

An Early Voice of the Vietnamese Diaspora in Vietnamese-American Literature

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In *Blue Dragon, White Tiger: A Tet Story* (1983), Tran Van Dinh's characters represent particular political and philosophical positions that defined various factions during the American War in Vietnam. This article examines these characters and their interactions with Minh, the protagonist, who must find his way through the maze of these political and philosophical positions as he seeks a satisfactory, humanistic place for his own poetic nature. Tran's work is a novel of ideas—ideas that have proven acceptable to audiences in the United States but unacceptable to government censors in Vietnam. Tran's primary contribution to Vietnamese-American literature is this novel's effective depiction of the intellectual forces at play in Vietnam during the American War.

Context of the Novel

Tran Van Dinh's *Blue Dragon, White Tiger: A Tet Story*, published in 1983, is the first Vietnamese-American novel written in English about the American War in Vietnam. Tran's voice, therefore, is one of the earliest and most important of the Vietnamese Diaspora in the United States.¹ *Blue Dragon, White Tiger* examines the corruption and eventual collapse of the South Vietnamese government, and it focuses attention primarily on the educated, elite Vietnamese whose lives were strongly influenced by the spiritualism, romanticism, poetry, and classical Chinese and Buddhist traditions that characterized the culture of pre-war Vietnam.

Tran's main character, Minh, is a Vietcong sympathizer who feels responsible for the fate of his country, occupied at the time by foreign invaders. Other characters represent various types of people on both sides of the conflict: the backers of Communist interests, on one side, and the backers of U.S. interests, on the other. Minh, like the author, is a humanist and a man of intellect who must find his way through the ideological minefields of his day and develop a morally responsible position for himself. The message that Tran delivers to his readers is that hard-line ideology of any sort is dehumanizing. Adherence to any hard-line ideology

excludes many dimensions of the human experience that are basic to human culture and well-being.

If *Blue Dragon, White Tiger* ended after chapter 14, which describes the victory of the Vietcong and the North Vietnamese Army over the Saigon government and the evacuation of U.S. troops, it probably would have been approved by the Vietnamese government for the Vietnamese reading public. Chapters 15 through 17, however, voice Minh's disappointment with the postwar Communist regime and recount his escape to the United States as a boat person. According to tenets established by the Vietnamese government, the novel therefore expresses a "reactionary" message. In the end, Minh departs from his beloved homeland because it has fallen into the hands of the Communist hardliner politicians; this resolution is unacceptable to Vietnam's Communist government.

Blue Dragon, White Tiger does not focus sharply on U.S. forces or American G.I.s involved in the American War in Vietnam. The novel depicts, rather, the corrupt Saigon government, the U.S. officials who support it, and the Vietcong who oppose it. The "average" Americans who are portrayed in the novel are either minor or insignificant characters; most of them play non-military roles and stay in Vietnam only for short periods. Interacting with these minor characters, however, are the significant American and Vietnamese individuals who are developed more fully in the work. They, along with the artistic use to which Tran Van Dinh puts them as he reveals a subtle understanding of people and events, are the focus of this article.

Some Contrasting Figures among Supporters of the Saigon Government

Lieutenant Arthur Bradley

The first American whom Minh encounters after a visit to Hue's Thien Mu Buddhist Pagoda is Lieutenant Arthur Bradley of the U.S. Marine Corps. At first, Minh, because he is not carrying an identification card, is suspected of being a Vietcong by a young Vietnamese counterpart of Bradley's named Vi. Lieutenant Vi's treatment of Minh is a manifestation of his personal paranoia, arrogance, mistrust, and cruelty: "Without warning, he hit Minh full in the face with the butt of his revolver. Minh felt the warmth of fresh blood in his mouth and nostrils." He then threatened Minh verbally: "Keep your hands up, or I'll shoot!"² Subsequently, Minh has a conversation with Bradley, who begins to trust and respect him after he learns of Minh's background as an intellectual and a permanent U.S. resident. Bradley apologizes for the misunderstanding and offers Minh a cup of coffee: "Can I offer you a cup, Professor? And if you'll permit me, I'll clean that blood off your face."³

In this incident, the author juxtaposes two kinds of treatment in order to emphasize the irony of Minh's situation: The first kind of treatment,

from the Vietnamese, is cruel and rude; the second, from an American who has been in Vietnam for a year, is friendly and polite. A Vietnamese national serving the Saigon government treats him brutally and unjustly, but an American officer serving the same government treats him kindly and caringly. The former represents the demoralizing influence that American wealth and power have exerted upon the baser instincts of Minh's people; the latter, the naïve motives of the Americans who support their country's intervention in Vietnam's civil affairs.

Minh is taken aback by Bradley's self-effacing and sincere attitude: "He didn't try to impress Minh with a phony façade like some Americans Minh had met."⁴ Phong, Minh's brother, also thinks very highly of Bradley, who is "an exceptionally sensitive man, not like most of the other American officers whose only concerns are Viet Cong body counts, promotions, and R and R in Hawaii or Bangkok."⁵ Bradley, an African-American officer from Louisiana, also perceives the irony of American history and of his military duty in Vietnam: "He's fighting for freedom in Vietnam, [while] his people at home haven't any," because of the racism that is rampant in the United States.⁶ While the Vietnamese mishandle and mistrust Minh, Bradley listens to and sympathizes with his unfortunate situation. When Minh asks him about the war and his knowledge of Vietnam, Bradley admits that he knows very little about the country and the culture that the war is destroying. He knows even less about the Vietcong's secretive organization and its operations, admitting that he cannot distinguish a Vietnamese civilian from a Vietnamese insurgent. Bradley renders what Minh refers to as "unexpected kindness."⁷ Following this incident and its aftermath, Minh must reconsider any necessity for the destruction in his country, the suffering of his people, and the frustration pervading Vietnam due to the war.

Vice-Consul Buckley

Another American who appears in *Blue Dragon, White Tiger* is U.S. Vice-Consul Buckley. Soon after Minh arrives in Hue, a man named Loc warns him about Buckley's duplicitous personality and behavior: "From what I know, Buckley is a very cunning person. He's not a regular foreign service officer but a C.I.A. agent."⁸ It is interesting to note that Buckley, who represents the U.S. government in Hue, and some of his American guests have either pre- or extramarital affairs with Vietnamese women, just as did many G.I.s stationed in the country. The first time Buckley invites Minh as a special guest to his house, he greets Minh diplomatically and politically: "Welcome back to Vietnam and to Hue. May we all work closely with each other so that peace can be restored to the heroic people of Vietnam in the not-too-distant future, and may we celebrate the coming Tet in peace and victory."⁹ Buckley's sterile, formulaic language represents the official U.S. attitude toward Vietnam. The "just cause" of the war and of

American interference in Vietnam's internal politics expresses itself as "business as usual."

Although the Vietnamese are threatened and perturbed by American artillery, Buckley says phlegmatically that the noise of the guns makes him "fall asleep more easily."¹⁰ Buckley is inured to the sounds of the war. He is aware of the corruption in the Saigon government that forces Vietnamese peasants to ally themselves with the Vietcong—who know how to "exploit them . . . more intelligently."¹¹ Buckley expresses his official disapproval of Minh's anti-war articles that have been published in the United States but avoids responding to Minh's allusion to how liberal it is for him, an American civilian resident, to maintain his own unofficial anti-war stance. At a reception hosted by Buckley at a hotel to celebrate the Fourth of July, Minh notices Buckley's perfunctory greetings and feigned merriment as he welcomes his guests: "Buckley's *monotonous* greetings and compliments—'How splendid did [*sic*] you look, How beautiful you are, It has been a long time since I saw you last'—[were] repeated *automatically* as he shook hands with his guests" (italics added).¹² Here, Buckley is presented as a parrot or an automaton rather than as a human being; because he is a diplomat, he has to officiate politely and cannot show any signs of exhaustion or tedium.

Even though the U.S. officials know well that the Saigon government is its puppet, depending upon the United States for financial and military support, Buckley ignores the fact, hosting the reception with appropriately banal locutions: He asks everyone to toast the president of the Republic of Vietnam, and he then reads them a message from the U.S. president addressed to the Vietnamese and the Americans in Vietnam. Once again, the rhetoric of the "just cause" of the war is employed: "The American people will help the Vietnamese to build a prosperous democratic society."¹³ Through Buckley and others like him, images of the American officials in Vietnam are portrayed negatively in *Blue Dragon, White Tiger*.

Use of the Word *Vietcong* in the Novel

Viet, in the Vietnamese language, means simply "the people"; the word *cong* is the shortened form of *cong san*, "communist." *Vietcong*, based upon its Vietnamese elements, therefore means "the Vietnamese Communists." The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines *Vietcong* as "(a member of) the Communist guerrilla force(s) active in Vietnam between 1954 and 1976."¹⁴ Technically, however, the term *Vietcong* refers to the Communist forces operating in South Vietnam, and many members were South Vietnamese Buddhists opposing the predominantly Catholic Saigon government.¹⁵ The Communist forces infiltrating from the North were primarily members of the North Vietnamese Army (NVA). In Vietnamese, NVA soldiers were referred to as the *bo doi* (NVA G.I.s); the NVA supported and armed the Communist

partisans who were indigenous to the South. In postwar Vietnam, referring to someone as a Vietcong would be rude.

In an interview with Le Ly Hayslip (b. 1949), author of *Child of War, Woman of Peace*, when asked, “Did you believe the Viet Cong?” she said, “Of course; they were people from our village. I knew they told us the truth. The guerrillas from my village we called ‘uncle’ and ‘brother’ and ‘sister.’ They were liberators. We didn’t call them Viet Cong. Viet Cong was a name the Americans invented.”¹⁶ William R. Corson explains the term *Vietcong* as follows: The word “refer[s] to individual members of the insurgent movement as well as the movement.” He continues: “The significant point, notwithstanding the attitude of the Johnson Administration, is this: All the [indigenous] Communists in South Vietnam are part of the Vietcong, but not all the Vietcong insurgents are Communists.”¹⁷ Therefore, the distinction between the use of the terms *Vietcong* and *NVA* is subtle but important: Both forces were active in efforts to overthrow the Saigon government, but each originated in a different part of the country and out of differing historical and ideological backgrounds.

In *Blue Dragon, White Tiger*, Minh is *not* a Vietcong partisan, as most reviewers of the book claim. He is simply a normal anti-war Vietnamese who feels responsible for the fate of his country; in other words, Minh is only a Vietcong sympathizer, a nationalist.¹⁸ After Minh agrees to join Loc’s organization and to serve as a translator, Loc defines Minh’s political position clearly: “Remember that you’re what we call a political sympathizer and expert. You’re neither a cadre, nor a party member. You will be addressed as *anh* [brother], not *dong chi* [comrade], which is only for party cadres and members.”¹⁹ Minh feels alienated from the Party: “Not being a member now, at this historic moment, practically excluded him from the mainstream of history.”²⁰ Minh never attempts to become a Party member, nor is he nominated for membership. As a character, he represents neither the Vietcong nor the NVA insurgents; he remains simply a Viet, a representative of the people.

Some Contrasting Figures among Opponents to the Saigon Government

Loc

In Tran’s novel, Loc is the most important member of the Communist cadre, and he influences Minh in several positive ways. Therefore, understanding Loc’s affiliation with the Vietcong is important. Loc represents, at least for Vietnamese-American readers, the traditional hero who functions as a model worth emulating. He represents an emblematic, classless figure, even though his social and educational backgrounds are similar to those of Minh. Moreover, his youthful appearance and physical strength resemble the qualities ascribed to the archetypal socialist hero, who is always “robust.”²¹ Tran describes Loc as follows: “In his early forties, with a round,

open face, his hair cut short, Loc looked like a student. He wore khaki pants and a light brown shirt that went well with his tanned complexion and was brightened by his big, lively eyes."²² Minh notices "Loc's strong hands, his wide shoulders and muscular arms. They seemed to complement his exuberant face and optimism."²³ Loc represents the classic spokesperson selected by the Communists, and he is a dynamic character who leads the global march to Communism.

According to Katerina Clark, "just as the [medieval] icon painter looked to an 'original' to find the correct . . . colours for a given theme," writers in the socialist tradition "could copy the gestures, facial expression, actions, and symbols used in the text already pronounced canonical."²⁴ Throughout the novel, Minh admires Loc's locution and his well-articulated, persuasive, and logical argumentation, which does not intimidate those of his less well-educated interlocutors: "Loc was an intellectual who had earned a Ph.D. at the Sorbonne, but he used clear, simple terms, not jargon and rhetoric, to convey his political views."²⁵ Loc also impresses Minh with his ability to integrate political theory into his own life "in a way that he, Minh, had never been able to do."²⁶ Loc's brilliant explanation of *Tinh* (feeling) and *Ly* (reason), which are the foundations of Vietnamese Communism, makes Minh's mind whirl "with thousands of impressions."²⁷

Loc is a superior Asian man because of his education and moral integrity. Minh and other people think very highly of him: "Minh had to admit that Loc had never lied to him"; and Lan, a schoolteacher who is friends with both Minh and Loc, once tells Loc that he is very "well liked and respected" by faculty members and students at her school.²⁸ He remains sympathetic to all types of people, never allowing sarcastic or supercilious attitudes to determine his behavior. He treats Minh kindly and sincerely as a friend, a colleague, a collaborator, and most importantly, an individual; and his caring and considerate manners are revealed even in his small gestures. Loc is a successful Communist organizer who possesses various leadership qualities: intellectual acuity, the ability to analyze political and social situations, persuasion, professional bearing, and flexibility. When he first meets Loc, Minh is struck by the intensity of his voice, thinking that Loc "must speak often in public."²⁹ Loc thoroughly understands the corruption of the Saigon government, the nature of the war, and the role of the U.S. government in the country.

It is Loc who encourages Minh to establish good rapport with Vice-Consul Buckley in order to gather information from the American Embassy. Loc even knows Buckley's Vietnamese girlfriend, who tells him what happens at the consulate; and Loc's ability to dissect and examine political situations is excellent. He articulates his ideas with confidence and authority. For instance, he scrupulously analyzes the Johnson administration's attempt to "Vietnamize" the war, the graft in the Saigon government, the Buddhists' anti-war demonstrations, and the strategies that his organization has

developed to defeat the Americans and their puppets. Loc pays attention to small details, giving his comrades minute instructions on how to avoid conspiracy and danger. In a letter Loc writes to Minh concerning a meeting at the Moonlight Tea House, Loc is careful to describe each movement Minh will make: "Dress casually and carry a large book with you. Be sure you're not being followed. If you suspect you are, take a walk downtown and return home. Repeat the same for two more days and if you're still being followed then stop." After further instruction and direction, Loc asks Minh to read the letter carefully, memorize every single instruction, and destroy it: "Burn it, put the ashes in a pot of water, stir it up and throw it in your garden."³⁰ Loc is a good organizer whose network includes important religious figures and other dignitaries, and he is able to contact them and ask for help in his plan to hold a nonviolent demonstration against the Saigon government and the U.S. presence in Vietnam. He is presented as the ideal cadre organizer and operative who balances feeling and reason in appropriate proportions. However, Loc joins the Workers' Party not "for personal reasons, but for national and historical reasons."³¹ He is dedicated to the establishment of a postcolonial, independent Vietnam.

When Minh receives a note about the detainment of his American girlfriend, Jennifer, by Loc's comrades, Loc understands his friend's concerns, and he kindly arranges a time and place for them to meet. He wisely says to Minh, "In a situation like this, feeling should prevail over reason."³² Later, he asks a soldier to make sure that Jennifer will be escorted to safety. In a battle between the Vietcong and the Americans, Lieutenant Bradley is wounded and taken prisoner, but Loc says that his regiment will not torture Bradley but "treat him very well, as a friend, not an enemy."³³ Loc's humanity and dignity are also shown in his letter to Minh of May 10, 1975, in which he recounts the bloody battle of Hue and the tragic death of Minh's parents: "Your father and stepmother were both lying dead on the floor. . . . I immediately arranged a dignified burial for your parents. Members of Hue's military management committee and I attended, and followed their coffins to their final resting place."³⁴ Loc fulfills his duty as a friend, a son, a cadre member, and a human being. His respect, love, and humanity are evidenced in all of his words and actions.

At the end of the novel, although Loc is aware of Minh's plan to flee the country, and he feels angry and upset by Minh's criticism of the new Communist regime, he neither discourages Minh nor attempts to arrest him for his crime. Loc understands Minh's feelings and need for personal freedom: "Minh saw in his face a glow of sympathy, even tenderness." Loc even assures Minh's safety: "You're not under arrest. You probably won't be arrested. I've talked with the executive chairman of this office's committee and we've agreed . . . to let you leave the country as planned."³⁵

Tran Van Dinh seems to have cast Loc in such an idealized fashion so that readers would think: "He cannot be a fictional construct—he must be real." Still, the perfection infused by the author into Loc must strain the credulity of any reader. Even so, the reader must, at some level, wish that he had existed. If a touchstone for the concept of goodness cannot be imagined or defined, then degrees of goodness, or degrees of wickedness, cannot be measured. Loc represents this touchstone of goodness in Tran's novel.

Phan Thi Thai

A contrasting member of the Vietcong cadre in *Blue Dragon, White Tiger* is Phan Thi Thai, who was Minh's high school girlfriend. Very early in the novel, Minh's colleague Cung Dinh Chuong, dean of the Law School, states that "even if poetry and politics blend, poetry and communism cannot."³⁶ Thai represents the actual impossibility of such a union; she is a leader who privileges Communist ideals over personal aspirations; thus, no "poetry" is found in her personality and leadership. When Loc introduces her to Minh, she shows "no sign whatsoever that she recognized Minh as her old high-school sweetheart."³⁷ She represents, therefore, a person who has sacrificed her personal life totally for the good of the Communist Party in Vietnam. Thai possesses several positive leadership qualities just as Loc does, so Communist gender equality is realized in her person. She is introduced to members of a delegation who are attending the Paris Peace Accords as "a woman with remarkable revolutionary achievements, a political commissar in our heroic army, an intellectual who speaks French, English, Russian, and Chinese fluently."³⁸ Thai acts professionally and diplomatically, and Minh observes her manners with great admiration.

Like Loc, Thai presents herself well through a concise and coherent speech at a press conference in Paris. However, because Minh is a poet, he expresses his feelings and emotions as a poet. After he has written a love letter to Thai to remind her of their old friendship, he is criticized first by Loc and then by Thai for his "decadent, romantic, feudalistic, bourgeois mentality."³⁹ Renny Christopher comments that Thai's rejection of Minh's human and earthy approach to personal relationships "symbolizes for Minh the cost of adhering to the Party—it would mean rejecting the Vietnamese culture of his youth," which he values greatly.⁴⁰ Thai embodies an ideal Vietcong cadre member who is willing to put aside personal desires and ambitions for the well-being of the collective. In other words, she relies more upon her *Ly* (reason) than upon her *Tinh* (feeling). It is this very imbalance of character, which Minh later perceives in the Communist regime, that forces him to leave Communist Vietnam so that he can maintain his individuality. He departs his homeland only after he is fully convinced that poetry and Communism cannot coexist. For Minh the poet, no place exists for him in postwar Vietnam.

Depiction of the Destruction of Vietnam & Its Culture

American Military Influence

According to David W. Levy, *demoralization* is the proper word to describe the loss of spirit, enthusiasm, will, and purpose that U.S. soldiers assigned to Vietnam experienced. An erosion of morality, “evaporation of moral restraint,” and perversion of human relationships characterized the lives of a large number of American G.I.s during the later years of the war. Signs of moral decay were most obvious in places in which American G.I.s took “R and R” (rest and recreation)—where the prostitution industry, disreputable bars, and centers of drug addiction existed in abundance.⁴¹ Minh begins to address these manifestations of demoralization among U.S. combatants very early in the novel: The Americans travel to Bangkok to visit brothels, and even some U.S. military colonels either are involved or implicated in smuggling heroin and opium from the country. In a conversation with Loc on the Perfume River, Loc vehemently condemns the prurient Americans for turning the picturesque sampans of Hue into lustful hotbeds of sex: “Minh, you must know that our Hue sampans are no longer for poetry and music as in the old days before the Americans descended. They’re floating houses of prostitution now, mostly to serve our new, unwelcome guests.”⁴² The Americans spoil the charm and beauty of Vietnam’s imperial capital and the tranquility of its river; their presence in Hue as uninvited guests leads neither to peace nor to liberation.

Interestingly, a major criterion for a G.I. to be selected for R and R in Bangkok was his record of killing—his adding to the “body count.”⁴³ Tran is a skillful writer who can subtly connect *carnage* with *carnality* in the circumstances of the war. In the larger picture, Tran’s linkage of *killing* and *kissing* (*war* and *love*) finds an ultimate convergence in the person of Buckley, who represents “we the people of the United States” as their government’s agent. Buckley is portrayed, therefore, as a model of the general hypocrisy that the novel exposes. Vietnamese women are useful as mistresses while one is carrying out an assignment abroad, but such usefulness signals only the general decadence promoted by the American effort in Vietnam.

Value in Nature

In Vietnam, those Vietnamese who adhere to the values of Buddhism, Taoism, and animistic spirituality generally revere Mother Nature. The protagonist, a poet himself, often gains inspiration from nature and uses natural metaphors to express his innermost feelings and emotions. The narrator in *Blue Dragon, White Tiger* describes the natural beauty and scenic landscape of the author’s hometown, Hue, in great detail. Although the United States uses bombs and chemicals to defoliate forests and destroy the natural environment, it cannot deracinate the Vietnamese people’s love for

nature. During a conversation in a subterranean tunnel between Minh and Nam, a young comrade, Minh points out an orchid in bloom, and Nam says, "Nature develops and preserves our patriotism, which is our collective Vietnamese sensitivity. It strengthens us and our Party steels us."⁴⁴ Nam tells Minh that some Vietnamese soldiers even grow orchids in their shelters or carry them during their journeys.

According to Carline Romano, Tran believes that "the only way to know the Vietnamese is through their poetry."⁴⁵ His intelligent protagonist, Minh, is poetic and romantic, and it is through nature that he studies the general laws of existence. For example, during a walk along a river with the patriarch of the Thien Mu Pagoda, the patriarch explains to Minh the systematic operation of nature:

Son, in that underwater world the big fish swallow the small, while small ones eat up millions of miniscule living things our eyes can't see. It's often said that the world of human beings, at the moment, isn't very different. When the sun sets and the water is opaque, you can't see the fish, but the cycle of destruction continues and continues. Now you can see the bottom of the river. You can see the fish, big and small, because of millions of rays of sunlight. They dispel illusions and reveal their realities as they are. With pure heart, with Buddha heart, one can see. With eyes, one cannot always see.⁴⁶

The Patriarch's teachings are imbued with Zen philosophy, and it is this Buddhist insight, this other way of seeing the world, that the Americans cannot understand. They do not treasure and protect nature as a system, believing rather that behind the stillness and calmness of the scenery there hides the Vietcong. For example, Minh's father angrily says, "The Americans have mined the rivers, lakes, and ponds, and put chemicals in the moats. They believe the Viet Cong will hide underwater. Too bad, too bad."⁴⁷

Traditional Values

Minh's father has always been an anti-Westerner; he had participated in Vietnamese initiatives against the French colonialists, and he feels angry that his son has lived in America, "the land of the enemy!"⁴⁸ He vehemently exposes the crimes that the Americans committed in his country: "First I was disappointed and then angry that you [Minh] preferred to stay on in a country whose soldiers were raping our women and corrupting our youth, whose planes and ships—whose defoliants—were and are destroying the land of our ancestors, polluting our rivers and depleting our mountains. You chose to live on in a country that supports the worst, most decadent Vietnamese traitors, the Catholics, who are determined to destroy the Buddhist religion. Remember, it's the American wood that sets the Vietnamese house on fire."⁴⁹

Obviously, Minh's father takes a dim view of the Americans; he considers them to be invaders, enemies, aggressors, destroyers, and wanton rapists. From his perspective, the American use of herbicides to destroy the ancient foliage of Vietnam is indefensible and unforgivable. The extent of the American use of the chemical agents that have wreaked havoc upon the Vietnamese and the Vietnamese ecological system is well documented. Agent Orange, for example, has left many Vietnamese children born long after the war unimaginably disfigured. According to David W. Levy, besides Agent Orange, the Americans also employed jellied petroleum mixed with white phosphorus; and between 1965 and 1972, four hundred million pounds of the resulting lethal napalm were dropped on Vietnam.⁵⁰

Vietnam has been a predominantly rural and agrarian society for at least two thousand years, and the hydraulics of agriculture in Vietnamese civilization have had a defining influence upon Vietnam's culture. Vietnamese society emphasizes the collective, and, according to George McTurnan Kahin and John W. Lewis, the bombardment of the Vietnamese countryside "accelerated the disintegration of the rural society."⁵¹ Kahin and Lewis maintain that it was America's outrageous destruction of the means of agricultural production that forced the Vietnamese to abandon the land and the graves of their ancestors. The destruction of the ancient bond between the people and the land of their ancestors rent asunder the fabric of Vietnamese civilization. Minh's father understands the consequences of the U.S. government's use of weapons, money, and power to support Ngo Dinh Diem (1901–63), the first president of South Vietnam. Part of Diem's political agenda was to Catholicize the Buddhists and assure the sustainability of his Catholic and urban regime. In Vietnam, respect for nature has always been an important element in the agrarian people's religion. Diem's plan could not be supported by the Buddhist majority that he governed.

Conflicting Interests

When Minh stops to buy a beverage from a street vendor, the seller suggests that Minh put some ginger and sugar into his glass of coconut milk because the chemicals that the Americans use to defoliate the land give the drink a sour taste. The vendor then tells Minh how the Americans and ARVN (Army of Republic of Vietnam, or South Vietnam) troops raged through his village in search of Vietcong: "I'd lived there for years and never seen any Viet Cong, but there was a battle and many died. After that the whole village was declared a 'free fire zone.'"⁵² The vendor expresses particular grief over one of his fellow villagers, who had been shot to death because he went back to the field to fetch a shovel, and over the vendor's own son, who already had been killed in a battle. The American bombing raids turned Vietnamese women into widows, children into orphans, and civilians into indigent and homeless wanderers.

When Minh asks Loc about the massacres in ground attacks at Hue,⁵³ he asks: "And what about their . . . B52 carpet bombing, their free-fire zones, and their indiscriminate slaughter of innocent women and children in villages in Quang Ngai during the Tet offensive?"⁵⁴ He suggests that the ground attacks are less significant when compared with American pogroms from the air. By tradition, the Vietnamese never attack religious sanctuaries where holy, numinous beings reside.⁵⁵ During the war, Buddhist temples were often suspected to be sanctuaries for Communist infiltrators opposed to Diem's government and its U.S. supporters, so even the temples came under ground attack and aerial bombardment. Tragic stories of Vietnamese civilians killed in holy places by the Americans recur throughout Tran's novel. Thus, American bombardment pushed many Vietnamese civilians into existential crises. The patriarch of the Thien Mu Pagoda shares one such story with Minh; it concerns a young Vietnamese man who came to the famous temple to seek rest. This young man told the Patriarch that "his uncle had been a monk but died when his pagoda was bombed by the Americans."⁵⁶ The view held by Minh's father on the indiscriminant and seemingly mindless ruthlessness of the Americans in the war is repeatedly supported by such incidents recorded in the novel.

Political Interests

The American government, in Loc's view, wanted to remake the whole world in the image of an unrealistic political abstraction that did not exist even in the United States. His assessment of the American political program in Vietnam is sarcastic, and he employs the words *arrogance* and *ignorance* to describe the Americans' eventual attempt to "Vietnamize" the war. On this subject, his personal patriotism and pride in Vietnamese history are evidenced in this statement: "For one thousand years the Chinese failed to 'Vietnamize' Vietnam, that is to say, pacify our country and annex it to the Middle Empire. After nearly one hundred years, the French attempt was blown into ashes at Dien Bien Phu. How do the Americans think they can do it when all the others, Chinese, French, Japanese, have failed miserably? How, by using every conceivable advanced weapon they have to kill all the Vietnamese, defoliate our forests and poison our rivers?"⁵⁷

Loc candidly points out that the U.S. failure to understand Vietnamese history is due to "their total disregard and ignorance of other nations' historical experiences"; "they believe that armed with guns, a copy of the Declaration of Independence, and a Constitution, they can propagate a 'melting pot' policy around the world."⁵⁸ Loc also scoffs at the United States for claiming the right to resolve another country's social dilemmas using a melting-pot philosophy, although the U.S. itself "can't [even] melt the Blacks, Puerto Ricans and Indians!" He mockingly concludes, "How can their unmelting pot pretend to melt the Vietnamese into a Vietnamese pot? I get lost in their

thoughts.”⁵⁹ Loc is pointing out, sardonically, that, like the Chinese and the French and the Japanese before them, the Americans are entertaining “irrational dreams”⁶⁰ in their plans for the Vietnamization of the American War and its political agenda. Thus, the Americans abuse their immense power in ways totally inconsistent with the humane values, principles, and ethical standards that they proudly proclaim to be their founding ideals.

Loc calls the Americans “treacherous” enemies for their failure to abide by a binding agreement not to bomb during a ceasefire or an exchange of prisoners.⁶¹ After Minh is allowed to meet his American girlfriend in an underground shelter, a comrade warns Minh that the Americans might harm her: “We were afraid that either the U.S. troops or the Saigon puppets would pretend not to know about it [a 24-hour temporary ceasefire along the Ben Hai River], kill the American prisoners, and blame us.”⁶² Ultimately, it is an illegal American bombing that kills Jennifer, and the U.S. government either denies or conceals the fact. Minh realizes the irony of his girlfriend’s tragic death: “An American bomb paid for by the American people’s taxes, made perhaps in some factory not far from Amherst, Massachusetts, killed an American woman—the lover of a ‘Viet Cong official.’”⁶³ In a conversation with Bao, a Vietnamese journalist, in Paris, where Minh serves as an interpreter and press attaché, Minh says that, in their battle for the liberation of Hue, “the U.S. indiscriminately used massive fire power, killing more innocent civilians than soldiers . . . [and] we in the liberation Army had to take care of the dead—dead killed by American fire—and bury them at great risk. And *now* we are accused of killing these people.”⁶⁴ The battle for Hue, indeed, was infamously destructive, and Minh’s reduction of the confrontation to absolute black-and-white terms reveals his particular political persuasion on that issue.

Minh’s Ultimate Decision & Commitment

The message that Tran Van Dinh delivers through the interaction of a full spectrum of characters with the protagonist Minh—himself a character caught between his background experiences both in Vietnam and in the United States—is, as noted above, that hard-line adherence to any political ideology is dehumanizing. Thai, the female Communist who is the equal of any male Communist around her, is just as dehumanized as U.S. Vice-Consul Buckley. Both characters have renounced their humanity in order to identify fully with the doctrines extolled by the political regimes they have chosen to support, and both appear as mechanical figures who serve their regimes as well-oiled automatons rather than as fully realized human beings. The characters Loc and Bradley, however, commit themselves to the causes that their political leaders assign them, but they have not determined to ignore or deny the humanity in individuals from the opposing camp.

Caught between the opposing poles of political persuasion is Minh, who is a poet inspired by nature and the folk traditions of the Vietnamese people. In the end, Minh must depart the land that he loves because it has fallen into the hands of the hard-line politicians who claimed it at the end of the war. Whether he will find poetic inspiration elsewhere remains doubtful, but elsewhere his poetic spirit might draw upon his recollections of a balanced *Ly* and *Tinh* as an ideal of the past. Elsewhere, perhaps, he can nurture the humanity within him that will not yield to ideological abstraction, however compelling it might appear to be.

Tran's novel is unique in its depiction of the intellectual forces at play in Vietnam during the American War. The deep consideration of these currents of thought leads Minh, ultimately, to make his moral decision not to remain in Communist Vietnam. Minh maintains his humanity: He senses that brotherhood should be universal; it should not be ideological, defined exclusively as a brotherhood of believers. The novel focuses on the educated thinkers who had to make personal, moral decisions through the war and in its aftermath. This group is a relatively small but nevertheless significant. Tran's novel is ultimately successful in its depiction of the process of moral decision-making that guided his main character's life amid the destruction that changed his country forever.

Notes

This article was written as part of a larger study that also examined Lan Cao's Monkey's Bridge (1997) and Le Ly Hayslip's Child of War, Woman of Peace (1992).

¹Tran Van Dinh was born in 1923 and grew up in Hue, the ancient imperial capital of Vietnam. His family upheld the intellectual and spiritual values of a traditional upper-class Vietnamese family—a family steeped in the tradition of Confucian scholars, Buddhist philosophers, and Taoist poets. During the French War in Vietnam (1946–54), Tran, like his father, actively joined in anti-colonial activities against the French. In 1961, after ten years of working in the Vietnamese diplomatic service in Southeast Asia (Thailand and Burma), Tran joined the Vietnamese Embassy in Washington, D.C., where he participated in the Civil Rights Movement. By 1963, after having held various prestigious political positions, Tran simultaneously served as non-resident ambassador to Argentina and head of the Vietnamese Embassy. At the end of 1963, he resigned from his diplomatic position in Washington and pursued his passion for work toward peace and social justice. He taught Asian humanism at SUNY–Old Westbury (1964–71) and at the Dag Hammarskjold College in Columbia, Maryland. At Temple University (1971–85), he taught international politics and communications; he later became chair of Temple's Department of Pan-African Studies. Tran's publications and scholarly activities are quite impressive: he has published several books on Vietnamese history, international Buddhism, and the Third-World independence movement; and articles of his have appeared in the *New York Times*, the *Nation*, *National Geographic*, the *Christian Science Monitor*, and other journals. Besides his scholarly works, he has written poetry and two novels, *No Passenger on the River* (1965) and *Blue Dragon, White Tiger* (1983).

²Tran Van Dinh, *Blue Dragon, White Tiger: A Tet Story* (Philadelphia: TriAm, 1983), 83.

³*Ibid.*, 84.

⁴*Ibid.*

⁵*Ibid.*, 20. Tran explains, “There are soldiers everywhere in the Thai capital now, including Americans on ‘R and R,’ rest and recreation, from Vietnam. ‘You know what a friend of mine calls R and R?’ Chammi has asked him. ‘Room and rush. The Americans come here, find a room, rush to the massage parlors, pick up a girl, rush back to the room . . . and rush her back to the massage parlor.’”

⁶*Ibid.*, 89.

⁷*Ibid.*, 87.

⁸*Ibid.*, 114.

⁹*Ibid.*, 155. *Tet* is Vietnam’s traditional Lunar New Year.

¹⁰*Ibid.*

¹¹*Ibid.*, 156.

¹²*Ibid.*, 161.

¹³*Ibid.*, 163.

¹⁴*Oxford English Dictionary Online*, 2006 ed.

¹⁵See Tran, *Blue Dragon, White Tiger*, 91, 113, 116, and 141–43.

¹⁶Gilbert N. Dorland, *Legacy of Discord: Voices of the Vietnam War Era* (Washington, DC: Brassey’s, 2001), 84.

¹⁷William R. Corson, *The Betrayal* (New York: Norton, 1968), 136.

¹⁸Tran, *Blue Dragon, White Tiger*, 151. In a conversation between Minh and his brother An, An says, “Well, if by Viet Cong we meant antigovernment, anti-U.S., then the majority of the students are Viet Cong because most of them are nationalists. But if by a Viet Cong we mean a communist cadre, then nobody knows exactly how many.”

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 209.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 219.

²¹Katerina Clark, “Socialist Realism in Soviet Literature,” in *The Routledge Companion to Russian Literature*, ed. Neil Cornwell (London: Routledge, 2001), 174–86: 179.

²²Tran, *Blue Dragon, White Tiger*, 91.

²³*Ibid.*, 94.

²⁴Clark, “Socialist Realism in Soviet Literature,” 177.

²⁵Tran, *Blue Dragon, White Tiger*, 94.

²⁶*Ibid.*, 96.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 97.

²⁸*Ibid.*, 159, 109.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 94.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 191.

³¹*Ibid.*, 95.

³²*Ibid.*, 222.

³³*Ibid.*, 236.

³⁴*Ibid.*, 276.

³⁵*Ibid.*, 309.

³⁶*Ibid.*, 44.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 211.

³⁸*Ibid.*, 248.

³⁹*Ibid.*, 257.

⁴⁰Renny Christopher, “*Blue Dragon, White Tiger*: The Bicultural Stance of Vietnamese American Literature,” in *Reading the Literatures of Asian America*, ed. Shirley Geok-lin Lim and Amy Ling (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), 259–70: 265.

⁴¹David W. Levy, *The Debate Over Vietnam* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), 60–61.

⁴²Tran, *Blue Dragon, White Tiger*, 112.

⁴³*Ibid.*, 20.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 225.

⁴⁵Carlin Romano, "A Vietnam Diplomat Turned Vietnam Novelist," in *San Francisco Sunday Examiner & Chronicle*, May 6, 1984.

⁴⁶Tran, *Blue Dragon, White Tiger*, 80.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, 61.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, 67.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, 66.

⁵⁰Levy, *The Debate Over Vietnam*, 56–57.

⁵¹George McTurnan Kahin and John W. Lewis, *The United States in Vietnam*, rev. ed. (New York: Dial, 1967), 239.

⁵²Tran, *Blue Dragon, White Tiger*, 100.

⁵³Neil L. Jamieson, *Understanding Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 321. The Hue massacre of 1968 is described as follows: "During the twenty-five days in which attackers [the Vietcong] partially controlled the city[,] several thousand people were executed in cold blood. Most of the victims were shot; others were beheaded, beaten to death, or in some instances apparently buried alive. Members of the Vietnamese Nationalist party (VNQDD) and Dai Viet party members seem to have been special targets of this terror."

⁵⁴Tran, *Blue Dragon, White Tiger*, 235.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, 73. For example, when Minh is concerned about potential dangers lurking behind the Thien Mu Pagoda, his brother Phong assures him, "I don't think there's any danger in going there. The Viet Cong have never attacked religious centers."

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, 79.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, 95.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*

⁵⁹*Ibid.*

⁶⁰*Ibid.*

⁶¹*Ibid.*, 124.

⁶²*Ibid.*, 224.

⁶³*Ibid.*, 249.

⁶⁴*Ibid.*, 224.