

# Last Night I Dreamed of Peace: the Diary of Dang Thuy Tram

Book Review

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## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Brett B. Bodemer has an MA in French and is currently pursuing a degree in Library and Information Science at the University of Hawai'i. He lived and worked in Hanoi from November 2006 through November 2007, where he translated and edited English and French materials for the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology, including the exhibit on loan "We have eaten the forest - George Condominas in Sar Luk." (bbodemer@hawaii.edu)

**Last Night I Dreamed of Peace: the Diary of Dang Thuy Tram**, translated by Andrew X. Pham; introduction by Frances Fitzgerald; notes by Jane Barton Griffith, Robert Whitehurst, and Dang Kim Tram. New York: Harmony Books. 1st American edition, 2007.

Dang Thuy Tram's *Last Night I Dreamed of Peace*, published by Harmony Books, is remarkable for many reasons. Not least of which is the fact that it exists at all. This revelatory diary kept by a female doctor serving with the North Vietnamese forces traces her experiences from 1968 to 1970, prior to her untimely battlefield death. Her journal, discovered by American troops, should have been burned. American forces had standing orders to destroy any uncovered Vietnamese documents of no discernible military value. But Dang Thuy Tram's memoir was spared the burn pile by a disobedient American military intelligence officer. Or perhaps this American was being more perceptive than disobedient, for one of the many insights yielded by this war-time diary is the social dynamic of resistance and its very dependence on a strongly woven network of personal relationships and commitment. Surely,

such details are of inestimable military value.

This is just one of many interesting facets of this complex diary, which, after being belatedly restored to the author's mother in Hanoi, was published in Vietnamese in 2005 and quickly became a publishing sensation. More than 430,000 copies were sold in less than two years, a phenomenal number in a country where "few books sell more than 5,000 copies" (xviii). Vietnamese readers found in it a less ideologically sanitized version of the war than had been previously available, with several passages offering poignant critiques of the Communist Party. It proves equally interesting as autobiography, history, sociology, and political science. Andrew X. Pham, with help from his father (a Hanoian familiar with Dang Thuy Tram's linguistic milieu), has rendered an English translation that is readable and captures the emotional tenor of the original that is charged with passion, idealism, sentimentality, and the brutal carnage encountered daily by a doctor serving in a battlefield clinic.

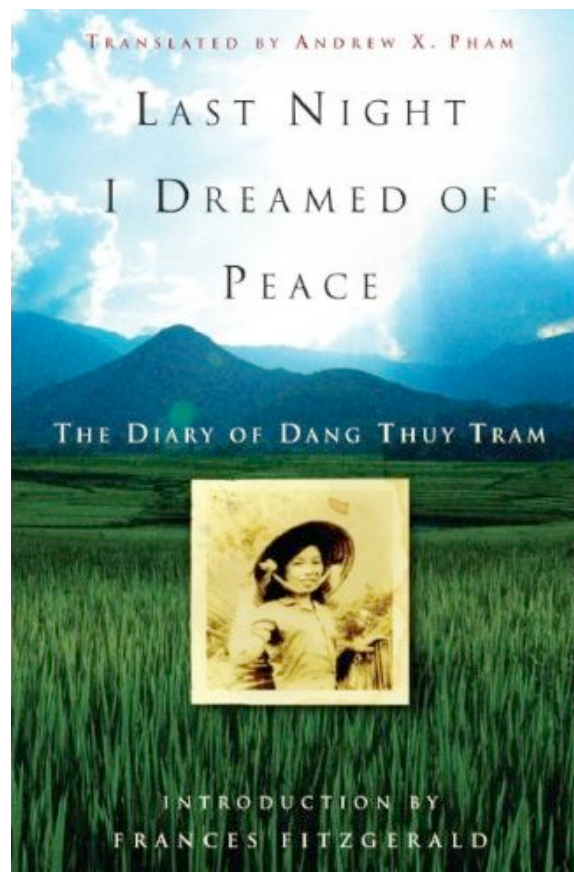
Frances Fitzgerald's concise introduction is complemented by a judicious selection of footnotes provided by Jane Barton Griffith, Robert Whitehurst, and the author's sister, Dang Kim Tram. If there is any flaw in the diary's presentation, it is that the editors' decision-making process is not fully transparent. For example, it isn't clear whether Dang Thuy Tram or the editors provided the epigraphs preceding each of the two sections, or even whether the author made the decision to divide the diary into two discrete books.

Dang Thuy Tram was twenty-four when she volunteered to serve as a doctor in a National Liberation Front battlefield hospital in Quang Ngai Province (the same province that witnessed the notorious slaughter later called the My Lai Massacre.) This book is comprised of her surviving diary (two earlier journals were lost while eluding American forces) and extends from April 1968 to an entry made two days prior to her death in June of 1970. She records the suffering and destruction encountered in the war-zone: bombings, raids, and the razing of whole villages. In one nightmarish account she witnessed the death of a soldier accidentally hit by one of the phosphorous rounds fired by opposing forces to mark forests for subsequent defoliation. The soldier smoldered for days before dying. Furthermore, Dang Thuy Tram slept underground for almost two years, and the last portions of the diary recount multiple relocations of her clinic as American forces drew nearer and nearer.

Yet the diary is much more than a chronicle of this war's quotidian grimness. It serves as an emotional register. Dang Thuy Tram is conflicted in many ways, and her entries yield a complex portrait of the emotional and intellectual life of the woman who wrote them. Raised in a well-educated Hanoi family (both parents were physicians) and sent to elite French-founded schools, she voices her frustration at not being fully accepted by her associates in Quang Ngai. Her narrative strikes a plaintive tone when she is refused admission into the Communist Party. One of the recurrent tensions of the diary stems from what she perceives as a conflict between her "bourgeois sentimentality" and her "revolutionary spirit," and she often expresses guilt for her inclinations to privilege her private emotions over her revolutionary commitment.

In fact the diary suggests that her private feelings and her revolutionary spirit flow from the same source, and that both are similarly embedded in her intense and

complicated interpersonal relations. She recounts episodes of homesickness for her family and friends in Hanoi in very affective language, but also writes similarly of her relationships with her students (she taught in the clinic as well), her patients and her associates.



She often strives to categorize these relationships on a qualitative level, running the gamut from: 1) a physician's love for a patient; 2) a sister's love for a brother; 3) the warmth of camaraderie; and 4) pure and sincere friendship. Yet, when she describes many of her relationships (and much of the diary is devoted to interpersonal relationships) her language is unremittingly ardent. Her continuous effort to clarify and understand the nature of these relationships suggests a never-resolved struggle with uncertainty. When people she has come to know are injured, captured or killed in the fighting—as many of them are—she calls on herself in an emotional language aimed to heighten her determination, utilizing her intense personal connections as a springboard to solidify her will.

In Dang Thuy Tram's diary it is the intensity of feeling and the resolve to see the war through that emerge as the most salient features of her writing. The translator in his note discreetly apologizes for the register of the diary's language as being typical of its time and place. But it is this very blend of ideological and affective language interspersed with reflections, doubts, and the need for reassurance that renders the book such a fascinating read. In contrast to passages that refer to roads "of blood and fire" the author sometimes pauses to enjoy moments of peace as sunlight falls on bamboo, only to recoil from this feeling with a twinge of remorse for having found a moment's peace.

On August 5<sup>th</sup>, approximately a year before being shot and killed, Thuy wrote: "perhaps I will meet the enemy, and perhaps I will fall, but I hold my medical bag firmly regardless, and people will feel sorry for this girl who was sacrificed for the revolution when she was still young and full of verdant dreams" (146).

Her story is undoubtedly tragic and readers might justifiably feel sorry for her. Yet, pity is not the dominant note struck in this diary. My own response was great admiration (and perhaps even envy) for this young doctor who felt things more intensely in 26 years than most people do in a life span twice as long. Though her diary *can* teach us about aspects of the American war in Vietnam, about the daily life of combatants, and how the will to social resistance can be steeled by steady and inconclusive losses, what one really takes away from this book is the sense that, even though she died so young, here was a woman who felt, acted, and reflected deeply: a woman, in short, who lived.