: that they could no longer write as they had before.’

In explaining the cultural and critical response generated by ‘The General Retires’, Thiep echoed Ngoc in emphasising the story’s potent mix of thematic and formal innovations. ‘The story begins with the retirement of a general to his home village and ends with his death,’ the writer explained to me during an interview in the mid-1990s. ‘The period covered is a rather long one marked by a funeral and a marriage, episodes of great sadness and happiness, and a varied range of events and characters connected and intermingled with each other. In addition, I employed a kind of purified language, a language purged of unnecessary words. Sentences are reduced to their basic components: subjects and verbs. I used few adjectives and no frivolous or flowery words. The story is divided into numerous sections and the empty spaces separating each section are fashioned in such a way as to suggest a multitude of images and ideas to the reader.’ The story’s significance in Vietnamese literary history may ultimately derive more from the pioneering formal innovations that Thiep underlines here than from its daring thematisation during the early postwar era of the alienation of a retired Communist general.

In the next four years, Thiep’s publication of several dozen additional stories generated a huge critical discourse about the significance of the writer and the meaning of this work. The most influential and contentious were a series of stories, including ‘Fired Gold’, ‘Sharp Sword’ and ‘Chastity’, that revised the conventional reputations of well-known Vietnamese historical figures from the nation’s precolonial past. For Ngoc the significance of Thiep’s historical fiction was closely linked to Vietnam’s new postwar reality. ‘After many long and endless periods of opposing invaders,’ Ngoc explained, ‘this was really the first time that the Vietnamese people have had to confront not enemies from outside but ourselves, to ask who we really are and what our history really is ... To self-question is to look inward. If literature that exposes and denounces is essentially outward looking, the literature of Nguyen Huy Thiep is inward looking. One can say that this is the first time in our literature that the Vietnamese people have become

decisively engaged in self-revelation. This, I submit, is the most important contribution of Nguyen Huy Thiep.’

With the fall of the Eastern bloc and the rise of student protest movements in China, an increasingly nervous Vietnamese Communist establishment tightened or reversed many of the cultural reforms that had created conditions for Thiep’s emergence in the late 1980s. A grinding campaign of low-level but persistent harassment and intimidation by the police and cultural authorities stifled his creativity and depressed his productivity. Although he continued to publish intermittently for the remainder of his life, including several dozen short stories and literary essays, a handful of unproduced plays and three poorly received novellas, his professional life through the first two decades of the twenty-first century was marked by an abiding sense of frustration and unrealised promise. ‘I’ve worked as professional writer for twenty years,’ Thiep told *Tap Chi The Thao & Van Hoa* (Sports and Culture Magazine) in 2007, ‘and I’ve grown increasingly confused by the praise showered on literary garbage. I’m not jealous, just profoundly disillusioned.’ Adding to his dissatisfaction towards the end of his life was a sense that, while his enormous contribution to the history of modern Vietnamese literature remained unquestioned, international fame and recognition had eluded him.

When Thiep passed away at the age of seventy-one on 20 March, the gulf between his international reputation and his domestic literary standing could not have been wider. For most foreign readers, capable of accessing his fiction only through translations published by small independent or academic publishers, Thiep was a quirky and unconventional alternative to better known writers like Bao Ninh and Duong Thu Huong. For local audiences, on the other hand, Nguyen Huy Thiep has remained—despite the fallow period of his later career—the most innovative and important Vietnamese writer of the postcolonial era.



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