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The Machinery of Vietnamese Art and Literature in the Post-Renovation, Post-Communist (and Post-Modern) Period

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[Vietnamese writer Pham Thi Hoai was the 2003-04 Distinguished Visitor of the Southeast Asian Studies Consortium of the University of California, Berkeley, and UCLA. She delivered the same lecture at both campuses. At UCLA it was held on February 4, 2004. Below is the English translation of her lecture.]

* * *

Thirty three years ago, when I submitted – from my small town — my first ever piece of writing to the “children’s creativity contest” of the Hanoi Pioneer Youth League (Thieu nien tien phong), the world was easy to understand. I don’t recall much about what I wrote. It may very well have been a story about a lazy child, who got bad grades and made mother worry. This mother, nevertheless, wrote to father at the front that their child was well behaved and studious. By mistake, the child read the letter. Ashamed and regretful, the child vowed to improve so as to be worthy of the image presented in her mother’s letter. Every piece of this world fit together and these pieces seemed easy to assemble. The left and right sides were clearly marked, without confusion. In Quang Tri, our army and people were winning big battles. On the loud speaker, our army and people won as regularly as the sun rises. At school, a student who earned high marks was compared to a brave soldier who killed Americans and their Southern Vietnamese lackeys. A high mark in math equaled one dead American. A high mark in wood-shop equaled one dead South Vietnamese lackey. The enemy’s blood formed a river in my report card, the enemy’s bones, a mountain. In a neighboring town, the prodigy poet Tran Dang Khoa — who is a year older than I — was writing verse that inspired the nation, a nation in which every person — young or old — knew who they were and the reasons why they should smile if they were to die the following day. During this time, it seemed that all progressive members of humanity wished to become Vietnamese.

In the thirty years since then, the world order has undergone many changes – changes profound enough to have transformed even the most conservative people. Every individual fate, no matter how independent and self-contained it may seem, is inevitably a product of its time and society. I did not chose the trajectory (cai moc) of my own literary career for example. The choices I have made have not been entirely my own. They have been shaped by external forces. Even those things that seem to belong completely to oneself, to have been nurtured from within and that appear to be self-generated are the product of changing external circumstances. Had circumstances unfolded differently, had fate remained static, I probably would have become a writer of “sincere” stories – stories that reveal who is better than whom, stories in which evil is defeated, stories in which “willpower” leads to victory, and stories in which errors are corrected. In these stories, lies are told for “compassionate” reasons and tragedy figures as little more than a decorative accessory.

Like all Vietnamese of my generation, I was not born to be a skeptic, a cynic or a critic. That my later work has gone in these directions is a function of the times. While I respect the idea of unlimited artistic freedom, I believe that what Vietnamese writers often see as their own private world of creativity – their original planet divorced from any solar system – is, in reality, closely tethered to its historical era.

I cannot say anything about those inner worlds since only their owners have that authority. Instead, I wish to speak about the relationship between a writer and her time: and in particular – the relationship between Vietnamese writers and the post-Renovation era. To be more accurate: I wish to speak about the relationship between writers who write in Vietnamese and the post Renovation era. This allows us to include Vietnamese writers who live abroad and to exclude Vietnamese writers who write in other languages. I have my reasons for doing this. I believe that the Vietnamese language is the incarnation and the witness of changes in Vietnamese society and history as well as an agent of change itself.

The Renovation literary movement began in 1986, reached its peak in 1988-1989 and had no official conclusion. The concept of “post-Renovation” used in my talk refers to the period from the mid 1990s until today. It does not refer to a precise month or year. One day, I hope, historians and researchers of this period will provide an accurate chronology. If, as some people think, there exists currently something called Renovation II, the concept used here should be thought of as Post-Renovation I. Instead of offering a definition, I would like to discuss several problems of post- Renovation literature – problems that I believe deserve attention.

Renovation is often referred to metaphorically as a force that “untied” art and literature. This image is widespread but rarely examined. For instance, it is not clear who is doing the tying and who is doing the untying and what is the rope that needs to be untied. We do not know how much the initial impulse for untying came from a genuine “glasnost” or from a counterfeit official version. We do not know whether we have the right to liberate ourselves or if that right remains the monopoly of others. We felt like centipedes whose feet are tied but tied with a very soft rope. It has taken a while to figure out that the most significant knot is the one tying literature to politics. If Renovation promised to allow literature and art a certain space of freedom, and to limit the right of the machinery of politics to interfere with the machinery of literature, then the task of the post-renovation era is to determine precisely the parameters of this space of freedom for literature and to determine the circumstances in which the government maintains a right to interfere with literature.

Up to the mid '90s, the legitimate parameters of the literary field were marked by invisible flags which Vietnamese writers had been well trained to perceive. This field was the most spacious that Vietnamese literature had ever enjoyed with two important exceptions: literature from the late colonial era of 1930 – 1945 and Southern literature prior to 1975. In the post-Renovation era, the basic rule is that: “You can do whatever you want as long as you avoid politics.” This clever agreement facilitates living together in peace and allows both sides to avoid the kinds of conflicts that occurred in the past and that neither side wants to repeat. This rule allows writers to commit themselves completely to art, a position which used to be criticized and was even banned for a

time.¹ In Vietnam, the practice of segregating literature from politics has a stature akin to the separation of church and state. As it turns out, literary work includes many activities that have no direct relation to politics: the task of enhancing literary apprehensions of the world, the task of forming an avant-garde, the task of researching topics, the task of searching for new artistic forms, the task of escaping from society's assigned roles and getting to know one's true, idiosyncratic self, the task of teaching the younger generation, the task of rereading the classics, the task of restoring a tradition of intellectual debate, the task of developing the publishing industry, the task of literary education, or the task of simply enjoying the pleasures of literature...

While all of these things may seem like normal elements of literary practice, they represented, for us, a new and fresh horizon that no one had seen before. There was a huge amount of work to do and given our recently liberated freedom, you might imagine writers expressing the conviction that "whatever literature needs, I will provide. Wherever literature meets difficulties I will be there." You might imagine the emergence of a feeling of urgency to hit the road, to get down in the trenches and carry out the basic work of the Renovation years.²

But this did not happen, or it happened only to a disappointing degree. Or when it happened, the outcome was very odd. Let me illustrate what I mean with an example.

Despite the shortages and censorship of the war years, quite a bit of world literature was carefully translated into Vietnamese and widely distributed during this time. And this translated world literature greatly influenced the spiritual life of Vietnam. I would not have become a writer if, in that little town, amid years of running from bombs and eating root crops there was not a library. It was a tiny library and it contained less than a thousand books. It was located right inside the office of the district People's Committee. I discovered it when I went to take a bath at the cement well of the People's Committee where the water was cleaner than at ordinary earthen wells. The librarian – who was also at the same time the nurse, the cook, telephone receptionist and the janitor — was a voracious reader, just like me, a young child without any toys. Together, we read that entire library from top to bottom and then over again from the bottom to the top. Over and over again, we read the works of Hans Christian Andersen, Shakespeare, Thackeray, Pushkin, Tolstoy, Gogol, Solokhov, Mayakovsky, Gorky, Balzac, Hugo, Stendhal, Maupassant, Moliere, Aragon, Romain Roland, Robert L. Stevenson and Cervantes. We read Heine through a translation done by Te Hanh, Schiller through translation done by The Lu, as well as Ibsen, Pablo Neruda, Hemingway, Jack London and of course, classical Chinese writers.

I do not mean to idealize the achievements of translation in those days in order to underline the shortcomings of the present. The small chunk of world literature that was allowed to circulate in Vietnam during the "years of the march towards socialism," the years of heroic warfare" and the "gloomy immediate post-war years," had been carefully filtered and wrenched from their original contexts. Moreover, those works that did not make it to Vietnam were often denounced

¹ One of the most popular and favorable form of resistance of unorthodox literature before Doi Moi was to concentrate on the so-called pure art. The rhetorical method, experiment and polish is one of the glorious fortress of the challenging spirit against the orthodox.

² A slogan of Vietnam's Youth League once was: "Wherever needed, the youth will be there. Wherever difficult, the youth will be there." Later, this slogan is mocked in various versions: "Wherever there is a lot of money, I'll be there. Wherever there is too much money, I'll be there," or "Wherever needed, I won't be there. Wherever difficult, there will be no me"...

as useless and poisonous garbage that ought to be avoided or even forbidden. During this time, pro-Soviet literature was most prized by our literary critics. Hence, John Reed was invested with the authority to represent all of American literature. Louis Aragon stood for French literature and Anna Seghers for German literature. Of course, this mode of classifying literature led to the introduction into Vietnam of what was essentially a deeply distorted caricature of world literature. It employed a simplistic and distorted lens through which to view world literature – a lens that continues to influence Vietnam today. But despite these shortcomings, it was not such poor spiritual food for Vietnamese readers. Mayakovsky, Gorky, Ehrenburg, Fadaev are far from mediocre authors. Their presence in the Vietnamese language must be applauded. But the biggest applause goes to the famous ambition of communism, an ambition to monopolize the right to liberate human beings from every misery, especially the kind of miseries caused by the feudal, capitalist, colonial and imperialist classes. Therefore, even though it fell outside of what was conventionally considered the revolutionary literature of the proletariat, the work of Hugo, Tolstoy, Hemingway and of many great writers of the world were still translated, as long as they did not blame the miseries of human kind on totalitarianism or dictatorship, and as long as their creative methods did not violate too strongly the methods of socialist realism.

But, the recent years of peace, greater openness and greater material abundance have provoked a crisis in the field of literary translation. In a series of recent talks and articles, the writer Nguyen Ngoc has lamented this situation. According to him, “the foundation for serious literary translation has been shattered by pressure from a new translation market that follows a brutal commercial tendency which the state has enthusiastically unleashed.” He calls for a “national strategic plan for translation and argues that the state must lead and organize this strategic work.”³

I admired Nguyen Ngoc when he served as chief editor of the famous *Van Nghe Magazine* during Renovation. I admire him even more for his undiminished enthusiasm and for his surprising energy during the post Renovation years. But please let me present a different view: I do not think that the market in Vietnam is responsible for the recent impoverishment of the field of translation. And it is hard to imagine the current Vietnamese government taking the lead in this work of spiritual development.

If it was really “unleashed,” this commercial market would have seized a work such as “Lolita.” It would have silently and quickly calculated that the hundred thousands of readers who bought *Paradise of the Blind* (Nhung Thien Duong Mu) would also buy *The Gulag Archipelago*, and that *American Psycho* would sell faster than *Harry Potter*, because the audience for Harry Potter in Vietnam spends all day studying while the audience for *American Psycho* has plenty of time on its hands. I also believe that if the market principal was really unleashed, a commercial publishing company in Vietnam would not only replace *Vietnamese Womens News* with a Vietnamese version of *Playboy* magazine but they would choose a Vietnamese version of *Cahier du Cinema* to replace the current *Vietnamese Cinema* magazine (tap chi Dien Anh Viet Nam). And why do the un-marketable collective works of Le Duan and Truong Chinh continue to be published while the work of global thinkers – not only western ones – are not? Because global authors do not attract Vietnamese readers? No, I do not believe that the work of Le Duan or

³ Nguyen Ngoc, One need to restore a healthy translation. *Tap Chi Tia Sang* (A Ray of Light Magazine), No. 21, Hanoi, November 11, 2003. Republished on eVan.

Truong Chinh is easier to digest than the work of Rousseau. Nor do I think that their work is more engaging than that of Winston Churchill. And in terms of contemporary relevance for Vietnam today, their work is on par with that of Marcus Aurelius.

But we shouldn't worry about the financial health of these publishing houses that publish books that absolutely no one will read. They were created to spend an approved budget, in order to generate a false need or to falsely sustain an irrelevant demand. Their success in Vietnam today does not compare with the record attained by Mao's little red book during the Cultural Revolution. [But there, the market rule was only present to be on the edge.] The rules of that game were based on different principles. The beast of material interest was not "unleashed" to bite freely in the market of culture and communication in Vietnam. It is tied up with a chain long enough to dominate a limited domain, but beyond the length of that chain lies another domain — a domain that is larger, more experienced and more barbarous than even the domain of the market: the domain of contemporary politics.

In other words, the principal of literary freedom which states that "One can do whatever one wants as long as it is not political" – when applied to the field of translation inevitably means one has the freedom to translate Chin Yung (Kim Dung) but not George Orwell.⁴

Since neither Orwell nor Chin Yung were available several decades ago, publishers who now put out Chin Yung must be seen as contributors to society – but their contribution is like that of a motor-bike smuggler who provides motor-bikes to every last peasant whether they know how to use the breaks or not.

The recent explosive spread of motorbikes has caused more deaths than Vietnam's last two wars combined: the Vietnamese-Chinese border war and the Cambodian war. The recent explosive spread of Chin Yung⁵ has crushed numerous writers and translators with those who mimic the work of Chin Yung now outnumbering those who oppose it. The Vietnamese environment has a strange tendency to merge the agent of positive change and the executioner into a single person — the greater the contribution the more serious the crime. But if I must weigh this on my own personal scale, I do not think that the crimes of the commercial market in Vietnam are more serious than the benefits it brings, and its total impact is not enough to have caused the current cultural crisis.

⁴ A text such as *What Is Democracy?* on the American Embassy website does not count as literary translation. When the news of the first sentence, 13 years, for Pham Hong Son was broadcast on Yahoo as headline news, I accidentally witnessed a German forum which was very fired up about this story. One person in the forum commented that: whoever is so immature and unwise to the extent to propagandize for the so-called democracy of the American government, that person deserved to be quarantined from the community, so that the community will have one less stupid person. Although most participants in the forum agreed that the article *What Is Democracy?* is not worth reading and even more not worth anyone sacrificing for it, even if for only one day in prison, most insisted that these derisory comments are completely inappropriate for the level of seriousness of oppression of freedom of thought which is happening in Vietnam. The person making the comment eventually apologized.

⁵ This is only a way of speaking with no contemptible implication on the work of Chin Yung. I personally think that Vietnamese writers should experience several major work of Chin Yung such as *Laugh and mock the (underground) world* (Tieu ngao giang ho), *The hero who kills the hawk* (Anh hung Xa dieu), *The young woman of Do Long* (Co gai Do Long)..., so that at least to understand the root of numerous phrases, images and concepts... which came to Vietnamese language from Chin Yung's novels.

Let us return to the role of the state in the field of translation. The ending of state subsidies for the publication and distribution of translation work has damaged the machinery of translation. But the problem is not that the financial tap has been turned off. The development of a private economy reveals a host of other smaller taps which when they run together can contribute significant resources.

But privatization in the field of culture and communication has not advanced as far or as radically as the privatization of toilet paper, dish detergent, liquid soap, shampoo, bath soap, toothpaste and tampons. Obviously this is not because the national demand for clean laundry, bathing, shampooing and douching is more urgent although the unbelievable density of advertisements for such products may make one think this way – and it indeed I sometimes felt this way the last time I went back to Vietnam.

In my opinion, what needs attention is not that the state (or to be more accurate: the national leaders, an indivisible mixture of the Party and the state) has stopped leading and sponsoring translation, or has stopped being the engine of the train. Rather it is that despite its absence, it refuses to allow anyone else to replace it or to carry out the work at all. The post-Doi Moi indeed is a period of strange empty spaces, of absent authority, of a train without an engine or an engineer. The train continues to run, most of the time in a monotonous rhythm, following a set course. When going downhill, it may run at a frighteningly high speed. When going uphill, it may slip backward. The old prestige of ideology, of systems of thoughts and of certain spiritual values have been abandoned, but the empty space has been sealed shut, leaving no opportunity for new sources of prestige or value to take their place. The machinery of leadership held by the Party and the state has lost its efficiency, but no alternative executive system is allowed to take over. The structural organization from the top down is no longer in effect, but the confederation of individuals from the bottom up has not been established. In the last several decades, there has not been a single time, even during Doi Moi, when Vietnamese writers have been able to form groups independently that can compete against the spiritual prestige of government organizations. I do not mean to criticize. Bravery and cowardice plays no role in this story. The application for the establishment of an **official** Association for Classical Dance has a completely different fate than the application for the establishment of **an independent** artistic and literary group, unless, of course, the writers and artists listed their organization's purpose as kite flying rather than poetry.

So, the peaceful co-existence of politics and literature during this Post Doi Moi period is only peaceful as long as the machinery of political authority can be present or absent as it wishes. It does not have to report to anyone or ask permission from anyone. It is undeniable that the general atmosphere today is more open and generous than in the past, even when compared to the Doi Moi period. Even the punishments for “crimes of culture, literature and art” are considerably more lenient than in the past.

Depending on level of “problem” that a work – in the scope of being a literary work, not a political one –

In certain cases distribution may be stopped or publishing permits revoked. Harsh criticism may appear in newspapers. Authors may not be invited to appear on television, to serve as the editor

of literary journals, to work as General Secretary of the Writers' Association or to win the Ho Chi Minh award. But their ability to write is not formally revoked and they may retain the right to go abroad. They are not sent for re-education, put under surveillance or placed in jail.

Clearly, literary life in Vietnam today has been normalized to the extent that the generation who matured after Doi Moi cannot imagine the fear which blanketed all previous generations. The time has obviously changed. According to optimists, the wheel of history has rolled so far already that it cannot be turned back.

However, the Vietnamese political establishment continues to believe that Vietnamese literature must submit to its leadership and more importantly, the current period of generosity and openness is not guaranteed by any legal foundation or regulation or administrative act. Moreover, it is not guaranteed by any honorable promise or private support behind the curtain. No one is confident enough to make such promises.

Most of the old warning signs which used to clear enough for even the blind to see have been taken down. This is not because the forbidden areas have become safe but simply because it takes less work to leave the signs down (cho do vat va). Today this sign, the next day another one, it is better to take them all down. A very Vietnamese way of behave. It is thus easier to make mistakes. I can understand those who would prefer to return to a more clear-cut time – a time when we were on one side and our enemy was on the other. Hands were held and guided by bosses who told us that we must write in this way and not that way. The task was clear, in those days and energy did not have to be wasted. Vietnamese revolutionary literature reached a certain level perhaps because creative energy could be focused on a single goal. When he was completely devoted to the revolution, Che Lan Vien's poetry such as *Dieu Tan* exhibited a spark of genius; this work was stronger in many ways than the poetry he produced during the time of hesitation and experimentation towards the end of his life.

I have also always felt that the later – post-revolutionary — work of Nguyen Tuan was more boring than the earlier work (*The Old Fame* (Vang bong) and of *Once upon a time* (Mot thoi), not because he *followed* the revolution, but because he followed it *reluctantly*; followed and received its favor, but at the same time, it give him the opportunity to be someone else.

It was as if he used 2/3 of his talent for the revolution and reserved the remaining 1/3 for something else, the result was that Nguyen Tuan was never really his whole self. In such circumstances, even accidents had their own stature. Both the halo of To Huu and the dark shadow of Tran Dan had a similar intensity, and – I hope not to be misunderstood – even reinforced each other as a spur to creativity.

All of those attractions no longer have any effect during the Post Doi Moi years. The prestige of orthodoxy has disappeared and taken with it its twin brother, the prestige of anti-orthodoxy. The works which have been banned in recent years: *A Story told in the year 2000* (Chuyen ke nam 2000), *Searching for Characters* (Di tim nhan vat), *God laughs* (Thuong de thi cuoi), *A Time of fake prophets* (Thoi cua nhung tien tri gia)..., in my opinion, are much more important and have a much higher artistic value than most of the work banned during the Nhan Van – Giai Pham period. But they do not attain the same mythical status. They don't arouse any real curiosity

within a literary public that was once eager to taste forbidden fruit. As I mentioned, most danger signs, (signs of prohibition) have been eliminated. Now, each writer must use their own talent and energy to find their own way rather than allowing themselves to be led. Writers must design their own safety zone. Writers must interpret for themselves the principal that: “one can do whatever one wants as long as it is not politics.” The post-renovation era is the golden age of self-censorship.

If each person only looked after him or herself, at least there would still be a no man’s land, an empty space in which one could take risks. However, all individuals are also members of the collective. Writers serve the machinery of literature, journalists serve the machinery of communication, friends serve the machinery of relationships, and everyone serves the machinery of their family.

These connections enhance the scope of self-censorship. We guard ourselves and we guard one another and we protect each other. And after applying every method of self-censorship, if one still gets in trouble, then one should accept it in the spirit of Kafka: no one really knows why? No individual, no office, no branch, no authority, no enemy, no duplicitous friend. There are no longer progressive and conservative sides or leftists and rightists — different positions merge together, everything is permitted and not permitted simultaneously. Vietnamese literature today may be seen as both open and peaceful and closed and violent.

A question often asked by foreigners is: are Vietnamese writers free to write what they think? Many writers in the country claim that they are completely free and that anyone can write anything. But thinking and writing are always closely related and therefore maybe the question needs to be changed. First we should ask whether Vietnamese writers have the freedom to think. In recent years, the freest brain in Vietnam does not belong to any writer. Instead, it belongs to World Security Newspaper (An Ninh The Gioi).

Why is the most sensational newspaper also the most orthodox? And why does this paper display the badge of the “Vietnamese People’s Police” and carry the slogan “For National Security” and include the sign “The Office of The Ministry of Police?” How does it become one of the leading spiritual forces in the country? The popularity of the monthly magazine “Police Culture and Literature” and “Global Security’s End-of-the month supplementary issue (phu san)⁶ devoted to Art and Literature” indicates that the empire of “Police Art and Literature” during the Post Renovation era has replaced the empire of the journal “Army Art and Literature before the Renovation period.”

The answer lies with the replacement of the army by the police. The era of Nguyen Minh Chau, Nguyen Ngoc, Bao Ninh, Duong Thu Huong, Nguyen Khai, Le Luu, Duong Huong, Nguyen Khac Truong was a time dominated by soldiers and officers. It was a time whose history was

⁶ The first issue of *World’s Security* came out on Aug 15, 1996. At first, it was a bimonthly periodical with specialized topics of the Police’s Culture-Art & Literature magazine. Later it became a weekly journal which came out on Wednesday. Since September 2000, it published a special issue, the World’s Security End-of-the-month issue. Since January 2004, in responding to the new duty, *The World’s Security* merged with the *People’s Police* and become a product of the *People’s Police* newspaper (www.anninhthegioi.com.vn).

mainly a history of war and whose most important achievements were military achievements. This time, however, has passed.

We are now in the Post- Renovation period. The newspaper of the police can endow Vietnamese writers with a freedom unmatched by any other periodical simply because the police set the limits of what is permissible, appropriate and orthodox.⁷ The police are the ones who blow the horns. Even if they blow it at the wrong time, it does not matter since there are no other horn blowers. After an initial period of suspicion, most writers inside the country have chosen to ignore the history of animosity between literature and the police. After all, this newspaper has the most readers and pays writers as well as the New York Times. The paper also prints statements that no other papers dare to publish. If it wishes to have influence and to avoid becoming isolated, Vietnamese literature must retain a close friendship with the press. Its biggest friend right now is the *World Security Newspaper*, which allows it survive in a small gap somewhere between popular culture and political orthodoxy. We should be optimistic in believing that a small space is better than none. We can be optimistic that a small gap is better than none.

Many of our centipede legs have been untied. The question now is which leg should go first, which should go next and which should go last. Here I do not mean to criticize any literary collective. People have the right to devote themselves completely to their art and to state that: “I only do art, I do not get involved in anything else.” But, art is involvement. I myself did not understand this at first. For many years I closed my door, thinking that to withdraw was the most effective form of political dissidence. I even refused to do translation, thinking that it was the work of someone else.

Three months ago I had a chance to return to the small town where I wrote and submitted the first published work of my life. I actually received Second Prize in that competition, the only literary prize I have ever been awarded in Vietnam. The cement well of the People’s Committee is no longer there. Local leaders use water from the water-tap and people do not need to go there for a hot shower. The library is no longer there — only a handful of publications in the guest room: (the work of Le Duan, Truong Chinh...), the *People’s Daily*, the *People’s Army Daily*, the *People’s Police Daily* and *World Security Daily*. The guest room also had a television, a video and a karaoke machine, a statue of Ho Chi Minh, a banner that says “Live, fight, work and study following the example of President Ho,” a two-layered pink curtain made in Thailand, a fake leather sofa set, a tea set and a thermos made in China, and a red plastic pot for disposing of old tea. There is not a bookstore in the entire town, no newspaper stand, no Internet stores, but there are 3 or 4 electronic game parlors that are always packed with young customers. In every house I visited, there was no sign of printed work except for textbooks in children’s school bags and calendars on the walls. The only exceptions were the houses owned by members of the provincial association of art and literature and the head of the local poetry club. The activities of the club resemble a large feast since they are marked by the arrival of cars from Hanoi and distant parts of the province. In those cars are retired representatives of the provincial literature association, or retired members of the Vietnamese writers’ association, or retired vice ministers,

⁷ The novel “The time of fake prophet” of Nguyen Vien was rejected by almost every publishing house and was finally accepted by the Police Publishing House. Later, the order to stop the distribution of the book is also carried out by the police.

heads of institutes, vice presidents of chambers of commerce, cadres who left their native place and who are now retired from work.

Those most devoted to Vietnamese literature are retirees on pensions who have escaped both commercial and political pressures. The poems written by these retirees seem untouched by the demands of the market – rather they are produced to meet the formal demands of official literary activity. They are not the product of political orders, but do not stray – even one verse — from the orthodox political line.

I was accompanied on that trip by a French friend. She asked whether it was happy to be a Vietnamese writer nowadays. I replied that no matter what, it is not as unfortunate as to be a French writer. There is not yet a Proust or a Celine as an obstacle in Vietnamese literature. There is still much work to do.

January 2004