
Reviews of Books

Ngoc-Tuan Hoang ed., *Cau Noi~The Bridge: Anthology of Vietnamese-Australian Writing*

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Cau Noi~The Bridge is an engaging attempt to do as the title implies and bridge cultural differences. In the case of this ambitious anthology, edited by Ngoc-Tuan Hoang, the individual stories themselves represent the metaphorical bridges seeking to connect a variety of points of difference between Vietnamese-Australians in Australia and the wider culture they inhabit. The actual areas of difference range through such themes as race, values and identity. The book is a modest 113 pages in length with ten writers representing the latter two of three distinct generations of Vietnamese-Australians. Given the difficulty of the issues canvassed it is hardly surprising that some of the selections in this slender volume sometimes fall short of capturing the complexity of the subject matter they invoke.

This concern aside, the anthology is a valuable contribution to an increased understanding of both the links and points of disjuncture between the respective cultures. Though stylistically diverse, the stories are thematically joined by their examination of such arguably universal themes as social justice, moral courage and the longing for rooted-ness. Straddling two realities the individual stories combine to form the rich fabric that is “Vietnamese-ness” in the Australian context. There is also a logic to the way the stories are arranged in that they are presented sequentially from the most culturally burdened to those that convey a relatively seamless integration into Australian society. Thus, as a collection, the reader is able to traverse such diverse issues as racism on the streets of Sydney to the weight of cultural baggage over time.

The collection opens with Trinh Hoang Nguyen’s ‘Poetry as a Means of Demystification and Purification’. This essay, a mixture of narrative and poetry, contemplates the significance of homeland and place on the human psyche. The story is of a young poet/lawyer burdened by a childhood heavy with the symbolism and sloganism of Vietnamese Communism. In spite of now spending as much of his life in Australia as Vietnam, Trinh Hoang Nguyen still struggles with the memories of his fourteen years in the latter country. Through the medium of poetry he claims that he has been able to demystify and purify his mind of the stories that he grew up with in his childhood in Vietnam. With some poignancy Trinh Hoang Nguyen interprets his childhood education as largely encompassing betrayal and trickery. In an effort to understand the “trickery” and “betrayal”, he explores his inner self through the vehicle of poetry. However, any sympathies that the reader may have with Trinh Hoang Nguyen’s account of life in Vietnam in the seventies and eighties is likely to be tempered by his somewhat naive view that

During my first few years in Australia, I was often surprised by the fact that I was not taught patriotism in

school, and that nobody forced me to believe in any symbols and slogans...one day I realized I was living in freedom in Australia.ⁱ

By contrast, anyone living in Australia post “September 11” might be well aware of the “us” and “them” jingoistic symbolism that pervades much public discourse.

The next story in the collection, *Home Home* by David Phu An Chiem also, as the title implies, explores the theme of homeland but with the twist that is germane to this volume. In *Home Home* Chiem plays on the notion of difference between homelands as he recalls the story of a Vietnamese boy from the day of his leaving Vietnam to the day of the reunification of his family in Australia. The story is effectively recounted in the form of a film script that moves between the two worlds of Vietnam and Australia. Though punctuated with traumatic experiences the story is witness to the power of the human spirit and the endurance of family ties in a world of alienation.

Huong Thao Nguyen’s *The Water Buffalo* is a moving account of a troubled relationship between father and daughter exacerbated by, not only generational distance, but especially by the difference between ideas of home and community. That is to say, ideas that the daughter’s father brought with him from Vietnam and the social isolation experienced by a daughter trapped between two worlds. One world appears dreamlike and the other seemingly real, yet equally uncomfortable. Only at the end of the father’s life is his daughter able to gain some focus and look into the abyss that is at once both her father’s death and life. Looking into his dream world she realizes that she is fated to forever occupy a space on the border between dream and reality. Equally poignant, though less troubled is Matilda (Hang) Tran’s essay *The Well*. Written in a very matter of fact style, Tran’s essay tells of a young women’s childhood memory of her family’s well as a vehicle for negotiating her movement from childhood in Vietnam to adulthood in Australia. Tran uses the metaphor of a well to evoke her geo-cultural transition. She writes

My mother says we left our native land and came to live in a new country, but I say we left a well and came to live with a tap.ⁱⁱ

Like Nguyen in *The Water Buffalo*, Tran resists the temptation to nostalgia and instead writes carefully and with acceptance of the complexities that inhere in living life to the full. Although the well of her essay meets an undignified end, Tran concludes that water, even if from a tap, can be clean and cool.

Rice Hop: The Album by Khoa Do speaks directly to, and about the contemporary generation of Vietnamese-Australian youth in the form of song lyrics. Ranging across such difficult issues as racial discrimination, the role of language as a barrier to integration and migrant unemployment, Khoa Do’s lyrics eschew simplistic answers in favor of lucid observations of the state of affairs. Somewhat ambitiously, Khoa Do’s lyrics illustrate, with some clarity, and cultural context aside, the angst and alienation felt by the contemporary youth cultures of developed economies. Importantly, though *Rice Hop: The Album* also remains stoically optimistic in the face of the seriousness of such issues. Khoa Do’s account of youth culture in contemporary urban Australia manages to convey the gritty realities of the day to day with a deftness and lightness that carries the reader past the temptation to despair.

Anh Khoa Tran’s *Deeper than Skin* is an impressive and moving account of the significance people attach to the “surface”. Her story exemplifies the difficulties that inhere in the isolation brought about by the color of skin. What makes the story more interesting than it otherwise might be are the differing layers that inhere in this account of difference. The young woman of the story is different, not only as someone of Vietnamese descent in Australia but also due to a rare skin

pigmentation that renders her different within her own ethnic group and indeed within her own family. Tran's observations of how such superficial differences as skin color can adversely affect our behavior toward others may come as no surprise. What is more likely to leave the reader uneasy however, is the idea that such differences can so significantly impact on our closest relationships. Deeper than *Skin's* depiction of how difference can so deeply affect relationships with whom we are close contains real insight without the need to judge.

Like *Deeper than Skin*, Hai Ha Le's *Ginseng Tea and a Pair of Thongs* and Chi Vu's *Lover in the Fish Sauce* also avoid judgment in their portrayal of materialism in conflict with tradition. *Ginseng and a Pair of Thongs* broaches such issues as the importance of place and the conflict engendered by overlapping belief systems with deftness and matter of fact humor. The story is also an interesting portrayal of the machinations of institutionalized religion in contemporary society. *Lover in the Fish Sauce* however, is a more pessimistic account of how materialism can exacerbate the sense of rootlessness and despair among the current generation of Vietnamese-Australian youth. The young Vietnamese man of the story, by living out his parent's dreams, is alienated from them. Salvation lay, as often seems to be the case, in the re-affirmation of being that can be attained in relations with particular others. In this case, it is only his girlfriend, another Vietnamese-Australian of his generation, who can understand his feelings of disconnection.

In *Fragments of Being*, Nguyen narrates with compassion the story of her family and their role in the annual commemorative ritual of celebrating the narrator's grandmother's death. In the telling of the story the values that are core to Nguyen's family's culture are conveyed with subtly and honesty. From such basic domestic rituals as washing, chopping and preparing herbs to observations of the division of labor within the household, Nguyen is able to demonstrate how particular values are of an enduring universal quality.

3 Generation. One Connection is like *Fragments of Being* in terms of both its depiction of family lives and unashamed optimism. *3 Generation. One Connection*, however, is even more overtly positive in its expression of the nourishing effects of close family ties. The story is autobiographical in the form of three juxtaposed but powerfully intertwined monologues. Brief versions of the life of this family, recounted by the grandmother, the mother and the daughter combine to show how three lives, three generations, connect as one. It is possible to discern, in this story by Chuong, that she is second generation Vietnamese-Australian on the grounds of the well-being and hope for the future that it conveys. Of all the stories in the collection, it is this one which most strongly suggests contentment with the notion of Australia as home whilst at the same time retaining connections with the past. Significantly it is a connection with the past that lacks either longing or grief. Finally, it is a story of undaunted optimism. In the words of the grandmother, "...the years have passed and with each year getting better".ⁱⁱⁱ

As a collection the stories cohere extremely well, presented as they are sequentially from the most burdened by the past to the least burdened. In terms of the cultural landscape they inhabit they offer insight and passion in the absence of judgment.

What is especially interesting, if somewhat disquieting, about this volume of accounts of "Vietnamese-ness" in the Australian context, is the way in which contemporary Australian society at large continues to struggle with the legacy of the Vietnamese community in its midst. Though Australia purports to be a multicultural society and champions tolerance and compassion, racism and prejudice are never far from the surface of the social fabric. The stories in this collection are ample witness to this conclusion. It is with some irony then that the stories themselves suggest a generosity of spirit that the wider Australian community would do well to take heed of.

- i T. H. Nguyen, 'Poetry as a Means of Demystification and Purification' in *Cau Noi~The Bridge*, Ngoc-Tuan Hoang (ed.), (Sydney: Casula Powerhouse Arts Centre), 2004, p.20.
- ii M. H. Tran, 'The Well', in *Cau Noi~ The Bridge*, Ngoc-Tuan Hoang (ed.), (Sydney: Casula Powerhouse Arts Centre), 2004, p.54.
- iii M. Chuong, '3 Generation. One Connection' in *Cau Noi~ The Bridge*, Ngoc-Tuan Hoang (ed.), (Sydney: Casula Powerhouse Arts Centre), 2004, p.113.