

UCLA
Colloquium Series

Title

Gio Thoi Phuong Nao/From Where the Wind Blows

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2qs5c5cv>

Author

Le, Le Pham

Publication Date

2005-08-09

Gio Thoi Phuong Nao/From Where the Wind Blows

Lecture delivered as part of the UCLA Center for Southeast Asian Studies
Colloquium Series, November 17, 2004

Born in Viet Nam, Le Pham Le attended the University of Pedagogy in Saigon, where she earned a B.A. in Vietnamese Language and Literature. After teaching in high schools for five years, Le fled her country with her family due to the fall of South Viet Nam. Her poems have appeared in *Nimrod International Literary Journal*, *Rattle*, *In Other Words*, *Beacons*, *Current*, *Erbacce*, *Evergreen Valley College Literary Magazine*, *Flowers of Love*, *Co Thom*, and *Cum Hoa Tinh Yeu*. Her first book-length publication is a bilingual collection of Vietnamese poems entitled *Gio Thoi Phuong Nao/From Where the Wind Blows*, translated by Dan-Thanh Pham Le and Nancy Arbuthnot (Vietnamese International Poetry Society, 2003).

My Passion for Poetry

Let me begin by mentioning an interesting remark from a good friend of mine, John Balaban, who is poet and translator of *Ca Dao Viet Nam: A Bilingual Anthology of Vietnamese Folk Poetry*. He said, “Vietnamese draw upon *ca dao* as freely, as effortlessly, as they draw well water” (17). As a conscientious objector who had been in Viet Nam during the war, John Balaban used to go to the countryside to collect audiotapes of *ca dao* sung by the local folk singers; therefore, he had a first-hand appreciation for the great verbal tradition of the Vietnamese literature.

Living in that poetic environment, I had developed a passion for poetry since childhood listening to my mother, grandmother, and neighbors singing lullabies swaying in their hammock in the summer time. I was amazed by the lyrical verses created by most of the Vietnamese ordinary folks who could not even read or write. Growing up, I was exposed to the Vietnamese literary tradition through reading and teaching literature. I cultivated so much admiration for the literary work from the countless Vietnamese poets such as Nguyen Du, Ba Huyen Thanh Quan, Ho Xuan Huong, Nguyen Binh, Quang Dung, Nguyen Nhuoc Phap, Han Mac Tu, Nguyen Huu Loan, etc.

Poetry has become an important part of my life ever since my early childhood, although John Balaban might be surprised to know it is not that easy for me to draw well water!

The Meaning Behind My Book

As a Vietnamese of the first generation resettling in America, when writing this book, I hope to leave a modest legacy for my children and their younger Vietnamese-American generations, and of course, for any other readers who can relate to my refugee experience wherever they may have come from.

I began my book about my overseas journey with the intent to leave the war-related experience behind, although I think it is important to include some historical

background regarding Viet Nam while presenting my poetry to you. That way you will have a sense of where I came from.

Where My Life Began

I was born in Don Duong, a small town located in the Central highland area of Viet Nam and attended an elementary school consisting of only five rooms. And when I had completed all the schooling that was available in my district, my parents were presented with the problem of where to send me next. Since there were no adequate schools nearby, my parents advised me to take an entrance exam to Bui Thi Xuan, an all girl school which combined both junior and high school students. At the time, to any student of my age, being accepted to that prestigious school was considered a great honor. I passed the entrance exam and was admitted.

My High School Years

Because the school was located more than fifty miles away from home and travel was so difficult and dangerous at that time, I had to find a closer place to live in, temporarily. My father was a civil-servant for a government bank and his work required him to be closer to his office, which was nearby my school. For the first year, my father rented an apartment close by to my school and arranged it so that whenever he was away, I would stay with our neighbors. I would only get to visit my family once a month and during the summer. For the rest of my high school years, I continued to live in Dalat, often staying with close family friends and boarding with other classmates.

One of my poems entitled “**Midnight**” which I wrote after my father passed away in 1999 describes one of my most unforgettable memories with him during my junior high school years. Ms. Cari An Coe (Kim Thuy) was so kind to offer to read this poem in English while I will be reciting it in Vietnamese. We will be following the same format for all of the poems presented today.

*In my hazy dream you appear
And disappear, father,
And I am young again, waiting at the gate
For you to pick me up from school
In Dalat, hometown, city of misty rain.*

Nửa Khuya

*Thoáng hiện Ba về trong giấc mơ
Như ngày xưa ấy lúc còn thơ,
Đón con trước cổng giờ tan học.
Đà Lạt, mưa phùn bay phát phơ.*

Dalat is also known as “City of Cherry Blossoms” and its weather is as nice as San Francisco’s.

When I got older, the situation in Viet Nam got worse. Fortunately, Dalat was one of the cities which was not severely affected by the war. According to S. Mintz, the United States had sent military advisers to Viet Nam since 1956, but it was not until 1968, when I graduated from high school, 536, 000 American soldiers arrived in my country. Obviously, the Viet Nam War was seriously escalated at this point.

Vietnamese Educational System

At the time, Viet Nam followed the French educational system in which at the end of ninth grade students had to pass the national exam to be able to move up to senior high school. At the end of eleventh grade, they had to pass another national exam to obtain BAC I. Then at the end of twelfth grade, they had to pass the last national exam to obtain BAC II, and of course, they had to fulfill all other requirements in order to be able to graduate officially from high school. Needless to say, a degree at any level in Viet Nam was like a matter of life and death. Why that important? Because if they failed, male students usually had to go to the war and chances were they might not be able to return home.

I had worked really hard and finally graduated with a Bachelor degree in Vietnamese Language and Literature and became a high school teacher. It does not sound or mean much to any of you in this room, but growing up in a war-torn country like Viet Nam with limited access to education, I am always grateful for my parents' dedication and sacrifice toward my education.

My College and Teaching Years

Disregarding the fact that the war was still going on, life was moving on, too. After completing one year at the College of Letters in Dalat, I moved to the capital Saigon upon my acceptance to the University of Pedagogy.

Because I highly valued education, during my high school years I only focused on studying, disregarding all marriage proposals. Generally speaking, in my culture, relationships between male and female students were not encouraged, if not dissuaded. And due to most families' obligations, it was unlikely for a married woman to continue her education. Living under a male dominated society, it was normal for the Vietnamese women to depend on their husbands' salary. Personally, I preferred to make something out of my own life. It was not until my third year of college that I met my husband who at the time attended the Institute of National Administration. We met during a field trip, and we were married four years later.

In 1972, during my second year of teaching in a province of the Mekong delta called "Ba Xuyen," one historical mark that needs to be mentioned here is that the last American combat battalion withdrew from Viet Nam leaving the unfinished war to the Vietnamese (Mintz). As a result, three years after that, Saigon fell to North Vietnamese troops on April 30, 1975. I happened to be there during that terrible transition.

The Aftermath of the War

On May 1, 1975, when the North Vietnamese troops first appeared on their tanks and moved toward the capital, my husband and I decided to leave Saigon. We went toward the shore of Rach Gia, a city located at the bottom of Viet Nam, where we would hope to escape by boat. Gunshots sounded everywhere on Highway Four, the main route from Saigon to its western cities. It was the first time I witnessed the disaster after the war. Thousands of South Vietnamese soldiers took off their military uniforms and left them on the shoulders of that long highway building masses of shoes, guns, and several other military items which they no longer needed. Deep inside the jungles, many southern military leaders chose to take their own lives in honor of the liberty ideal that they believed they had fought for. It was an extremely heart-breaking scene. Yet, although we knew nothing of what would happen next, we were somewhat happy that the war was finally over.

As we all know, wars always separate soldiers from their loved ones. The Viet Nam War is one example, and this is true of any war such as the one going on now. Hoping to stay alive and to be able to return home unharmed when the war ends is a common desire of all soldiers. Their sentiments and wishes are expressed in the poem entitled “**Two Songs for a Friend**” which I will be reading to you.

Song of a Soldier's Wife

*It's raining in the East,
and wet here, too, in the West,
dew or snow
always falling.
Have autumn breezes
blown in the wilderness yet?
Lonely nights,
how much I miss you!*

Song of a Soldier

*On the battlefield,
Bombs and guns have finally quieted.
Dawn approaches; under this sky
The sun wakes up my human longing.
The tide still rises and falls, the sea's memory
filled with an image of you in a flowing dress.
From far away, my love,
I am returning.*

Nỗi Lòng Chinh Phụ

Mưa bên Đông, sao ướt bên Tây?

*Nghe đâu đây sương tuyết phủ đây.
Hắt hiu thu chớm ngoài quan ải.
Cô phòng, ai mãi nhớ thương ai?*

Nỗi Lòng Chinh Phu

*Chiến trường ngưng tiếng đạn bom.
Bình minh nắng gọi một vòm trời yêu.
Nhấp nhô ngọn sóng thủy triều.
Bồi hồi biển nhớ em chiều áo bay.
Từ nơi góc núi, chân mây,
Anh về nói lại chuỗi ngày yêu đương.*

It was true that many soldiers from both sides were able to return home but not everyone was happy. Because when we arrived in Rach Gia, we learned that it was too late to reach its shore safely due to the chaos. Troops from the North had taken control, and we had to return to Saigon the next day. As were millions of other military officers and civil-servants, my husband was imprisoned for his association with the South Vietnam non-Communist government for about a year. It was not until he was released from the so-called “re-education camp,” our journey to freedom began.

My Malaysia Sojourn

The poem entitled “**Echo**” is about my experience on the boat at the beginning of my family’s voyage when I unexpectedly became the spokesperson for the boat.

*Twilight off the coast of Malaysia,
storm rising. The coast guard fires
a warning and the refugees dive
to the deck. A lone woman rises,
holding her baby tight. Her cry
for help echoes through the night
and the guards cease firing,
allowing the boat to land on the free island.*

Tiếng Vọng

*Súng âm ỉ nổ rền trong cơn bão.
Khách trên tàu chột nhón nháo, xôn xao.
Nàng đứng dậy trước mũi tàu, lao đảo.
Tay bỗng con lên tiếng nấc nghẹn ngào.
Âm thanh lạ vọng vang chiều hải đảo.
Người lính tuần, tác dạ bỗng nao nao.
Buông nòng súng, mở tấm lòng nhân đạo.
Bờ tự do, bèn lạ vẫy tay chào.*

It was November 11, 1978, fifty-one other people and I risked our lives to come overseas seeking freedom in America. After surviving the first horrifying challenge on the boat, we were allowed to land on the shore of Terengganu, a western city of Malaysia for a day, and finally settled in Pulau Bidong refugee camp. According to Richard Holbroke, U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for East-Asian and Pacific Affairs, approximately 50% of Vietnamese refugees died at sea during their escape. I know I was more than lucky.

The following is the poem “**Simplicity**” which captures my experience in the camp where we tried so hard to find peace through life’s struggles.

*Exiled in this strange land
we build our tent-site on sand,
rocks soft to our work-hardened hands.
At night when the moon shines
we recite poems. The hammock sways.
A mother’s song lures her child to peace.
Beyond the monkey-bridge,
a boat rocks with the waves.
Wind, carry my worries
to the other side of the sea!*

Đơn Sơ

*Lạc loài trên đất tạm dung,
Dựng căn chòi nhỏ bên vùng biển êm.
Bàn tay chai cứng, đá mềm.
Đêm trăng soi bóng bên thềm, đọc thơ.
Đong đưa chiếc võng chùng tơ.
Điệu ru ngày cũ “À ơi! Ví dầu ...”
Chòi sau lắt léo nhịp cầu.
Buồm xa thấp thoáng bóng tà lữ.
Bềnh bồng sóng nước vô tư.
Gió ơi, đưa mối sầu dư sang bờ!*

In her review on Amazon.com, one of my readers says “Whether by wind or by words, Le’s poems transport the reader into a different realm, and I was uplifted by the flight.” I think it is really charming. Thanks to her and to the wind!

A New Journey Began

Any of you, who are familiar with the Vietnamese culture, might be wondering how these Vietnamese refugees could be able to leave their beloved country disregarding their attachment to their homeland especially to their loved ones who were left behind.

I would say that it was one of the most difficult things I have ever done in my life. Let me read to you the poem entitled “**Church Bells**” describing my homesickness for Viet Nam.

*Where can I go
under this hot summer sun?
Why is it so hard
to find peace?
Hair tangled, vision blurred,
I wander town lost,*

*a young bird
fallen from its nest
under a clear sky
that is crying.*

*Is there nothing
in this false world
more beautiful than
the songs of heaven
to lure my soul?
Is there anything
more than promises
to lure the world?*

*Alone in California,
in public places
or in bed listening
to church bells
that keep me awake,*

*I turn aside
unable to hear
the peace that the bells
used to bring.*

Chuông Nhà Thờ

*Như một oan khiên, nghiệt ngã,
Đến nơi này lòng lấm sự ngón ngang.
Tôi suốt đời là một kẻ lang thang.
Tìm đâu thấy niềm bình an miên viễn.*

*Tôi vẫn đi mệt nhoài
Giữa lòng phố miệt mài nắng đổ.
Mồ hôi từng cơn gây khô da thịt.
Trời không mưa sao đại lộ bỗng mờ?*

*Tóc rối trên vai ơ thờ.
Buồn như chim non bơ vợ không còn tổ ấm
Khi cơn mưa chiều vừa tạnh
Am thầm nghe khóc cả trời xanh.*

*Tôi biết mình vốn thích an lành
Nhưng cuộc sống gặp nhiều bất hạnh.
Có gì đẹp như những lời ca thân thánh
Để quên rũ tâm hồn tôi?
Còn gì vui hơn những hẹn ước xa xôi
Để ru ngủ trên gian tội lỗi?*

*Đêm Cali vẫn bùng bùng mở hội.
Người và người ngợp phố rong chơi.
Ray rứt nghe chuông vang vọng từng hồi.
Khuya trở giấc, quất quay trời viễn xứ.*

When I first arrived in America, I was totally bereft.

No matter how much I value the freedom in my second homeland, I was so sad thinking of my parents who were so far away. Through the poem “**When the Last Leaf Falls**,” I wrote about a dream I had about my late father who has left a great spiritual legacy for me and was the motivation to make my book of poetry a reality.

*Father, from the invisible world,
are you calling me?
Reading your diary in my dreams
I feel you still alive.*

*Your words resound:
I see the last leaf falling
like my soul sailing toward my ancestors,
my body still anchored to this shore.*

*In the same dream my sister appears.
I show her your diary, then close it.
The ripe plum she was eating
is squeezed tight in her palm.*

Outside, wind blows, rain falls.

Chiếc Lá Sau Cùng

*Từ cõi vô hình, Ba gọi con?
Tưởng như ngày ấy Ba vẫn còn.
Những dòng nhật ký hư hay thực?
Cảm xúc dâng tràn, dạ héo hon.*

*Em từ quê mẹ đến thăm con
Trong giấc mơ xa dáng mỗi mòn
Vò nát quả đào đang chín mộng
Sụt sùi dòng lệ, gió mưa tuôn.*

*Chiếc lá vô tình kia sắp rơi
Như thuyền ai đó đổ ra khơi.
Nhỏ neo, rời bến về quê cũ
Hồn gửi bên trời, mộng tá toi.*

Some of my readers had told me that they have found comfort through reading this poem during their time of sorrow after losing a loved one.

The Eternity

Through my presentation, I have shared with you some poems from my collection entitled *From Where the Wind Blows*, which reflects my life journey as a Vietnamese refugee and the journey I traveled in discovering myself in a new land. I know at some point in your lives, many of you will be able to relate to my experience wherever you might have come from.

Life is an endless journey full of surprises and obstacles, isn't it? Let me conclude my speech by reading to you my last poem entitled "**Perception.**"

*Living this life is like living a dream
joy and suffering almost the same.
This passion for poetry
this happiness, this ongoing journey of life—
One day when I close my eyes
all this will pass
as wind blows over long grasses,
as clouds drift past.*

Nhận Thức

*Cuộc sống này nào khác một cơn mơ.
Ngưỡng mộ đời, mê mãi những vần thơ.
Ta cho niềm vui chùng như nổi khổ.
Hạnh phúc quanh ta quý giá vô bờ.*

*Rồi một ngày ta nhắm mắt xuôi tay.
Nỗi muộn phiền đong đưa bông cỏ may.
Nhân gian sâu chơi vui như gió thoảng
Chuyện mắt còn xin gửi áng mây bay.*

As John Balaban mentioned in his translation entitled *Spring Essence: the poetry of Ho Xuan Huong*, hopefully, when everything in this life is gone, “only poetry lasts” (113).

Works Cited

Abstract written by Quyen Di Chuc Bui.

Balaban, John. *Ca Dao Vietnam: A Bilingual Anthology of Vietnamese Folk Poetry*, Unicorn Press: 1980.

Balaban, John. *Spring Essence: the poetry of Ho Xuan Huong*. Copper Canyon Press: 2000.

Mintz, S. (2003). “Digital History,” Retrieved July 13, 2005 from <http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu>

“The Tragic Journey,” [Dien Dan Dan Chu](http://www.danchu.net), 27 July 2005

<http://www.danchu.net/TaiLieuDacBietDDDC/O.BoatPeopleHistory.IE.2a.html#_ftn4>.