



Ao Dai: My War, My Country, My Vietnam by Xuan Phuong, and Daniele Mazingarbe. 2004.

Translated from French by Lynn M. Bensimon and edited by Jonathan E. Myers. New York: Emquard International.

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Ao Dai: My War, My Country, My Vietnam is a thoroughly engaging first-hand account of one woman's experiences of revolution, war, social upheaval, deprivation and peace during the last half of Vietnam's 20th century. *Ao Dai* provides insight into the experiences of women during the anti-colonial resistance movements against the French and briefly, the Japanese, and the subsequent struggle and war with the United States. This is a perspective that is lacking in the literature on the Indochina Wars, and *Ao Dai* fills a gap in the growing body of memoir literature on the multivariate Vietnamese experiences of these wars. In particular, the book fills a gap in the English-language literature on such topics. In this respect, it is comparable to several other key writings of women's experiences of the Vietnamese Revolution and it is useful to use these as comparisons in this review of Xuan Phuong's *Ao Dai*. These examples include Le Ly Hayslip's *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places* (1989),¹ Duong Thi Thoa's memoir essay translated in the Women's Studies journal *Signs* (1998),² Nguyen Thi Dinh's memoir *No Other Road to Take* (1976),³ and Duong Van Mai Elliott's *The Sacred Willow* (1999).⁴ Among these, Xuan Phuong's memoir is unique and significant in several ways.

First, Phuong candidly recounts growing up as part of a colonial-era elite family in Dalat and Hue. She candidly discusses the hardships and advantages this offered her, and reflects upon how this affected the course of her life. Phuong generally depicts herself as a naive and inexperienced young girl who was swept

¹ Hayslip, Le Ly, and with Jay Wurts. 1989 *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places: A Vietnamese Woman's Journey from War to Peace*. New York: Plume.

² Duong Thi Thoa (Le Thi), translated by Mark Sidel. 1998 *Changing My Life: How I Came to the Vietnamese Revolution*. *Signs* 23(1):1017-1030.

³ Nguyen Thi Dinh, and translated by Mai V. Elliott. 1976 *No Other Road to Take: The Memoir of Mrs. Nguyen Thi Dinh*. M.V. Elliott, transl. Ithaca: Cornell University Southeast Asia Program.

⁴ Elliott, Duong Van Mai. 1999 *The Sacred Willow: Four Generations in the Life of a Vietnamese Family*. New York: Oxford University Press. Interestingly, two decades before publishing her own memoir, Elliott was one of the principal translators of Nguyen Thi Dinh's memoir.

up in the tide of revolutionary activity. In her prologue, Phuong details the very moment when she leaves her parents' home to join the Resistance on March 19, 1946. She was just 16 and was dressed in her school uniform, a purple *áo dài* or tunic dress when she literally and figuratively crossed the river from life as a member of the bourgeois class to join the revolution. In the first part of her book, which chronicles her family history and her formative years in Hue and Dalat, Phuong conveys a growing awareness of her family's relative luxury and her sensitivity of the disparity between rich and poor in the early part of the 20th century Vietnam, still under French rule. Phuong explains how this influenced her choices as a teenager and motivated her dedication to the revolutionary cause. This element of Phuong's narrative in particular, contrasts to Elliott's *The Sacred Willow* in which she seems to avoid coming to terms with her family's upper-middle class status.

Second, like Duong Thi Thoa's memoir essay translated in *Signs*, Phuong remained in Hanoi throughout the war years *and* the impoverished postwar years (which provides a dramatic contrast with the relatively dynamic picture of Vietnam these days). In spite of the relative military and political success of the Vietnamese Revolution with the final withdrawal of American forces and reunification of the country in 1975, the late 1970s and 1980s saw economic deterioration and political isolation, which brought continued suffering to the people. Phuong details how she and others suffered during the 1970s and 1980s and she gives us a brutally honest picture of those stark years in Hanoi. She eventually finds success in working as a documentary filmmaker but ultimately seeks solace by moving back to the south and going into business in the art world.

Third, another unique quality of Phuong's memoir is that she seems to straddle a "middle-ground" politically, as she alternately rejects and embraces the political (communist) message throughout her life as a revolutionary. Where other authors espouse a particular political perspective, Phuong seems somewhat ambivalent about politics. Where other memoir writers display a political outlook characteristic of many who left Vietnam for political or economic reasons (Hayslip and Elliott), or having determined the course of their lives according to political motives (Nguyen Thi Dinh and Duong Thi Thoa), Phuong alternately embraces and rejects political ideals (in particular, communism). And yet one of her primary reasons to write the book is to show the youth of today what their forebears have suffered. This makes her account seem more realistic and interesting, to see that her beliefs and actions are a more complex reality and not necessarily a "black and white" issue as with many memoirs.

The main text of *Ao Dai* is laid out in sections of varying length which follow a linear, chronological path in a highly episodic mode. I suspect that this somewhat erratic format resulted because the book was actually narrated to Ms. Mazingarbe, in French, and subsequently typed up and translated into English. Nevertheless, the narrative largely flows from one story to the next. Phuong avoids dwelling on her many traumatic experiences and we do not get a sense of that elusive "deep memory" that other memoirs of painful times have exhibited

(such as Spiegelman's exploration of his father's Holocaust experience⁵). This silence in Phuong's narrative gave me pause, as it seems like there are large omissions. Yet, in essence, this is further evidence that personal memory and its recounting are subjective activities which depend on the writer's goals and other factors.

A foreword by Frederick Z. Brown situates *Ao Dai* in its larger historical and political context and ends with the statement that "Phuong represents a bridge between the Vietnam of the war years and the Vietnam we see today" and as such, Phuong, the person, becomes Phuong, the symbol of a "new" Vietnam. Indeed the full title of her memoir, *Ao Dai: My War, My Country, My Vietnam* is telling in this respect. We infer that this memoir is a personal account, not only of her life, but of her country's history. In her prologue, Phuong declares one motivation for writing the memoir: "It occurred to me that telling my story would allow me to render homage to the companions of my youth, those whose examples I followed...I also wanted today's youth, especially the Vietnamese for whom uncle Ho is only a historical figure, to understand the suffering that our generation endured. Finally, I wanted to explain to my newly reunited family why I had made choices that separated us from each other for so long" (xvi). Here Phuong expresses the desire to bridge not only her country's past and present, but also the hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese living outside of Vietnam.

An excellent research project would be to perform a thorough analysis of Vietnamese women's narratives such as those mentioned here; and *Ao Dai* would be an interesting component of such a study. In the meantime, *Ao Dai* is recommended for undergraduate courses or graduate seminars on Vietnamese history or the Vietnam War and could also be useful in Women's Studies or Anthropology courses. One minor technical aspect will be of some irritation to specialists on Vietnam, and that is the lack of diacritics for Vietnamese words and a few typographical errors of Vietnamese words. However, this issue is minor in consideration of the larger appeal and viability of the book as a whole.

⁵ Spiegelman, Art. 1986-1991 *Maus: A Survivor's Tale*. New York: Pantheon Books.