

UPDATE

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BUREAUCRACY IN HANOI IS EXPECTED TO SHRINK

Business leaders in Seattle and elsewhere are awaiting more details of reported plans for a massive reshuffling of the national bureaucracy in Hanoi.

Reports say the shake-up revealed last month will merge eight governmental bodies into three "super ministries," the Ministries of Agriculture, Industry, and Planning and Investment, and also will consolidate entire layers of bureaucracy.

The changes, expected to take place in the summer, had been anticipated for a considerable time as an essential part of the country's transition to a market economy that began almost ten years ago.

Economists in the U.S. believe the announced reforms may facilitate the establishment of a stock market in Hanoi, reduce graft, quicken the pace of privatization, and make it easier for outsiders to set up new businesses.

SEATTLE HEALTH AGENCY HAS PROJECTS IN VIETNAM

A non-profit agency in Seattle promoting health programs in Vietnam is the newest of six companies that have joined the Greater Seattle Vietnam Association as corporate members.

PATH stands for Programs in Appropriate Technology for Health.

The "appropriate" technology includes simple and sometimes innovative preventive actions that are affordable and administered by members of the host community.

It mainly addresses the needs of women and children, with an emphasis on improving the quality of reproductive health services and reducing the spread of communicable diseases, including AIDS.

PATH, founded in 1980, has provided programs in many developing countries, including Thailand where the AIDS

epidemic has been grave.

In a two year project sponsored by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and supported by Vietnam's Ministry of Health, PATH is conducting programs that promote the use of condoms in three locations in Vietnam, with the expectation that the programs would be available everywhere in the country.

Other programs administered elsewhere in Southeast Asia and proposed for Vietnam include education about population control, malaria prevention and inoculations against hepatitis B.

In addition, the organization has established a Fund for Technological Transfer, which helps low-income groups get loans to produce diagnostic materials and other items needed for serving special needs of their regions.

VIETNAMESE AND U.S. WRITERS ON TOUR

A group of visiting writers from Vietnam and the U.S. were confronted by loud protesters in Seattle, October 30 and 31. The writers gave scheduled discussions at the University of Washington and the Seattle Public Library to promote a new anthology about the war and early years of peace.

At one point during the University program, a protester climbed a tree outside the window and shouted his objections through a megaphone.

Campus police arrived at the scene, sent the protesters away and drove some of the University sponsors to safety.

There were no injuries or arrests. [See p. 2 and 3]

WRITERS FROM OPPOSING SIDES SHARE

The Seattle Public Library and the University of Washington hosted readings and discussions by the editors, authors and translators of the anthology The Other Side of Heaven: Post-War Fiction by American and Vietnamese Writers. The events on October 30 and 31st, were part of a national book tour sponsored by the publisher, Curbstone Press, and the Ford Foundation. The local events were supported by the Seattle Public Library, Elliott Bay Books, the Wing Luke Museum and various departments at the University of Washington. The anthology is being acclaimed as the first collection of stories to embrace the literature of three primary combatants of the war: the Americans, the South Vietnamese and the North Vietnamese. As such, the work marks an important literary moment, as writers from the different sides define a path towards a reconciliation that has alluded many participants of the war since its official end in 1975.

The participants included Le Minh Khue, a veteran of the Peoples Army of Viet Nam and a reporter to the Army newspaper. Khue now works for the Writers Union in Hanoi, is widely published within Vietnam and is regarded as one of the new literary forces experimenting with contemporary literary forms that reject both the romanticism of the French colonial novel and socialist realism of the war period; in so doing they are redefining the limits of public discourse through their harsh interpretation of social and political reality. Her story "Tony D" is a stark portrait of life in an urban squatter settlement, where inhabitants live by crime, with scarce regard for the human decency of friend, neighbor and family alike. Her characters are alienated from the norms of society, exhibiting only a tenuous regard for the moral forces that have prevailed in the pre war society: Confucian piety, Christian morality, and respect for ancestors. In discussions at the University of Washington, Khue described reading Jack London during the war, and how this writing brought an appreciation for the shared humanity of even those who were called the "enemy." She feels that it is upon this shared human suffering, which is the basis of her post-war writing, that she hopes to build the foundation of reconciliation between former enemies. Her story speaks to the effects of greed and avarice upon our humanity.

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The second writer from Viet Nam, Ho Anh Thai, is also respected as a member of the new literary scene, and is regarded with some caution by the current government in Vietnam. His story in the anthology, "Fragment of a Man," also dwells upon the enduring dislocation resulting from war. Thai is a veteran of the Vietnamese conflict in Cambodia and has worked as a diplomat in India and currently works for the Foreign Ministry journal, World Affairs Weekly. Thai took advantage of the panel discussion at the University to describe the changes in the economics of literary production; with the proliferation of literary journals throughout the country, there is a greater incentive for young writers to present their work for publication, although Thai and Khue both lament that the traditional love of reading is losing ground to video and television.

Another writer represented in the anthology, Hoang Khoi Phong, is one of the most respected amongst the overseas Vietnamese community in this country. A 13-year veteran of the Army of Republic of Vietnam, Phong has written many novels over the last twenty years which describe his experiences in war and in exile. Despite his pain in leaving his family (he did not see his wife and daughter for 20 years until a recent visit to Viet Nam), he claims that bitterness can only bring further strife and pain to the already divided community. In a moving delivery in poetic text, he demonstrated how he sees in his writing an immutable truth that transcends politics and speaks to the common core of human suffering. It was perhaps Phong's strength of conviction that was most heavily tested during these events. Being the only representative of the former South (the anthology includes the other well know writers, Nguyen Mong Giac and Vo Phien), Phong was the object of emotional criticism from the Viet Kieu community here who protested against his decision to participate in the anthology and to speak on the same panel as the visitors from Hanoi, whom they dismiss as agents of "communist propaganda" regardless of the subtleties of their relationship with the Vietnamese government.

REACTIONS TO WAR AND PEACE . . .

The undeniably emotional impact of these literary events derived from their giving voice and substance to the silent figures of "the enemy," and from their bringing to focus the shadowing and faceless persona of the Southern Vietnamese ally. The voices were carefully metered with presentations of poetry and prose from the two American writers, Wayne Karlin and George Evans, whose experiences in war and its aftermath mirrored their own. Karlin, who was one of the editors of the volume, and along with Le Minh Khue, one of its instigators, spoke of how the volume was borne out of the mutual realization that hate is a construction of convenience for military and political machines; he and Khue knew upon their first meeting that their task as writers was to deconstruct this image of the "enemy" as not human and therefore "killable," and to promote in its place knowledge of the common suffering of war. Karlin's feelings were echoed in the poetry of George Evans, translated into Vietnamese for the event at the Public Library by Ho Anh Thai, which interwove this theme of common humanity throughout the sections of the readings.

* * *

Both events provided a first opportunity for many people to hear these words of reconciliation -- interpreted into English by two translators for the volume -- Nguyen Qui Duc and Thai Tuyet Quan, and into Vietnamese for the Vietnamese-speaking audience by Ho Anh Thai. Nguyen Qui Duc, himself a radio journalist and writer, was moderator for the panel at the University of Washington, where he raised questions that focus not only on issues of reconciliation and the aftermath of the war, but also on the role of the young generation of Vietnamese American writers, whom he represents. According to Duc, these younger writers want to move on from the divisive issues of the war, to explore themes more pertinent to their times, such as their literary identity as Asian American writers. At the same time Duc wants to recognize the debt that these younger writers owe to the older generation, whose labors liberated the younger generation to explore these new avenues. He also recognizes that the voice of the southern writers has not been granted due attention in US popular and scholarly literary circles: academic conferences which have brought together the literary productions of both "sides" of the war have often failed to include the voice of the South. Karlin has begun to address this omission with this anthology, which is the first popular paperback volume to include translations of these major literary figures of the former Republic of Vietnam. However, as one critical questioner posed to the panel, where is the voice of the contemporary southern provinces? Is there indeed a voice from other regions of Vietnam that is not being represented by these writers from Hanoi? Duc admits to this criticism: US scholars are now fascinated by the quality and demeanor of the new literature blossoming in the literary journals of the Writer's Union, but this urban writing does not represent the whole of contemporary Vietnamese literature. Perhaps there are many other voices yet to be heard, but this anthology represents only the first small glimpse of the powerful literary traditions of Vietnam.

Both presentations were made all the more poignant by the voices of dissent shouted from without; Karlin described literature as "the small still voice that speaks to the heart." The small voice cannot easily be heard above the shouts of hatred, but, as George Evans concluded, "The day that those people outside sit in here with us -- that is the day that this war is over."

- by Judith Henchy, Head, SE Section, University of Washington Libraries

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A grassroots, non-profit, duly incorporated and registered organization dedicated to helping the people of Seattle Create and maintain links with the people of Vietnam.	
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Excerpts from "No Time", by Nguyen Sa

I must get far away from this city
with its soot-streaked curbs
and people who pass each other
without a smile or a word.
"No time! I have no time!" she answered me.
Still, she did answer me, and yet
I didn't dare ask her,
"What important things have you time for?"
but whispered to myself instead
--the homeless whispering to the homeless--
there are those who love but have no time for loving.
If this is true, how can birds fly back to their nests?
How can poetry be written?
If this is true, birds and poems will die.

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