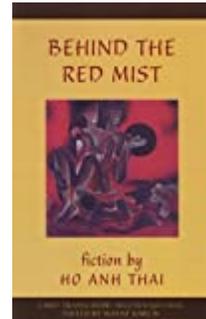




Anh Thai Ho. *Behind the Red Mist.* Willimantic, Conn.: Curbstone Press, 1998. xvii + 245 pp. \$14.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-880684-54-2.



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Behind the Red Mist

What happens after the bombs clear? When an event like the Vietnam War seared the ideology of liberation and suffering into the very marrow of a certain generation, what is the legacy left for the succeeding sons and daughters?

The post-war Vietnam that writer Ho Anh Thai describes in this collection of short stories embodies the confusion that every new generation faces—how to sustain and maintain the strengths of the past into their present while examining, either discarding or repairing, its mistakes. A nation in transition, the adoption of new political forms and freedoms are at the heart of these thought-provoking glimpses of a nation settling into itself.

Ho Anh Thai speaks from experience. He is of the post-war generation too young to fight but still actively caught up in its consequences. Born in 1960, he was evacuated from Hanoi in 1966 and lived the life of a refugee till 1973.

This book, a bestseller in Vietnam, seems to express a yearning to look back at the past, one that is framed and

revered by memory. Reality is lost in the myth of the war, perpetuated to a large extent by the post-war, post-colonial generation rather than by the ones who actually lived it. The deconstruction and reconstruction of these myths, Ho implies, enables a nation to move on to the future. The past, says Ho in the long novella that gives the book its name, is like a boat that has sunk beneath the waves and thought to be forgotten: “The river boat, thought to have gone to eternal sleep under the sand of the beach, considered to be content with its past, was now being excavated and would be useful in the present. And in the future also” (p. 177).

This reworking of myth is achieved with simplicity and clarity of language and with more than a little dash of magic. Infused with a gentle ironic humor and sympathy for most of the characters, its imaginative writing challenges us to jettison the quaint chili and lemongrass view of South East Asian literature. *Behind The Red Mist*, a social satire which draws together the major themes of this work, is the story a young man called Tan in the Hanoi of the 1980s who after receiving an electric shock is transported to the same place in 1967.

He not only witnesses the war with the benefit of hindsight, but actively plays matchmaker to the young man and woman who will become his parents in the future and discovers that the generation that was held up to his own as role models are very human indeed. Like when Tan comes across members of an anti-aircraft unit listening to waltz music, who suddenly break into patriotic song when he arrives on the scene, but quit when they realize he is not an official and invite him to learn their dance steps.

Doi Moi "Renovation," which began in 1986 and the adoption of the market economy, has greatly influenced the way Vietnamese writers pursue their craft. The new bureaucratic system and the effect of entrenched corruption on traditional Vietnamese culture are dealt with in four other stories set in Vietnam.

In "Fragment of a Man," a member of the post-war generation looks back on his parents life with respect and protectiveness. His mother has never recovered from her grief over the death of her husband in the war and tries to reconstruct her life through fragments of the past and treating them like icons. She effectively builds an alter to the past. The young man seems wiser in the ways of the world than his parents, yet somehow more innocent. His life seems rather colorless and without the passion of his parents' time. Ho implies that this is the feature of memory to block out the mundane. Reality, he says, can never really compete with the past.

"The Goat Meat Special" is a clever and biting tale of a corrupt, money-hungry official who one day turns into a goat while watching porno movies. He lives in constant fear of ending up as stew. His wife instantly recognizes him, despite this change. Its as if at last the he recognizes what he himself has become and so is forced to retire from public life. "People only say one thing changes into another," says one character, "but ... nothing changes into itself ... all I see around me are goats. The houses and the streets are surrounded by goats. Goats riding bicycles and Honda motorbikes. Goats sitting in Toyotas" (p. 43). Ho's meaning is clear and savage, it doesn't mince words.

The attempts of officials who try to regulate what is acceptable, cuts to the heart of "The Chase." The constant battle that the local police and militia wage against the young people of a provincial town seems a ludicrous waste of resources when all they do when they catch them is cut their hair and shred their trousers, Ho argues.

"The Man Who Believed in Fairy Stories" pokes fun at Vietnamese who idolize western ways and who think

West is always the best. "That morning, waking up in the United States, I was frightened to find that I had turned into an American" (p. 94). With a Western visage and fluent Vietnamese, he returns to his native land and finds that his social status vastly improved, so much so that his opinions and sexual favors are eagerly sought by those who want to get ahead. The 'fairy story' of the title is the difficulty one has in being accepted for what one is, not some ideal of what one should be.

In "The Indian" and "The Barter," the country is not Vietnam, but India, where the author spent some time studying and working as a diplomat. These are interesting commentaries on the Westerner who becomes more Asian than the locals and who don't realize how comic they become. We have surely come across these types. The earlier work tells of a young German studying Hinduism in India, who jettisons his identity and language in favor of immersion into the Total Cultural Experience. He eventually marries a local who in turn is enthralled by the West, and who spends her time deep in Western culture. "The Barter" concerns the tradeoffs we make to be modern, while still being reluctant to jettison tradition. The wife of a British archaeologist is driven to enter forbidden temples and know the 'real India,' while her Indian guide, a man who also experiences the delights of the forbidden, carries his own past literally in his backpack. The author suggests this barter will always be a compromise, and it is up to the individual to decide what is acceptable. In this, as in all his stories, Ho does not provide us with easy solutions to these cultural dilemmas. He presents them as they are. But by presenting them, we at least are more aware of their effect in our lives.

Ho Anh Thai has won several prestigious awards in Vietnam and began his publishing career while still in high school. He graduated from the College of Diplomacy in 1983 and served a stint in the People's army before joining the Foreign Ministry. He is presently an editor for World Affairs Weekly in Vietnam.

The renditions of these tales are smooth and fluent, and the translators' love and affinity for Vietnam is apparent. Writing like this can only help us further understand the consequences of history and the way that it is defined by the strong emotion surrounding a particular event. For the teacher, these tales would make an interesting comparative study with American fiction about the war. This volume brought the period alive for this reviewer, a Westerner of the same generation as Ho, who missed the demonstrations and protests of the hippie era.

After reading this collection I wanted to immediately expand my knowledge of modern Vietnamese fiction.

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