

UPDATE

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Editor, Dwight Davis

Signing Marks New Relationship

Seattle and Haiphong signed a document on October 28 to authorize the alliance for friendship and cooperation that both cities have been looking forward to for more than a year. The signing ceremony took place in the formal reception hall at the headquarters of the People's Committee of Haiphong City, and was televised on Vietnam TV. Terms for joint development of mutually beneficial projects followed the guidelines of sister city alliances. Interests to be developed are business and trade, education, health and culture. Haiphong is the second sister city linking Vietnam with the U.S. West Coast. Ho Chi Minh's sister city is San Francisco. The new authorization was signed by City Council Member Sue Donaldson, the designated liaison for the City of Seattle; and Hoang Van Dinh, the Director of Foreign Relations for the Peoples' Committee of Haiphong City. The Greater Seattle Vietnam Association, GSVA, which collaborated with Haiphong to create the alliance, was represented by Vice President Gary Johnson; Advisory Council member William Glassford, who is Senior Vice President for International Banking at Seafirst Bank, and a GSVA member who resides in Haiphong, Tobin Tent, of Capstone International Finance, Inc. Haiphong officials attending the ceremony included Chairman of the Peoples' Committee for Haiphong City, Trang Huy Dang, and several other dignitaries. The principals discussed details of an official follow-up signing ceremony in Seattle between the Seattle Mayor and Mr. Dang. That ceremony would be a highlight of an anticipated trade mission in 1997 to bring the two cities closer together.

Vietnamese Author Looks At Power and Morality

The man often called the preeminent Vietnamese fiction writer, Nguyen Huy Thiep visited Seattle on October 29th and 30th. He spoke at two public events on the University of Washington campus and visited Nathan Hale public High School. The events at "UW", which were cosponsored by the University of Washington Libraries, the History Department and Southeast Asian Studies Program, in conjunction with Seattle Public Library and Elliott Bay Book Company, were greeted with great enthusiasm by both the University and the local Vietnamese community. Thiep is the first Vietnamese writer invited to visit this country under the auspices of the U.S. Information Agency's International Visitors' Program since 1975.

Since coming to prominence after 1986, Thiep has been widely regarded as representing a totally new genre of literature in Vietnam. He became known to American readers with the publication of his short stories in translation, *The General Retires*. Some people have called him Vietnam's first post-modern writer, for his ability to create bewildering narratives whose chronologies and subjects are fractured and fragmented. Others have compared his work with that of Kafka or Salman Rushdie. In his lecture "Reading Nguyen Huy Thiep," Petr Zinoman, Assistant Professor of Southeast Asian History at the University of California at Berkeley, described the cunning way Thiep challenges the traditional assumptions of the modern state through an artifice of reframing events from an earlier era to read as allegory for the present political situation.

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Vietnamese Family Altar For The Burke Collection

It is likely that many handsome ancestral altars are found in the homes of Seattle's Viet Kieu community. But it is doubtful any are more impressive than the one recently received by Dr. Karl Hutterer. Hutterer is Director of the Burke Museum at the University of Washington.

Hutterer is also a director of GSV, elected to the board at the annual meeting in September. At that time, he shared with the attending membership the story of this altar's journey to Seattle. But his own journey is interesting too.

Attraction of Foreign Cultures

Hutterer was born in Austria and attended school in Germany. As an adolescent he developed an avid interest in other cultures. Entering the priesthood, he was posted to Cebu City in the Philippines where he could both conduct his clerical duties and pursue a university education in anthropology. It was there that his interest in the cultures of Southeast Asia went full bloom. Eventually, he left the priesthood and completed his Ph.D. at the University of Hawaii's East West Center. He spent 16 years at the University of Michigan and served as Asian Curator of the anthropology museum there before coming to the Burke in 1990.

One of Hutterer's early tasks at the Burke was a big one: the organization of "Pacific Voices," a new longterm exhibit to represent the natural and cultural history of our many Pacific Rim neighbors. For help, Hutterer turned to the Burke's Community Advisory Board. Board members represented fifteen of Washington's diverse ethnic groups. Members were asked to identify general cultural elements around which to organize the exhibit and recommend representative artifacts for each specific culture. The four significant elements selected: language, oral traditions, rites or ceremonies, and the relationship to teachers or ancestors. It was Olympia's Thuy Vu who suggested the Burke acquire for exhibit a Vietnamese family altar.

The choice was perhaps obvious; the family altar commands a prominent place in virtually every Vietnamese home. Perhaps resembling a shallow, open box about 18 inches high and

standing on end, the altar usually sits against the wall on a nice table or credenza in the main room. It contains photographs of deceased relatives, parents and grandparents or departed siblings. Burning candles and incense, as well as offerings of flowers and fruit, are placed before it.

Hutterer was surprised that he could find virtually nothing in the literature of anthropology about Vietnamese ancestor worship. But he was faced with another, more pressing problem: where and how to acquire an altar.

Then Mr. Dang Vu Minh, Vietnam's Minister for Natural Science and Technology, passed through Seattle last January. At a reception, Dang, who is attempting to organize a museum of natural history in Hanoi, was eager to talk with Hutterer. When the family altar came up, Dang volunteered to help. Eight months and many faxes later, Dang returned to Seattle for a trade fair in September. He brought the altar with him.

Traditional Altar Made To Order

This is no ordinary altar, like those made of plywood and sold on the streets in Old Hanoi. Dang commissioned an altar from a family of craftsmen outside of Hanoi in the village of Dong Ky, where Dang's own family altar originated. The altar's base stands about three inches high on four solid handcarved wooden legs, and the roof is supported by carved columns. It is hand-painted in the traditional deep red with gold trimming. The proscenium is dominated by two imposing dragons, aggressively animated and squaring off overhead. Dang also brought a set of incense burners, candle holders and offering cups to complete the display. And he insisted that the whole would be his donation to "Pacific Voices".

Although the altar was broken slightly in transit, repairs will be simple and the Burke's expert staff promises that when it finishes the damage will be undetectable. Potential viewers must be patient however. "Pacific Voices" is not scheduled to open for another year; you can see the altar in November, 1997.

by Scott Wild

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Writer Speaks In Seattle

In his response to the lecture, Thiep countered that it is wrong to interpret his opposition as a political phenomenon, he is opposed not only to political power, but as a writer, he has a responsibility to oppose all presumed areas of power, and that it was his duty to help society find a position of moderation acceptable to all factions.

Clearly Thiep's work resists easy classification, both in its complexity and variety. He speaks from his experience as a rural history teacher in deceptively simple language depicting everyday life in Vietnam. This simplicity however, belies a deep sophistication rooted in his understanding of Confucian and Buddhist teachings, and a keen awareness of the moral issues of his time. A reading in translation, presented by visiting Vietnamese American writer Nguyen Qui Duc, of a story written while Thiep was teaching in a minority village in the highlands, demonstrated his evocative descriptive writing and his ability to speak to contemporary moral issues, even when writing in the style of a traditional folk tale.

by Judith Henchy

GSVA Board Members Off To Vietnam With "Peace Trees"

Jessica Nguyen and Dwight Davis leave Seattle on November 22 with a team of American and International participants to join 40 Vietnamese to plant trees near Dong Ha

Dong Ha is in Quang Tri province, one of the areas most heavily bombed and mined during the war in Vietnam. People are still being injured and killed many years after the end of hostilities.

After the team plants local species of trees to begin a "Peace Forest" they will start construction of an interpretive center that will teach local children how to avoid landmines.

Jessica will then introduce Dwight to her family in Hue. She will spend several days with them while Dwight goes to Haiphong to represent GSVA in various sister-city activities.

Risk-taking Vietnamese Movie Directors

A chain of recent movie releases suggests that Vietnamese films are becoming more sophisticated and provocative than ever. The series also indicates that more Vietnamese film-makers are willing to take risks on diverse subject matters, and are more gallant with their interpretations. Two such films are A Tale of Kieu and Cyclo.

A Tale of Kieu, directed by up-and-coming female director, Trinh Minh-Ha, was inspired by the nationally celebrated Vietnamese poem, "Kieu". The main character in the poem, Kieu, became a prostitute to save her family from disgrace. Through her life experiences, readers are invited to explore different aspects of life; including, love, passion, loss of innocence, and other travesties.

A Tale of Kieu takes place in modern times with a Vietnamese woman named Tyen Kieu, who works as a journalist and part-time model. For a writing assignment, the woman researches the poem, thus discovering interesting significance of the poem and about herself.

The movie is somewhat disoriented. Trinh Minh-Ha explained, "The film is fragmented because people remember the poem in fragments. I was more focused on the voyeurism that runs throughout the history of narrative films."

Poetry is also the central focus of Cyclo, directed by Tran Anh Hung, whose recent film The Scent of Green Papaya received an Oscar nomination. Cyclo depicts the story of a cyclo, or pedicab driver, who descends into a life of crime in Ho Chi Minh City after his vehicle was stolen. The driver soon becomes strangely attracted to the city's violence and the gang leader, not knowing that the man is concurrently pimping for his girlfriend, the driver's sister. Viewers who enjoyed and expected the tranquility and innocence of The Scent of Green Papaya will find this movie disturbing and grotesque. An example is the execution by Saran Wrap in the last part of the film.

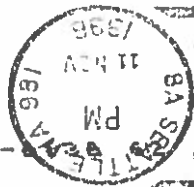
Tran Anh Hung successfully conveyed surrealistic themes of innocence -- its loss, regret, and the attempts to recapture it in this movie.

By Tyler Du Lam

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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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