

DOAN CAM THI

Bad Fathers: The Patricide Theme in Three Short Stories by Nguyễn Huy Thiệp (1987–1990)*

There is no good father, that's the rule.

Jean-Paul Sartre, *Les Mots*

After reunification on April 30, 1975, Vietnam was faced with numerous problems, both social and economic. The scars inflicted by wars ran deep and affected several generations. Economic planning and its corollary, rising inflation, caused living standards to fall alarmingly. The crisis in relations with China, the conflict with Democratic Kampuchea, isolation from the rest of Asia, and the US embargo worsened the situation. For the first ten years of its existence, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam was among the poorest countries in the world. The population experienced material impoverishment and ideological uncertainty. Many of their existing ideas had been challenged by the test of time. Certain Confucian values that had once been well rooted—respect for parents, disdain for money, fidelity in marriage, integrity of government servants, maintenance of dignity in the face of poverty—began to lose their grip.

In this situation, socialist realism struggled to pursue its positive narrative of the “radical” transformation of society since the advent of the

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Revolution and “new man”—that necessarily edifying hero. At the heart of debates agitating Vietnamese society during the Renovation [Đổi Mới, the movement launched by the Communist Party during its 6th National Congress in 1986 under the influence of perestroika in the Soviet Union], the status of literature was in question: Could it go on being blind to the realities of the times? Should it serve the Party or the individual? How could it restore shape, color, and vibrancy to daily life?

Published on June 20, 1987 in *Văn Nghệ* [Art and Literature], the journal of the Writers’ Union, the short story “Tuống về hưu” [The General Retires] by Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, had the effect of a bombshell. The story tells the tragic tale of a hero of the Revolution, who, unable to find his place in a society corrupted by the quest for money, finally finds a way to die. It is narrated in a detached tone, using coarse language colored with an extraordinary sense of derision. While the talent of the young writer was immediately recognized, his “morals” offended. *Văn Nghệ* became a space for debate on the subject of the writings of Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, particularly his historical tales where characters express “shocking” remarks or “defile the honor of the nation.” “Vietnam is a virgin, who, raped by Chinese civilization, found pleasure, humiliation and hate,” says the French adventurer in “Vàng lửa” [Fired Gold].¹ Nguyễn Ngọc, editor-in-chief of *Văn Nghệ*, showed remarkable courage by publishing not only the short stories by Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, but also divergent points of view on the controversial young author.²

Following the publication of “The General Retires,” things began to falter. On December 5, 1987 *Văn Nghệ* published “Hãy đọc lời ai điếu cho một giai đoạn văn nghệ minh họa” [Requiem for Literature at the Service of Ideology] by Nguyễn Minh Châu, an important figure in literary circles. In a painful confession, the author reveals his “cowardice” and that of his generation of writers who have “destroyed their own personality and bent their pen to power.” He shows how compromise with the authorities provoked the “split personality” of Vietnamese writers: “Each one of us seems to be writing with two pens: one addresses the ordinary reader, the other addresses the authorities. . . . Sincere words must be accompanied by a flattering phrase. How cowardly! In his heart of hearts, every writer should admit it. Fear lies at the base of this weakness.” He concludes with a bitter reflection: “Writers have lost the capacity for thought, meaning new and

original thinking. They exist like the soulless or have sold their soul to the regime. This is the most serious consequence of literature serving ideology.”³

Without openly criticizing the Party or its Marxist-Leninist principles, writers were demanding change and addressing taboo issues. While the authors of such works as “The General Retires” by Nguyễn Huy Thiệp or *Thiên sứ* [*The Crystal Messenger*] by Phạm Thị Hoài distanced themselves from socialist realism to reveal poverty or discussed the realm of dreams and the subconscious, *Nỗi buồn chiến tranh* [*The Sorrow of War*] by Bảo Ninh and *Những thiên đường mù* [*Paradise of the Blind*] by Dương Thu Hương challenged war or land reform.⁴

So literature in Vietnam has not always been a weapon in the service of ideology and was able to develop in spite of close surveillance by the authorities. A focus should be placed on these internal transformations and their endogenous dynamics to enquire beyond a repetitive problematic of the necessarily passive, even alienated author faced with an authoritarian regime. For we have seen that even within the Writers Union, an association controlled by both State and Party, criticism was voiced and a desire for reform found expression.

My paper on the literature of this period offers a reading of the theme of patricide in the work of Nguyễn Huy Thiệp as an indication of profound ideological crisis and as a metaphor for the keen desire for change.

In the writings of Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, fathers make regular successive appearances. Mothers are discreet or entirely absent,⁵ while fathers occupy the spotlight. In “Tuống về hưu” [The General Retires], “Không có vua” [Without a King], and “Tội ác và trừng phạt” [Crime and Punishment], three short stories written between 1987 and 1990, the authoritative father figure is omnipresent. Whether an army dignitary, a modest bicycle repairer, or a humble farmer, these fathers all have difficult relationships with their children—relationships which, although not devoid of love or affection, suffer from grudges, conflict, and hate. These fathers call their sons cowards, set them against each other, and rape their daughters. They flout the traditional moral codes founded on values inherited from the Classics, where the father is an idealized reflection or an edifying reference with which children must identify.⁶ Two decades later, in Nguyễn Huy Thiệp’s 2005 novel *Tuổi hai mươi yêu dấu* [My Glorious Twenties],

a celebrated writer is considered by his dropout son to be a “bad father.” The father’s death finally coincides with the child reaching maturity, as if only death justified his paternity. The dominance of this theme shows the extent to which the person, the authority, and the presence of the father are the core target in Thiệp’s work.

Generational conflict is a leitmotif of twentieth-century Vietnamese literature, from the modernist groups in the 1930s to socialist realism. But in the thesis novels of the early years of the century, where individuals are in conflict with the oppressive traditional family model, children are still sacrificing their own happiness in favor of filial duty. The hero of the famous *Tố Tâm* [A Pure Heart] published in 1925 by Hoàng Ngọc Phách, Đạm Thủy, a Hà Nội intellectual, renounces the love of beautiful Tố Tâm to honor his engagement to the fiancée chosen by his parents. Passionate as he is about European culture, he has never questioned the basis of the traditional moral code that requires the child to venerate and obey his parents in all circumstances.⁷ *Lá ngọc cành vàng* [Jade Leaves and Golden Branches], written in 1939 by Nguyễn Công Hoan, portrays a cruel father who, blinded by preoccupation with the prestige of the family, prefers to see his daughter suffer rather than married to a commoner. However, the only resolution the author provides to the conflict is the tragic death of the heroine. As for the so-called revolutionary character of socialist realism, in fact it seems to mask the moralizing aspect of the message. Such literature only tolerates dissent in order to elicit the happy endings shown in idyllic tableaux of the reconciled family. The Communist Party has criticized paternal authority at times, even as it defended the stabilizing role that fathers have played as guarantors of an established social order. So Confucian tradition and Communist ideology agree in condemning any challenge directed at the father. It is hardly surprising that revolt against paternal authority is so rarely portrayed in literature where patricide remains a taboo subject.

Nguyễn Huy Thiệp’s inquiry is more comprehensive than any of his predecessors, going far beyond a simple critique of the patriarchy. This paper questions three of his texts, namely “The General Retires,” “Without a King,” and “Crime and Punishment,” which all portray murderer offspring.⁸ Either they secretly wish to get rid of their genitor, or they unequivocally demand his death, or he is killed with an axe. The death

of the father at the end of each story is systematic. The action presents him as belonging to a species threatened with extinction and even likely to be assassinated by his own children.

Nguyễn Huy Thiệp does not conceal his fascination for this crime within the family. His short stories, written as narration of events by a witness or in diary form, often paint a portrait of a narrator whose biographical traits resemble those of the author. The stories closely integrate both the desire and the act of patricide into the complex and tormented realities of the years between 1975 and 1985, the decade beginning with victory in the war fought by the Communist Party and ending in poverty, the advent of the reign of money and disillusionment with ideology.

What does this terrible form of murder mean? What is Nguyễn Huy Thiệp's stance? Is he on the side of the father/victim or the child/criminal? What link does he establish between confusion in private lives and evils in the public sphere? What challenges for the family and for Vietnamese society are anticipated by his reflections? These are the questions that my reading of Nguyễn Huy Thiệp's work attempts to answer, taking into account how literature, ethics, politics, and economics interweave in the complex strands of the author's work.

The Murder of the Patriarch

“THE GENERAL RETIRES”: THE PHANTASM

Published in the review *Văn Nghệ* in 1987, “The General Retires” immediately established Nguyễn Huy Thiệp's reputation as a talented young writer. In this short story, a general in the People's Army, the eldest son of a family of minor scholars who enlisted at the age of 12, retires to his home village in the suburbs of Hà Nội with his disabled wife; his only son Thuần, the narrator; his two granddaughters; and their domestics Cơ, an old man of peasant stock, and his daughter. Thuần is a researcher in the Institute of Physics; his wife, Thủy, is a doctor.

For the first time in his existence the soldier is sharing his daily life with his close family and everyone in the household is delighted. He presents each member of the family with four yards of fabric that he has brought back from the army, and he spends his time receiving guests and writing letters of

reference for them. He wants to participate in household tasks with the domestics and his daughter-in-law's refusal creates a clash. Three months after his return he is invited to be master of ceremonies at his nephew's wedding. He is horrified at the noise the guests make and shocked by the vulgarity of the proceedings. Shortly afterwards, the nephew having been arrested for hitting his alcoholic father, the general agrees to give accommodation to the new wife and her little daughter, born about ten days after the wedding. He bursts into tears when he finds out that his daughter-in-law Thù, a doctor at the maternity hospital where she is in charge of abortions and curetting, collects the abandoned fetuses to feed the dogs she breeds for commercial purposes. The general witnesses the death of his paralyzed senile wife who is six years his senior and whom he married during a brief stay of leave although he didn't love her. He also discovers Thù is unfaithful to her husband. His sudden death during a visit to his old army unit a year after his retirement is followed by a great display of honors during his funeral.

The character of the elderly father is central to Thiệp's short story and is the framework of its structure. The elderly father's ideal, the result of both Confucian and Communist influences, allows him to distinguish clearly between Good and Evil. Hasn't he always led his life according to his principles: altruism, generosity, and egalitarianism, struggling against negative actions, showing contempt for dirty money? Nevertheless, this volition goes hand in hand with a simplistic view of the world. The gift of the same length of fabric to each member of the family makes him the object of ridicule in the eyes of his daughter-in-law: "When everyone's in uniform, the house will look like a barracks," she remarks (99). Molded by his career as a soldier, he sees conflict all around him and although he makes attempts at appeasement, he soon becomes aware that he is powerless in the face of moral corruption. His dream of a just society has evaporated and his death must be understood as a refusal to coexist with mean reality.

Death is omnipresent in "The General Retires," a short story containing multiple images of cruelty and degradation of the body. The "brownish parts" of the fetuses that Thù keeps aside to feed to her dogs float around in boiling pans. The mother dies suffering: she "was emptying her bowels where she lay (. . .). She grew thinner by the minute, her feces were nothing but brownish sickeningly evil-smelling liquid" (104). In the mind of old

Cô, his long-buried wife still continues to suffer because the earth on her grave has eroded. But the full force and the ambiguity of the text reside in the death of the general. All through the story the event is shrouded with unspoken words, silences, and mysteries. The text begins: “By writing these lines I have revived in the minds of certain friends the emotions that time had erased and I have desecrated my father’s silent grave” (96). So why would the death of a person in old age arouse such “emotions” in the minds of “friends”? Why would remembering his story be like “desecrating his grave”? What finally persuades the narrator to transgress this taboo? Why does he remain silent concerning the reasons for his father’s death? He even prevents the old friend of the deceased from elucidating the cause. In fact what was the cause of his death? Indeed he had “aged considerably” since retirement. The last part of his life is marked by tears, aging, dissatisfaction, humiliation, and anxiety—“Do all old people die suffering in this way?” (105) he asks his brother during his wife’s final moments. However, the powerful premonition of his own demise, followed by his sudden death, implies that it was a voluntary act of auto-destruction. Does he not sound a solemn departing note by saying farewell to his friends and acquaintances, ordering his old Commander to fire three salutes on his last visit to his wife’s grave, and by giving his diary to his son?

On this point the short story is seriously disturbing. It seems to be telling the tale of a murder rather than a suicide. Everything about the narrator seems to denote a secret desire, unconscious of course, to see his father die. The confrontations that arise between the two men when the patriarch declares the actions of his daughter-in-law “inadmissible”—her infidelity and the farming of dogs fed on abandoned fetuses—show how their apparently harmonious relationship is marked by tension and misunderstanding. “You’re a weakling!” he shouts at Thuần who replies: “You’ve got it wrong” or “Do not pay attention (. . .). Go to bed now” (108). As soon as he comes back to the family home, the elderly general is no more than a “pensioner” in his son’s eyes. By suggesting the old man write his memoirs as a way of keeping him occupied, the son is already contemplating the possibility of his father’s death.

Several details allow the reader to suppose that the son, for all his sincere affection and true admiration for his father, is harboring a patricidal

fantasy. An example is the nagging feeling of guilt that tears at his heart before and after the death of the old soldier. Does he not feel as much “joy” as “sadness” seeing his father leave for a long journey? When Không appears on the doorstep, does he not have a premonition of a “calamity” before Không announces the death of the general? How should one interpret the tears he sheds at his father’s graveside if they are not tears of remorse—“I wept as I had never wept previously (. . .) It seemed to be the greatest pain that any human being could experience” (111)? It is clear that he does not have the same relationship with his father as with his mother, to whom he vows a gentle love and a willingness to fulfill his filial duties. During his mother’s last days he changes and washes her clothes, feeds her, helps her go to the toilet, stays by her until she draws her last breath. In contrast, he hears of his father’s death by telegram and is late for the funeral. It is true that the son commits no criminal act, but with regard to his elderly father he is aware of an intense lack of understanding, just as later on he regrets having abandoned him to his inner suffering, to have hoped for his demise and, in a way, led him along the path to suicide. So it can be suggested that, for the son, the actual demise of the father is the result of his murderous intention and that this feeling subjects him to the same effects as the action of killing. Hence the need to close his narrative with the statement of remorse: “I consider these lines like the incense sticks I would have lit to his memory” (112).

“WITHOUT A KING”: THE VOTE

“Without a King,” a short story published soon after “The General Retires,” confirmed the talent of its controversial author. In the manner of “The General Retires,” it describes the daily life of a Hà Nội family in the 1980s where another powerful father figure dominates the household, even though, as a humble bike repair man, he does not have the same aura as the general. Later on Nguyễn Huy Thiệp adapted the story for the theater. The play’s title, *Family*, evinces the extent to which complex family relationships haunt the author. Old Kiền shares his house and his meals with his five sons—Cấn, Đoài, Khâm, Khiêm, and Tốn—and his daughter-in-law Sinh, Cấn’s wife. The names Kiền has given his sons can be read as a desire for unity, solidarity, and transmission: their names and their father’s

correspond to six of the eight trigrams from the *Book of Changes*.⁹ Another sign of his respect for ritual is how he commemorates the anniversary of his wife's death; in spite of being near destitute, he orders five trays of food and invites his sister and his brother-in-law as well friends and colleagues of his sons. At the New Year festival, with the interest from his savings, a derisory sum, he gives Tón the gift of a shirt and presents Sinh with a pair of socks before giving the rest to Cấn.

Lack of space means that the young couple occupy the only bedroom in the house. It also serves as a living room for the other brothers when they want some privacy with their girlfriends. Khâm and Đoài bring home two girls, Mỹ Trinh and Mỹ Lan, to court them during the commemoration ceremony for the anniversary of their mother's death. Nguyễn Huy Thiệp shows how the family functions by describing the status of each member. Although he is old, the father is still working to ensure his own survival and that of his two youngest sons, Khâm, who is still a student, and Tón, who is disabled. The largest part of the family budget is reserved for food; expenditure on clothes and leisure is minimal. The money the father earns by repairing bicycles is added to the income of Cấn, a hairdresser, and Đoài, a civil servant. Every day Khiêm, who works killing pigs, brings home "either a kilo of meat or a kilo of tripe" that he spirits away from the State slaughterhouse to help feed the hungry household. Exercising one of the professions traditionally most disdained by society, but the most lucrative in these times of crisis, makes Khiêm the most prosperous of the five siblings and excites the jealousy of the others. During the New Year celebrations he is the only one who can give the family a mandarin tree "laden with fruit" and a roll of firecrackers "six meters long." This makes Đoài and Khâm feel bitter: "we're both educated and we don't even have a decent suit to wear for New Year's Day" (134).

Following the same mode as the general's, old Kiền's family is a paradoxical system. In parallel with the particularities of the traditional model, such as the presence of several generations in one household, an established hierarchy of family members and the highest authority symbolized by the father, several principles that can be considered as modern have gained acceptance. The eldest son, rather than the father, is now in charge of finances. Work is shared out equally among the members of the family.

The children are free to choose their partner: the marriage between Cán and Sinh was not arranged.

However, poverty and lack of privacy breed resentment and cause a merciless struggle between the family members, where both father and sons use the same coarse and aggressive language. In “The General Retires” the author uses a measured tone, but everything is said outright in “Without a King.” Old Kiền’s words are “scathing.” He says to Đoài: “You—a civil servant? You must be joking! You’re lazier than a snake” (126), or to Khâm: “You parasite!” The atmosphere is all the more stifling in that all the action throughout the seven chapters takes place in the same enclosed space. Things become very tense when the cost of hospital care for the sick father creates a deficit in the family budget. During a family council Đoài suggests “letting nature take its course.” Old Kiền finally dies a painful death, just like the elderly mother in “The General Retires”: diagnosed with cancer, his eyes take on a “glassy” look and his “shaved head shows a huge protuberance the size of an egg . . . He never stopped groaning and complaining” (138). In the adaptation for the theater of “Without a King,” Thiệp gives the father’s suffering a moral dimension: during his death throes the old man confesses to Sinh that he once spied on her while she was taking a shower. Three months after the death of the old man, Sinh gives birth to a daughter. The story ends with the delivery of a telegram announcing the death of Mr. Vỹ, Kiền’s brother-in-law, during the celebration for Sinh’s return home from hospital with the baby.

Like the general in the first story, old Kiền has a special, almost passionate, relationship with his daughter-in-law. Both men have lost their wives and have no daughter, and their daughters-in-law more or less fulfill these roles, albeit differently: while Thủy takes charge of the material needs of the family, Sinh is responsible for preparing the three daily meals. The general feels nothing but disdain for Thủy, while Kiền feels a quasi-incestuous love for Sinh. He gives her gifts and “heaves a long sigh” as he listens to the water running while Sinh is washing (131). In both texts, the relationship between the patriarch and his son’s wife is in large part the source of the conflict between father and son. Did the general not start a quarrel with Thuần when he found out that Thủy was acting in a way he considered dishonest? As for Sinh, she is the object of desire of all the men: her father-

in-law and her brothers-in-law. Khiêm, the pig butcher and a rough character, treats her with great care and affection. Tồn, the simpleton youngest son, shows her slavish “devotion”: “(He) never missed a chance to come to Sinh’s assistance. His kindness to her was limitless. He sought to satisfy her slightest wish with utter devotion” (124). Đòai, the civil servant, makes advances, which she resists but he finally gets his way with her. Everything leads the reader to think that Đòai is the father of Sinh’s child and not her husband Cấn, “as limp as a crab without a shell” (129). It is easy to suppose that the special relationship that old Kiền maintains with Sinh, as father-in-law, inspires a certain amount of jealousy in his sons.

So the fact that Sinh is one of the central figures in a story that begins with her entry into the novelistic space owes nothing to chance. The story starts: “Sinh has been old Kiền’s daughter-in-law for several years now.” Her arrival in the exclusively male household is compared to “rain falling on a land cracked with drought” which “tempers” its extreme climate (125). Inextricable ties are thus interwoven between the family members. As in a primitive society, conflict arises here from the competition between the males for the only female. When Cấn hits his wife during an argument, Đòai intervenes, standing in front of Sinh and brandishing a knife at him.

Sexuality is certainly one of the keys to the interpretation of the origin of old Kiền’s sons’ patricide wish. Is it not Đòai, who is most in love with Sinh, who suggests letting the sick father die, discusses the legacy at the hospital while Kiền is in the operating theater undergoing surgery, refuses to recite the Sutra on Impermanence to comfort the dying man, and immediately goes off to buy the coffin as soon as he has passed away? The most heated confrontation takes place when Đòai discovers his father perched on a stepladder, standing on tiptoe trying to see Sinh naked in the bathroom. They then talk not as father and son but “man to man.” The older one frankly admits that he desires his daughter-in-law: “a man doesn’t need to blush because he has a dick.” The other clearly expresses his jealousy of his father: “I’ll never be able to forgive you for what you’ve done.” The disabled Tồn’s denunciation to Đòai of the voyeur father further complicates the situation.

The patricide project, which at the end of the story is the object of an open discussion between the siblings—“No point wasting time. Those

who agree to let him die put up their hand” (139), is simply an echo of “Bastards . . . I know you want me to die,” shouted by old Kiền every morning at his sons.¹⁰ In Nguyễn Huy Thiệp’s works, fathers are killed two times by their sons: they not only suffer mistreatment but the sons also fail to provide a male descendant. Sinh’s baby, like the child of the narrator’s cousin in “The General Retires,” is a girl: in a literary work the choice of the sex of the child to be born is never innocent. In one story paternity is unidentified and in the other the child is brought up in the absence of the father. Isn’t this a clear expression of negation of the father?

“CRIME AND PUNISHMENT”: CARRYING OUT THE ACT

“Crime and Punishment” is a short story set apart in Nguyễn Huy Thiệp’s writing. Its ten pages include two types of text, narrative and discourse. The narrator sometimes addresses the reader directly to express his thoughts and opinions. The first and longer part of the story, titled “Introduction,” begins with a declaration: “Many readers have come to see me. They tell me the stories about their lives and complain about their misfortunes, hoping that I will write ‘something’ about crimes and their punishment. They express their wishes with sincerity and emotion” (296). The story takes the form of a case study in order to formulate a sociology of crime, hence the second part—“History”—and the third part—“End”—presenting a monstrous example of paternity. During a trip with his 16-year-old daughter, the eldest of four children, the father takes advantage of their isolation and rapes her. When he is asleep, just after the rape has taken place, she kills him with an axe. Then she goes home, sets fire to the house, and kills her three siblings. Only her mother, who has gone out into the forest to pick medicinal herbs, escapes death. Having carried out these two criminal acts, she goes to the authorities to admit her crime and shortly afterwards hangs herself in her prison cell.

Clearly the story of the patricidal daughter and her incestuous father is used to illustrate the author’s theories on the roots of such actions. Undoubtedly their crimes stem from their passions. The father’s desire for his daughter may be explained by his great strength and virility: he is so robust that he once caught a huge boa constrictor with his bare hands. Then the “bestial” side of his soul leads him to do evil deeds. The author

seems to be saying that human beings, ordinary people, without any apparent pathological problem, can be subject to worrying weaknesses, and that an uncontrolled gesture can tip over into crime. The text also inquires into the young girl's psychological attitudes. The brutality of the rape provokes a reaction in self-defense: "Suffocating with rage, she kills him with blows of an axe" (302). Like the "most sincere assassins," she is unable to explain her behavior: "I don't understand . . . I don't know why I acted that way. It all happened as if something was compelling me to do it . . ."

The study of how the environment can influence a person's behavior interests Nguyễn Huy Thiệp to the highest degree. He blames poverty, geographical isolation, and the lack of education in the family:

In this mountainous area, one has to go at least fifteen kilometers to post a letter People live in houses on stilts that are basically huts Under the stairs a herd of filthy pigs pushing their snouts into piles of damp buffalo dung The population here know nothing of the events that have taken place in modern society in the last three decades. Their backwardness is terrifying to witness. (297)

The mother is totally absent from the story, but the reader understands that she is blind. For the narrator, the mother's disability and its reinforcement of the marginalization of the family must be linked to sexual abuse by the father because the issue is mentioned several times. So it has to be the rough and primitive nature of the surroundings, where social control is ineffective, that creates the substrate for the father's moral breakdown and for the daughter's uncontrolled violent behavior. A common omission in all three stories: in his descriptions of relationships with the mother, Nguyễn Huy Thiệp never evokes his problematic in the Oedipus model.

To return to "Crime and Punishment": the killing of the father is not on the register of fantasy. It is physical and concrete, as are the actions, albeit aborted but real, of the narrator's cousin Tuấn in "The General Retires," a "giant" "loud-mouthed" wagon driver, who chases after his father armed with a knife. The author suggests that committing the act is something that is more likely to happen in rough rural conditions. Fear of scandal probably encourages Đòai and his brothers in "Without a King" to hide their wish to let their father die. In short, while in "The General Retires" and "Without

a King,” patricide is only a wish or an unaccomplished action, in “Crime and Punishment” the act is accomplished. Moreover, the patricidal daughter advertises her action. Doesn’t she take the initiative of going to admit to the authorities? Doesn’t she describe the murder scene to the narrator? The story hardly mentions the rape to concentrate on the killing. It lingers over the time, place, weapon, and position of the victim. The whole scene is described in detail: “he is sleeping stretched out, face upwards, hand on forehead,” especially the wild gestures of the criminal: “standing legs apart, she lifts the axe, observes him carefully, like someone about to split logs.” The act of killing is characterized by great calm, and the cold calculation is all the more terrifying by being directly narrated by the guilty party: “To begin with I wanted to hit him in the face, but I was frightened that the blade of the axe might slip on his nose and that he wouldn’t die straight away. He was so strong (. . .). So I aimed at his forehead. Knowing that this is a solid place, I struck with all my strength. His brain scattered like bits of *tao-fu* . . .” (297).

Here in one single case, Nguyễn Huy Thiệp brings together three of the prohibitions in traditional societies: patricide, incest, and fratricide, the first of which is examined in detail. The author also continues the inquiry begun in “Without a King” of the close and constant link between this crime and the sexual behavior of the father underlined by Christine Castelain-Meunier in her work on paternity: “Defining and identifying the paternal tie around the prohibition of incest has permitted the organization of the reproduction of the species.”¹¹ In “Crime and Punishment,” the father’s incestuous behavior incites the daughter to commit two crimes: patricide and fratricide. In the eyes of the child, by raping her, the father destroys the moral order he is supposed to guarantee. There is no longer any reason for the existence of the man or his offspring. To demonstrate the severance of the filial tie with a father who has denied her existence as a person and as a child of the family, she refers to him using a neutral pronoun, marking distance “*ông ấy*.”

This is Nguyễn Huy Thiệp’s most comprehensive text on crime. Does it not bear the stamp of Dostoevsky, whose work is ingrained with the theme of patricide? Using exactly the same title as the Russian author’s famous novel “Crime and Punishment,” Thiệp gives a prominent place to one of

his quotations: “Beauty will save the world.” It is also interesting to note the parallel between “Without a King” and *The Brothers Karamazov*, which also portrays a family with only male siblings who bear the seeds of “sexual folly” and who are prey to the wish to kill the vulgar and immoral father.¹²

A Sutra on Patricide

Who are these patricides? The originality of Nguyễn Huy Thiệp’s work lies in the way he is constantly moving the focus from the father/victim to the child/criminal. Without posing as either moralist or judge to condemn the latter, the author is trying to understand them. What is behind the mask of these assassin figures? By means of these obscure destinies, the author appears to inquire into their social, political, and ideological context in order to create a portrait of the post-revolutionary generation.

In “The General Retires,” narrated in the first person, Nguyễn Huy Thiệp gives the “I” voice to the son, who addresses the reader directly, defending himself. The story opens and closes with him, an “intradiegetic” narrator, a term used by Gérard Genette.¹³ Thuàn provides the narrative according to his conscience, whereas the general, the hero of the story, is reduced to silence. Parallel to the father’s story, the reader hears the son’s voice, which is just as complex.

Thuàn often takes a detached view of people and things. He is laconic and he keeps his own comments and personal interpretations to a minimum. The reader is rarely invited to share his impressions, his dreams, or his wishes. He views himself in the same way as he views others. Not only does he say “I’m a bit old-fashioned really, full of contradiction and lacking in tact,” but he also truthfully records the unkind comments others make about him—those of his wife: “You look old,” or of his father: “You’re weak.” The use of expressions such as “It seems to me” shows that he is incapable of creating a self-portrait. The narrator talks about himself as if he was describing someone else. A stranger to himself, a stranger to the world, Nguyễn Huy Thiệp’s Thuàn is reminiscent of Meursault in Albert Camus’ *L’Etranger*.¹⁴

As narrator he introduces dialogue with neutral terms such as “he says,” “she replies.” The discussions in “The General Retires” are mostly in dialogue form. Thuàn restricts himself to a sober description of events and

behaviors as if he doesn't want to break into other people's discourse, to speak for them or to explain their thoughts. Whereas the old General tries to analyze everything including his own and everyone else's soul, his son seems to be saying something entirely different: man carries within him complexities that constitute a labyrinth for himself and others. For him, lucid awareness of self, others, and the world is impossible. His wife doesn't have only failings; she is capable of altruism and permits the general's niece and her daughter to stay in the house. Unlike the father, the son does not believe it is always possible to draw a clear line between Good and Evil.

It is possible to qualify the father as either positive or negative, but the son cannot be classified. The former is defined by his strong character and his wish to dominate events, others, and himself, while the latter is merely characterized by the absence of personality and will. He is neither actor nor challenger; he is primarily an anti-hero or a hero without heroism or tragedy. Suicide is the hand dealt out to the father who morphs towards his quixotic fate. The son does not die and prolongs his apparently banal existence at the research lab.

Incapable of making decisions, lacking aspiration and unable to enjoy life, the son does however harbor the patricide wish mentioned above. Although not outwardly rebellious, he secretly wishes to escape from the father he admires and to whom he owes everything: his studies abroad, his home, and his social status. This fantasy is not without consequences on an uneventful existence where the passions play no part: he discovers literature. After the self-imposed death of his father for which he feels a strong sense of guilt, the son becomes a writer in an attempt to atone for his imaginary crime.¹⁵ The only theme of his writing explores his ambiguous tie to the deceased parent. Their true encounter is posthumous. "The General Retires" is a subtle piece of writing, far from Manichaeism: Nguyễn Huy Thiệp does not simplify its reading and expresses how the loss of the father is truly liberating for the son and at the same time brings intense suffering.

Unlike Thuận, *Đoài* in "Without a King" does not have the privilege of telling the story from his own point of view. However, Nguyễn Huy Thiệp makes him the most important character. His name appears 116 times in the story, more often than any other character. He is the one who speaks

most because he is talkative and the author tends to favor his voice. The wittiest remarks come from Đòai: “Philosophy, that’s for bookworms (. . .). Did you see the plastic pearl necklace Sinh is wearing? Now that’s philosophy” (126), he says to his younger brother. Đòai has the last word at the end of the story: “Let’s get on with the party! Here’s to your very good health my lords” (139). He is the most highly qualified of the five brothers and has the highest social status, being a civil servant at the Ministry of Education. He is the only one who is present in most of the scenes, and who clearly states his projects and ambitions. He is described praying to his late mother to “make (him) be sent abroad to study” (128). Then he is also shown trying to seduce his sister-in-law, flatter his superior at work, talking man-to-man with his father, threatening his older brother, mocking his younger siblings, and welcoming the neighbors at New Year. He is the only brother to become a father and to talk about the future. During a discussion with Sinh, he proclaims to be the one with “the best future in this family” (34). He confides in Khâm saying: “(. . .) next year, I’ll be married to Mỹ Trinh (. . .). Mr. Daylight has promised to give us a gold bar.” During a party organized to celebrate the birth of Sinh’s daughter, he declares: “Even though it’s not worth a penny, life is a wonderful thing. It’s wonderful because of the newborn child, because of the future she will have” (139). It is hardly surprising that after the father’s death, it is Đòai rather than Cấn, the oldest brother, who takes on the most important role in the family.

The most unexpected aspect of the story, and what makes it so interesting, is that Nguyễn Huy Thiệp seems to make Đòai his spokesman. Sinh’s pregnancy and Mr Kiền’s illness are mentioned in two consecutive paragraphs. In a single sentence, the reader is told: “After the hundred-day ceremony following the death of old Kiền, Sinh gave birth to a baby girl” (139). At the end of the story, Sinh returns home from the maternity hospital with her new baby at the same time as the delivery of a telegram announcing the death of an elderly uncle. It is perfectly clear that the order of things illustrates one of Đòai’s strongly held beliefs: nothing conforms better to the natural cycle than the death of the elderly and the birth of children. He declares: “(. . .) this newborn baby (. . .) the future that awaits it (. . .). All the old die, what is so extraordinary about that?” (139). What is

more, in the structure of the story, everything happens in respect of the natural order of things. The chapter titles recall different times of the day (chapter 2: “Morning”; chapter 4: “Afternoon”; chapter 6: “Evening”) and the happy or sad events that mark the rhythms of family life (chapter 3: “Anniversary of the Mother’s Death”; chapter 5: “New Year’s Day”). In the thirty or so pages of this story, all the key events of human existence are there: Sinh’s wedding, the birth of her daughter, the death throes and passing of old Kiền, the anniversary of his wife’s death, the Tết festival.

The story of “The General Retires” is woven with the same logic: a birth and two deaths. The arrival in the General’s house of his great-niece whose father has just been sent to prison precedes the death of his elderly wife, and later on, his own. The different stages of funerals—the wake, laying out, transport of the coffin, burial, return home, and reception are described in parallel with the narrator’s thoughts on the infinite course of time and the natural cycle of birth and death: “That night, as I watched over my mother, I let my mind wander. I was thinking that death spares no one, it will come for us all, each in turn.” Other characters portrayed by Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, such as Nhâm in *Thương nhớ đồng quê* [Nostalgia for the Country] or Hiếu in *Những bài học nông thôn* [Peasantry Lessons], have already discovered in their youth, through their own experience of loss of a loved one by accidental death, this inevitable principle of Nature: “All of a sudden it was nightfall (. . .). Anxiety gripped me (. . .). I was aware of the immensity of the universe and I said to myself that in comparison, my person, life, even death itself, was without importance, without significance.”¹⁶

Also, in “The General Retires” and “Without a King,” the death of an elderly father or mother or uncle is systematically presented as a solution to another problem: the arrival of a child. In Nguyễn Huy Thiệp’s work everything appears to show that life conditions death, or rather death gives birth to life. Alternation makes this event in his texts both sad and joyful. Between the death of the father and the last words of the story there is a chapter: life goes on without him. Indeed, in the car on the way back to Hà Nội after the funeral, not one of the mourners even mentions the deceased: his brother and his daughter-in-law are chatting about the view from the car window and his son says nothing. In the same vein, one hundred days after the death of old Kiền, his sons hold a noisy party for the baby, the new member of the

family, hence the absence of a tragic element in these stories, however colored they may be by death and violence.

Is Nguyễn Huy Thiệp pleading in favor of “assassin” sons? Although it is difficult to provide a clear answer, he is obviously making an effort to understand them. From a moral standpoint he can be reproached for his cynicism because his heroes fail in their filial duty, the respect of that duty being the cardinal virtue of the Vietnamese tradition. However, the pertinence of his demographic and economic analyses is undeniable. In 1985, on the eve of the publication of Nguyễn Huy Thiệp’s three short stories, as a result of the high birth rate, Vietnam had 27 million dependent children between the ages of 1 and 14—or almost half its population of 60 million. The burden was all the more serious considering how many other problems people were facing: a fall in living standards linked to a planned economy with an inflation rate of 150–200 percent per annum, a housing crisis in urban areas, and a lack of space for leisure activities. At the time, Vietnam, with an annual income per person of 100 US dollars, was one of the poorest countries in the world. Hence the search for a balance between the death rate and the birth rate to avoid overpopulation. The two stories “The General Retires” and “Without a King” express the necessity for the family to stay the same size in order to survive. The Confucian moral code, giving concrete examples of filial piety (*hiếu*),¹⁷ demands that in case of famine, the child is buried to better feed the parents. The government, with family planning, controls the birth rate. As for Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, he addresses the problem in a different manner by asking himself about the elderly. His stories about death are still reflecting the struggle for life.¹⁸

Unlike Đào in “Without a King” and Thuận in “The General Retires,” the patricidal daughter in “Crime and Punishment” is a person the narrator met shortly before she committed suicide in prison. The fact that he presents himself as a writer whose biography closely parallels Nguyễn Huy Thiệp’s—age, lengthy periods in the northern mountainous regions, extensive knowledge of the populations there, present-day life in Hà Nội—reveals the author’s desire to describe it as an authentic case and to treat it in a special way. While Đào and Thuận are not given a physical description, the girl has an appearance: “Her face is hard and austere. Her untidy

hair is reddish like the tail of a cow. Her voice is deep and harsh like a man's" (296). The narrator talks about her almost tenderly: "She was not a heartless girl" (298). As if to justify her actions, he ascribes the origin of her crime to her rough family background: "she told me she had never known what love was" (301). He describes her as an "honest murderess" (300). Her remarks are often in direct speech. At the end of the story, he quotes a long passage from her testamentary note to the narrator to show how sensitive her feelings are:

Dear Uncle, I will soon die but no one will feel compassion for me. So please do two things for me. Buy a wreath of flowers for me. And then say a sutra for me. I want to die like any other human being. Once I arrive in the other world, I will never forget what you have done for me. My spirit will support you all your life until your dying day. (302)

After personally reciting at her graveside the whole of the lengthy *Animitta* sutra, also known as the *Signless Samadhi* of the Sixth Chan Patriarch Hui Neng, the narrator addresses the reader directly: "I did it for her, but also for me and for you, reader, in order to thank you for having spent time reading this boring tale" (302). In this way the sutra becomes a go-between for the girl and the nameless audience that represents the human community from which she is excluded. It is an extension of her thought and her life, going beyond the story and beyond death.

As in "Without a King" and "The General Retires," here Nguyễn Huy Thiệp gives the criminal child a voice and silences the victim father. As in the first two stories, the third places the crime in its social and economic context—"material poverty and backwardness give birth to crime," says the narrator. He constantly reminds the reader that these "savage" crimes are one of the social realities of the time: "We are living *today* in a country . . ." (300), "Once, *in the summer of 1978*, I traveled . . ." (298). As a background to the individual dramas, Nguyễn Huy Thiệp draws a raw, cruel picture of contemporary society, a poignant tableau of his era. His patricide characters have not been transformed into romantic heroes. On the contrary, he is portraying unhappy, suffering, or cynical anti-heroes. For him they represent a lost and disillusioned post-revolutionary generation who have mislaid all their ideals.

The importance of the theme of patricide in Nguyễn Huy Thiệp's fiction is such that one might be justified in wondering whether contesting paternal authority could also be construed as a desire to put the current regime to death as well. These stories were published around 1987, at the time the Đổi Mới movement was launched, when a certain measure of flexibility in cultural and economic activities was allowed, although this did not go so far as a radical rethinking of the army or the Communist party. Nguyễn Huy Thiệp's texts may have corresponded to the secret wishes of certain segments of the population, hence their broad appeal. By beginning with the description of the father's grave, "The General Retires" presents to the reader as the chronicle of an expected demise. The title of the story is sufficient in itself to evoke the double meaning of the hero's death, both literary and ideological. The term "general" seems like an ironic comment on his high authority based on his age, sex, and his triple roles as father, hero, and revolutionary. This is also how the anecdote of the hidden treasure should be understood. The day before the telegram arrives announcing the father's death, old Cơ and Bồng, the general's half brother, are dredging the pond when they find several old jars submerged in the mud. The whole family rushes out to help with the digging "not stopping to rest, spattered with mud from head to foot." But huge disappointment awaits them: the jar salvaged after a whole day's work only contains "a few medals corroded by the passage of time." Nothing can express the narrator's disillusionment more clearly than this anecdote: his father-hero no longer represents Truth: his ideal turns out to be nothing but a fable.

As in "The General Retires," there is a strong political connotation in "Without a King." These symbolic titles are more explicit when one is aware of the connivance between paternity and the one-party state, and when one knows that Hồ Chí Minh, founder of the latter called himself "old father of the people." In another of Thiệp's well-known works *Con gái Thủy thần* [Daughter of the Water Spirit], the narrator exclaims: "Tomorrow I'm going to see the sea. The water spirit doesn't exist."

Has Nguyễn Huy Thiệp's deconstruction of the father figure had an impact on contemporary literature? It should be noted that in *Bến không chồng* [Embarcation of Husbandless Women] by Dương Hương, published in 1992, a man commits incest with his adopted daughter and then commits

suicide. In *Bi kịch nhỏ* [A Minor Incident] (1993) by Lê Minh Khuê, the father's actions are portrayed as a symbolic infanticide. And who are these fathers? In both cases they are political dignitaries and national heroes.

Nguyễn Huy Thiệp's stories foretell the metamorphosis from a planned to a market economy, a transformation that brings Vietnam into the modern era. The narrator in "The General Retires," his wife, and his daughters show the signs of the kind of consumer behavior in a capitalist society: they smoke imported cigarettes, work at a factory farm breeding dogs, study music and foreign languages. Nguyễn Huy Thiệp's work is recognizing the decline of the family to the benefit the individual. In "Without a King" Đào tries to get rid of his father and brothers to gain sole possession of their joint accommodation. Thuần is already admitting that he can't understand his daughters; he recognizes their indifference to him and expresses the loneliness he feels in what appears from the outside to be a happy home. The general and his son are the announcement that their kind of father-figure is no longer consistent with today's literature where the extended family has given way to the Western nuclear model that Durkheim calls the "conjugal family."¹⁹ In *Cơ hội của Chúa* [An Opportunity for God], published in 1999, Nguyễn Việt Hà portrays a single-parent family where a woman chooses to raise her daughter on her own. "Có con" [The Child], a short story by Phan Thị Vàng Anh published in the same year, confirms the triumph of a lifestyle without a family: a girl spends the night with a boyfriend, thinks she is pregnant, discovers with relief that she isn't, and recognizes that she prefers the state of unmarried woman to that of single mother. The realities of life in Vietnam today are a reliable testimony to the foresight in these literary works.²⁰

With their multiple inquiries into ritual, time, and mediation between the natural world and human beings, Nguyễn Huy Thiệp's short stories achieve a sort of timelessness. It is true that they portray patricide as a sorry reality of his time, but beyond his observation of current events, he is reflecting on the world around him in general. History is made neither by rupture nor by renewal but by their alternation. His theory is reminiscent of the thought of Wang Fuzhi, a seventeenth-century Chinese philosopher, whose "logic of process" has been analyzed by François Jullien in *Procès et création*: "Life and death communicate with each other, death prepares also for life, it is

constantly there at the start of life: metabolism is permanent”²¹ or also: “If alternation obeys a cyclical logic, it is also the opposite of a sterile repetition: it allows a course to flow, each process to progress.”²²

What is the meaning of Nguyễn Huy Thiệp’s work? Are his stories tales of death or anthems to life? Are they a manifestation of profound nihilism or the expression of a wisdom that rejects all ideology? Do they defend Good or comply with Evil? Indeed what is the meaning of Good and Evil? Each reader will find his or her own response. With multiple readings possible, the work of this author is determinedly “open,” to quote Umberto Eco, for whom real literature is made as much by all the interpretations the writing ceaselessly inspires as by the text itself.²³

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ABSTRACT

In “The General Retires,” “Without a King,” and “Crime and Punishment,” three short stories written between 1987 and 1990 by Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, the authoritative father figure is omnipresent. Whether an army dignitary, a modest bicycle repairer, or a humble farmer, these fathers all have difficult relationships with their children—relationships which, although not devoid of love or affection, suffer from grudges, conflict, and hate. These fathers call their sons cowards, set them against each other, and rape their daughters. But their death at the end of each story is systematic. The plots within the stories present the father as a species threatened with extinction and even likely to be assassinated by his own children. This paper on the literature at the beginning of the Renovation [Đổi Mới] offers a reading of the theme of

patricide in the work of Nguyễn Huy Thiệp as an indication of profound ideological crisis and as a metaphor for the keen desire for change.

KEYWORDS: *Contemporary Vietnamese literature, Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, patricide, family, incest, ideological crisis*

Notes

1. The *Viet Nam Generation Journal* 4, nos. 1–2 (January 1992): 58–61 published the English translation of this short story followed by an article by Peter Zinoman, “Nguyen Huy Thiep’s ‘Vang Lua’ and the Nature of Intellectual Dissent in Contemporary Vietnam” (61–64) that provides a detailed analysis of the work and its political and historical context.
2. Nguyễn Huy Thiệp was born in 1950. As soon as they were published, his short stories were reprinted and also became the object of reprints, debates, and critical appraisal. In Vietnamese, see the collective work *Nguyễn Huy Thiệp tác phẩm và dư luận* [Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, His Work and How it was Received] (Hà Nội: Trẻ Editions, 1989) or Phạm Xuân Nguyên, ed., *Đi tìm Nguyễn Huy Thiệp* [In Search of Nguyễn Huy Thiệp] (Hà Nội: Văn Hóa Thông Tin Editions, 2001), which offer a selection of articles written between 1987 and 2000 on the subject of Nguyễn Huy Thiệp’s work. In English see Keith W. Taylor, “Locating and Translating Boundaries in Nguyen Huy Thiep’s Short Stories,” *Vietnam Review* 1 (Autumn–Winter, 1996): 439–465; Peter Zinoman, “Declassifying Nguyen Huy Thiep,” *East Asia Cultures Critique* 2, no. 2 (1994): 294–317; and Peter Zinoman, “An Interview with Nguyen Huy Thiep,” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 1, nos. 1–2 (February/August 2006): 485–499.
3. The quotations from this article are taken from its first publication in *Văn nghệ* nos. 49 and 50 (5/12/1987).
4. Land reform in North Vietnam was accomplished by the communist government from 1953 to 1956 by confiscating and redistributing land by landlords to poor and landless peasants. This program resulted in executions of “landlords and reactionaries”—the most reliable estimates figure between 13,500 and 20,000 killed—and resistance, including rioting, in the countryside. About Hồ Chí Minh’s role in the land reform, see Alex-Thai D. Vo, “Nguyễn Thị Năm and the Land Reform in North Vietnam, 1953,” *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 10, no. 1 (Winter 2015): 1–62.
5. A short story by Nguyễn Huy Thiệp is titled “Tâm hồn mẹ” [A Maternal Soul], although the mother is completely absent. The main character, a young orphan, imagines that one of his little female classmates has his mother’s features.

6. This relationship is one of the three main social ties (*tam cương*): monarch/subject (*quân thần*), father/child (*phụ tử*), and husband/wife (*phu phụ*).
7. Also according to these morals, a man must have a male child to perpetuate the family line and to care for his parents in their old age.
8. See Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, *Truyện ngắn* [Stories] (Hà Chí Minh City: Văn hóa Sài Gòn Editions, 2007). Further quotations refer to this edition.
9. A similar preoccupation with unity, solidarity, and transmission across the generations, as in “The General Retires,” where father and son have the same given name, but a different tone: Thuán and Thuần.
10. It is interesting to compare this short story by Nguyễn Huy Thiệp to the novel *Une belle mort*, published in 2005, by the Quebec writer Gil Courtemanche where a man kills the father he has never loved, not symbolically but in reality, physically. Indeed the novel touches on the current issue of euthanasia: the elderly father is suffering from Parkinson’s disease. But here, as in “Without a King,” the murder is inscribed within the logic of power and revenge, as the paternal figure is a sort of fallen dictator. However, whereas in the Vietnamese story, poverty is the root of the attempted patricide, the Canadian work recounts a gastronomic murder: the sick father who is deprived of all forbidden pleasures is killed with an excess of foie gras, rich pâté on toast, and glasses of red wine.
11. Christine Castelain-Meunier, *La Paternité* (Paris: PUF, coll. “Que sais je?” 1997), 7.
12. However nothing proves that Nguyễn Huy Thiệp had read *The Brothers Karamazov*, nor even heard of the article “Dostoevsky and Parricide” (in German “Dostojewski und die Vätertötung”) by Freud published in 1928 on the subject of *The Brothers Karamazov*. Although the works of Dostoevsky, like those of Freud, were introduced in Vietnam in the 1930s during the colonial period and had a strong impact on the new Vietnamese elite, particularly on writers like Vũ Trọng Phụng, Nhất Linh, and Nguyễn Tuân and on literary critics such as Trương Tửu and Nguyễn Văn Hanh, such writings were banned in the Communist North from 1954 onwards. They were however widely available in the South until the reunification of the country in 1975. It was not until the late 1990s that Vietnamese were able to rediscover these two writers.
13. Gérard Genette, *Figures III* (Paris: Le Seuil, 1972), 238.
14. There have been at least five different translations into Vietnamese of *L’Étranger* by Camus: *Người xa lạ*, trans. Võ Lang (Sài Gòn: Thời Mới Editions, 1965); *Kẻ xa lạ*, trans. Dương Kiên and Bùi Ngọc Dung (Sài Gòn: Đời Nay Editions, 1965); *Người xa lạ*, trans. Tuấn Minh (Sài Gòn: Sống Mới Editions, 1970); *Kẻ xa lạ*, trans. Lê Thanh Hoàng Dân and Mai Vi Phúc (Sài Gòn: Trẻ Editions, 1973); and *Người đứng*, trans. Dương Tường (Hà Nội: Văn học Editions, 1995). Like Dostoevsky and Freud, the works of Camus, despite his Communist engagement, were banned in Communist North Vietnam until the beginning of the 1990s.

15. With the twin themes of memory and guilt, Nguyễn Huy Thiệp's short story echoes the work of Proust who analysed this link in an article published in *Le Figaro* in 1907, two years after the death of his mother, with the title "Sentiments filiaux d'un parricide" [Filial sentiments of a parricide].
16. *Những bài học nông thôn* in Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, *Truyện ngắn* [Stories], 154.
17. Vietnamese children used to learn by heart the "Twenty-four examples of filial piety" [*Nhị thập tứ hiếu*] one of which, called "*Vì mẫu mai nhi*" [For the sake of one's mother, bury one's child], presents a similar situation to Nguyễn Huy Thiệp's story. It can be summarized as follows: "There was not enough food for everyone. So Quach Cu said to his wife: 'Our little boy eats such a lot that there is not enough left for our mother. We could have other children, but we can't have another mother.' So they agreed . . . to bury their child. As he started to dig a hole, his pickaxe struck a jar full of gold." See Patrick Fermi, "Le culte des ancêtres au Vietnam," <http://patrick.fermi.free.fr/cultantr.htm>.
18. Nguyễn Huy Thiệp's reflection recalls the theme of a Japanese film directed by Shōhei Imamura, *The Ballad of Narayama*, which received the Palme d'or at the Cannes film festival in 1983. The action takes place in Japan in 1860 in a poor and isolated village, where custom demands that when inhabitants reach the age of 70 they are considered useless to society and are ritually abandoned at the summit of Narayama, "oak tree mountain." Abandoning the elderly is also considered as a method of population control by the Eskimos of Thule; see Jean Malaurie, *Les Derniers Rois de Thulé* (Paris: Plon, coll. "Terre humaine," 1976), 91–92.
19. See Émile Durkheim, *La Famille conjugale*, lectures given in 1892 (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1975).
20. In 2016, there were over 60,000 divorce cases across the country. See Thanh Thuy, "Vietnamese Bishops Launch the Year of the Family against Divorce and Marriage Crisis," *Asianews.it* (February 7, 2017).
21. François Jullien, *Procès et création. Une introduction à la pensée chinoise* (Paris: Le Livre de Poche, coll. "Biblio Essais," 1997), 65.
22. Jullien, *Procès et création*, 27.
23. Umberto Eco, *Œuvre ouverte*, 1962, trans. C. Roux de Bézieux (Paris: Le Seuil, 1979).

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