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Vietnamese American Non-Fiction & Human Rights Discourse

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“Vietnamese communist literature is under *one* leadership: that of the Communist Party; writers must be members of *one* organization: the Vietnamese Authors Association; they share *one* ideology: Marxism and Leninism; they follow *one* approach to literature: socialist realism; they have one writing style: simplicity; they aim at *one* goal: to acknowledge the absolute power and righteousness leadership of the Communist Party, and to praise communist leaders and socialism; all published literary texts have *one* characteristic: politics.” (my translation)



Christina Schwenkel observes, “Official history in Vietnam has selectively silenced certain pasts that fall outside the dominant paradigm of revolutionary history”—for example, it denies any validity to the historical perspectives articulated by those who had allied themselves with the former Saigon government.

The American War in Contemporary Vietnam: Transnational Remembrance and Representation, p. 7.



“The term ‘reeducation,’ with its pedagogical overtones, does not quite convey the quasi-mystical resonance of *cải-tạo* in Vietnamese. *Cải* (‘to transform’) and *tạo* (‘to create’) combine to literally mean an attempt at ‘recreation,’ at ‘making over’ sinful or incomplete individuals. Born again as ‘Socialist men and women’ (*con người xã-hội chủ-nghĩa*), they will supposedly pave the way to the Communist millennium.”

Huynh Sanh Thong, *To Be Made Over: Tales of Socialist Reeducation in Vietnam*, p. x.



Important texts

Kien Nguyen's *The Unwanted*

Jade Huynh's *South Wind Changing*

Nguyen Qui Duc's *Where the Ashes Are*

Tran Tri Vu's *My 1,632 Days in Vietnamese
Reeducation Camps*

Huynh Sanh Thong, *To Be Made Over: Tales of
Socialist Reeducation in Vietnam*



Huynh depicts how inmates were tortured when caught eating non-rationed foodstuff:

If the guards saw you, you would find yourself at the “guillotine center” [...]. The guard tied the thumb of your left hand to your right toe and the right thumb to your left toe and let you stay at the guillotine center for a few hours, donating blood to mosquitoes. If the guard wanted to kill you he would leave you there all night. You would die in horror, your face sunken, pale as a banana leaf from loss of blood, your mouth wide open.

Huynh, *South Wind Changing*, p. 71.



In *Chính Phủ Việt Nam, 1945-1998* [*Vietnamese Government, 1945-1998*], which represents the official voice of the Communist Party, affirms:

“On January 28, 1976, the interim government announced an amnesty policy, granting mercy to soldiers and officers of the Saigon government and members of reactionary parties who had reported to local authorities and made progress during their reeducation” (133; my translation).



“There is a long historical relationship between U.S. human rights discourses and challenges to sovereignty [...]. Representations of ‘savage’ communists with no value for human life or respect for freedom justified military intervention and attempts to ‘save’ the country [Vietnam] from communism.”

Schwenkel, 178-79.



Lisa Lowe observes that Asian American authors who address the differences between Asia and America (or between the East and the West) in terms of human rights and civil liberties tend to accept and justify the imperialistic role assigned to the United States as a global policeman.

Lisa Lowe, *Immigrant Acts: On Asian American Cultural Politics*, p. 5.



In her discussion of human rights and postcolonial intervention as they are exhibited in Asian American literature, Leslie Bow argues that texts and reports about the absence of freedom and democracy in many Asian countries congratulate the United States on its “triumphantly touted brand of capitalism” and on its right to “export” that brand of economic order to Asia.

Leslie Bow, “The Gendered Subject of Human Rights: Asian American Literature as Postcolonial Intervention,” *Cultural Critique* 41 (Winter 1999): 38.



Howard Zinn argues that Marxist ideals, which communism proclaims, have attracted many “good people” from all over the world, and all of those who were inspired by communist ideals were “not racists, or bullies, or militarists”; the higher communist ideals do emphasize “peace, brotherhood, racial equality, the classless society, the withering away of the state.” If communist regimes, in their pursuits of these ideals, employ shallow propaganda, persecution, rigid indoctrination, totalitarian bureaucratic governing systems, and even torture to institute their policies, then these regimes must be reproached and criticized for their practices.



Zinn concludes that a unified Vietnam under Ho Chi Minh's form of communism is preferable to the corruption that prevailed under the Saigon government. Zinn arrives at a conclusion that most critics and historians avoid: "Right now [the 1980s and 1990s], for Vietnam, a Communist government is probably the best avenue" because of the goals it sets for the majority of the citizens under its rule: "the preservation of human life, self-determination, economic stability, the end of race and class oppression, [and] that freedom of speech which an educated population begins to demand." (pp.220-21)