

## ARE THEY HEROES OR NOT? TALKING ABOUT THE MAIN CHARACTERS FROM VIET THANH NGUYEN'S NOVEL, THE SYMPATHIZER

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*Abstract: In the last decade the novels written by various Asian Americans authors became popular among teenaged and adult readers from the United States, because they depict the real problems of the average American and offer cultural information about several ethnic groups from America. Moreover, Asian American novels impress the researchers of American and Asian literature, because they offer both the image of the adaptation of the immigrant to the United States of America and the way in which they preserve their traditions in the new country, at the same time.*

*The research tries to explain that the main characters from *The Sympathizer* (a North Vietnamese mole in the Republic of Vietnam, Bon, and a South Vietnamese general) can be seen as Vietnamese heroes, who are exiled to the United States. By talking about a heroic person, we will refer to the hero from an Asian perspective. In this case, the hero does not have to use force, but has to use his intelligence to fight his enemy and can use his physical strength only if he cannot defeat the enemy in another way.*

*Keywords: Vietnamese American, Masculinity, American Ethnic Literature, Spy, Hero.*

### INTRODUCTION

The current paper will not only focus on presenting the main characters, but will also try to show that the novel itself is a great depiction of the consequences of the Vietnamese war and of the ways in which Vietnamese immigrants adapted to the American way of life. Similar to the difficult life led by Romanian's ancestors during the Ancient and Middle Ages due to the fact that they had common borders with strong states like the Roman Empire, the Ottoman Empire, the Russian Empire, and other powerful states that looked to enlarge their territories by annexing smaller neighboring states, the Vietnamese's ancestors also had a difficult life, due to the fact that during the same period they were conquered by the Chinese Empire several times. Furthermore, even when they were not part of the Chinese Empire, they had to pay a tribute to the Chinese in order to preserve their territorial independence. Therefore, it is of no surprise that after the Second Indochina War, the majority of the Vietnamese that had collaborated with the government of South Vietnam were forced to flee to the United States of America as the North Vietnamese troops managed to conquer the whole territory of Vietnam and the nationalists were afraid that the communists would apply the same punishments as the Chinese Empire soldiers, when they had previously reconquered Vietnam. These methods, engraved in the collective memory of the Vietnamese, implied killing the loyalists of the old regime or at least torturing those loyalists and forcing them into slavery.

### SHORT INTRODUCTION INTO VIETNAMESE HISTORY AND THE VIETNAMESE EMIGRATION PROCESS

Archaeologists have proven that from the Bronze Age, approximately 3 millennia before Christ, the Vietnamese people had already established a complex society in the Hong river valley and delta. They used „large ornamental bronze drums, as well as bronze

arrowheads, javelin tips, cleavers, sickles, and fishhooks”<sup>1</sup>. The Vietnamese people who established this ancient society are not only the ancestors of the Lac people, as they claim, but the ancestors of a mix ethnic group which also includes the „Mongolian[s], Chinese, Thai, Austro-Asian[s], Melanesian[s], and Negrito[es]”<sup>2</sup>. Furthermore, we cannot say that they had manage to establish a very complex society and culture, due to the fact that they were left to develop in peace, as they were in the vicinity of the Chinese Empire and they were constantly afraid that the Chinese would incorporate their territory, but because of they were ingenious people that tried to survive and create an identity distinguishable from that of their more powerful neighbor. Although from 111 B.C. and until 939 A.D., with some short periods of independence, the Vietnamese territory was under Chinese rulership, the Vietnamese managed to preserve their own cultural identity as they only embraced the Chinese ideograms, some artistic and architectural characteristics of their rulers. During the Chinese domination of the Vietnamese territories, some Vietnamese tried to organize uprisings, but in the end failed or if they managed to establish independence it was for a short period of time. In 939 Ngo Quyen managed to reestablish the Nam Viet as an independent country and founded the first Vietnamese dynasty<sup>3</sup>.

During the seven centuries of independence, the Vietnamese rulers did not only manage to avoid losing their freedom by repelling the armies of Kublai Khan, but also incorporated in their domain the territories of the Champa and Khmer kingdoms. Therefore, it is of no surprise that the Vietnamese managed to prosper and develop. Unfortunately, after 1535, the presence of the European powers on the Indochinese peninsula brought the fear of being incorporated in their colonial empires. Even if, in the beginning, some Vietnamese viewed the Westerners as benefactors, at the end of the eighteen and beginning of the nineteenth century, they saw them as invaders and imposers of a foreign religion that put into question their way of life. The first to interact with the Vietnamese were the Portuguese and the Dutch, and they were more focused on commerce than on spreading the Christian and European values. However, during the nineteenth century, the French became the most influential European power in the area, and they were more interested in transforming the Vietnamese into Christians and civilized people, by Western standards. The imposing of a new way of life made the Vietnamese ban the Western religion and culture, and this in turn made the Western power retaliate, wanting to protect its citizens and the Christians by transforming Vietnam from an independent, but savage country, into a colonial state with a civilization similar to Western countries. This transformation was brought about through the use of force starting with 1858, when an expedition was sent by the French in Danang, and ended in 1885, when the Chinese Empire signed the Treaty of Tientsin after the Sino-French War (1884-1885). Through this treaty, the Chinese gave up the right to defend and sustain the government from the Tonkin region, the Northern part of Vietnam, which became a French protectorate<sup>4</sup>. After the Germans invaded and occupied France in the Second World War, the Vichy government of France, which was composed of French Nazi-collaborators, signed a protocol with the Japanese, “which allowed the Japanese to station up to twenty-five thousand troops in French Indochina and to use its airports and naval bases in exchange for Japan’s recognition of France’s right to retain Cochinchina, Tokin, Annam, Cambodia, and Laos as colonies”<sup>5</sup>.

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1 Sucheng Chan, *The Vietnamese American 1.5 Generation. Stories of War, Revolution, Flight, and New Beginnings*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia, 2006, p.3.

2 *Ibidem*.

3 *Ibidem*, p.5.

4 *Ibidem*, pp.8-16.

5 *Ibidem*, p.26.

After the Second World War ended with the Japanese capitulation, the Vietnamese People's Liberation Army managed to take control of the North of Vietnam, due to the fact that the Japanese had locked up all the French forces who had to surrender. They could not control the South of Vietnam, because the religious sects, the mafia groups, and pro-French organizations fought for their freedom. Unfortunately, the Southern Vietnamese did not know what they were fighting for, as the French wanted to regain their influence over the Indochinese peninsula and by the end of 1946 an incident from the Haiphong harbor escalated into the First Indochina War (1945-1954), where both the Popular Republic of China and the United States of America implicated themselves. The war ended with the establishment of two Vietnamese states, a communist one in the North and a so-called democratic one in the South, which was under protection of the United States of America's military forces<sup>6</sup>.

The Vietnamese communists and the American controlled government from South Vietnam did not respect the terms of the 1954 Geneva peace conference and did not organize the needed elections for a united nation, but continued to preserve a war time atmosphere, with the United States funding the anti-communist regime and the communists applying land and other type of socialist reforms. So it is of no surprise that the incident from the Gulf of Tonkin in July 1954, when a U.S. destroyer was attacked by the North Vietnamese when it entered the coastal area of North Vietnam, led to Tokin Gulf Resolution, an act of the United States Congress that authorized the use of force in order to protect the United States and its allies<sup>7</sup>. Therefore, the Second Indochina War or the Vietnam War began soon after the first one, on 1 November 1955 and continued for almost twenty years.

During the second war on the Indochinese peninsula, a brutal confrontation between the communist Vietnamese forces, the Soviet Union and Chinese soldiers, on one side, and the South Vietnamese forces, United States, South Korean, Philippine and Australian soldiers, on the other side occurred. Unfortunately, after the Tet Offensive in 1968, a surprise operation launched by the Northern Vietnam forces that led to the conquest of the center of South Vietnam by the communists, the Southern forces and their allies became demoralized and started to believe they would lose the war. As the communists managed to obtain more and more territories in the South and fearing retaliation from the North Vietnamese against those that collaborated with the Americans, in the spring of 1975 many South Vietnamese fled or tried to evacuate from the war zone. Some tried to go to the United States of America or Canada, while others just wanted to remain in Asia and took refuge in Taiwan or the Philippines. The Vietnamese War ended on 30 April 1975 when Colonel Bui Tin entered Saigon and the South Vietnamese army commander, Minh, surrendered. The last Americans evacuated from the Saigon embassy on 29 April 1975. The Americans lost the Vietnam war because weapons and other military equipment was commissioned, but not shipped to the Vietnamese front. Furthermore, in the end of the war the B-52 were not present and the Vietnamese soldiers were unmotivated because the inflation made their wages insufficient to support their families, and they became corrupt<sup>8</sup>.

#### MASCULINITY IN EAST AND SOUTH-EAST ASIA

Due to the fact that for almost two millennia the East and South-East Asian states were under the influence of the Chinese Empire and they adopted many customs and cultural characteristics, either because the Chinese armies managed to incorporate the neighboring states into the Empire or because the neighboring states preferred to pay a tribute to avoid conflict and for this fee they also received numerous Chinese objects and the chance to learn

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*, pp.28-43.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*, p.49.

<sup>8</sup>Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History*, Penguin Books, NewYork, 1997, pp.538-540, 674-701.

Chinese culture. Among the many cultural characteristics that they borrowed from the Chinese was the way in which men defined their identity. During the history of the Chinese Empire there were two main masculine identity models. One Asian masculine model is the brave hero, known as the courageous male and good friend in Chinese society. The second masculine model is the scholar (*caizi*), also known as the well-educated man (*wenren*)<sup>9</sup>.

The Chinese tradition suggests that the male is above the female, and he deals with all matters outside the household like politics, state administration and state security, while women take care of the household. Therefore, a man's tasks may be either intellectual or physical, and he must choose between the *wen* path and the *wu* path. While those who chose the *wen* path had to learn Chinese calligraphy and the classical Confucian texts, those who chose the *wu* path had to train as martial arts experts, which used force only when the peaceful methods failed<sup>10</sup>.

The hero, as a masculine identity model, was popular during the periods when the Chinese Empire, the Korean and Vietnamese state had to defend against invaders, or when these East Asian countries were divided. Heroes were praised for their physical strength and strategic thinking. As in the case of the scholar, many heroes passed through the military educational system and became military officials after passing examinations testing their knowledge in martial arts, archery and texts about military strategies.

The most illustrative description of a hero's masculinity can be found in the novel *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* "in which [...] Cao Cao describes the yingxiong [hero] as having huge ambition – no less than aiming to rule the world. More significantly, Cao Cao also gives an [...] illustration of the true nature of a hero: like a dragon he is able to be at ease in the universe and to shrink and extend at will"<sup>11</sup>. Therefore, the Chinese, Korean and Vietnamese heroes have to be strong men of big ambitions who can show their power in battle and hide it when the enemy needs to be tricked into believing them weak.

#### THE HERO IN VIET THANH NGUYEN'S NOVEL, *THE SYMPATHIZER*

Viet Thanh Nguyen was born in Vietnam in 1971 and after the Americans lost the war in 1975, his whole family escaped from the communist occupation and found refuge in the United States of America, where he rapidly managed to accommodate and blend in. He went to university and graduated a bachelor's degree program in English studies at the University of California. Afterwards, he also obtained a Ph.D. in English at the same university and soon after he became a professor. Furthermore, after starting to teach he also began writing short stories. In 2015 he published his first novel, *The Sympathizer*, for which he won many prizes<sup>12</sup>.

He was praised because he managed to "write a political novel of ideas, told through the voice of a revolutionary turned intellectual looking back on his faulty education with a heady mix of rage, confusion, and sympathy"<sup>13</sup>. Moreover, Viet Thanh Nguyen brings together both historical truths and a fictional espionage story in this novel, in order to attract both academic readers and the not-so specialized readers.

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9 Louie Kam, *Theorising Chinese Masculinity: Society and Gender in China*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2002, p.8.

10 Louie Kam, *Chinese, Japanese and Global Masculine Identities*, in „Asian Masculinities: The Meaning and Practice of Manhood in China and Japan”, Kam Louie and Morris Low (eds.), Routledge Curzon, London, 2003, pp.6-7.

11 Idem, *Theorising Chinese Masculinity: Society and Gender in China*, ed.cit., p.26.

12 Sean Wiebe and Pauline Sameshima, *Sympathizing with Social Justice: Poetry of Invitation and Generation*, in "Art/Research International: A Transdisciplinary Journal", no. 1, 2018, pp.9-10.

13 Ha-Dang Phan and Hao Phan, *Two Readings of Two Books by Viet Thanh Nguyen*, in „Journal of Vietnamese Studies", no.1, 2018, p. 121.

The main character is the North Vietnamese spy who had infiltrated the South Vietnamese army and became a Captain and the most trustworthy friend of the Vietnamese General. We can say that the spy is a heroic figure, although at a first glance many readers would not say this, because he is better with words than with actions, but in Asian literature the hero does not have to show his power through his actions, as victory is determined by the way he can manipulate the enemy and not by showing his force.

The spy describes himself as “I am a spy, a sleeper, a spook, a man of two faces. Perhaps not surprisingly, I am also a man of two minds”<sup>14</sup>. He is a man of two minds because he is spying on the South Vietnamese and how they flee and adapt in America, and reports this to the communists, but when reporting he uses the plural we in order to show that deep inside, he is sympathizing with them, because he spends a lot of time with the subjects and therefore he can understand their sorrows and misfortunes. He is lucky enough to be “the only son of an ostracized mother”<sup>15</sup> and not having to be concerned about taking care of a family or trying to bring his extended family to the United States, but he is haunted because he has to spy and report about the hardships of the South Vietnamese refugees in America.

Another important character in the novel is the general, who was “a thin man of excellent posture, he was a veteran campaigner whose many medals had been genuinely earned”<sup>16</sup> and who was more preoccupied for his family’s wellbeing than by turning the tide of the war. When Claude, the CIA agent who managed the refugees, told the general that soon the whole of South Vietnam would be under communist rule, the general raised his voice and told him that the Americans were abandoning him, but Claude managed to control the general by offering him to move his extended family out of Vietnam. In Asian cultures family is not represented by the wife and children only, but it is composed by the whole extended family. Usually, the older generations stayed together with younger generation, and most of the time the grandparents, the parents of a child, the child with his wife lived in the same house. This is due to the Confucian ethics that forced the children to take care of their parents in order to demonstrate their filial piety<sup>17</sup>. The general described this need to bring the whole family by saying that “[t]he problem, as he explained to Claude, was that his extended family alone amounted to fifty-eight. While he did not like some of them, and in fact despised a few, Madame would never forgive him if he did not rescue all of her relations”<sup>18</sup>.

Bon, another important character, “was a genuine patriot, a republican who had volunteered to fight, having hated the communists ever since the local cadre encouraged his father, the village chief, to kneel in the village square and make his confession before forcefully inserting a bullet behind his ear”<sup>19</sup>. When the time came to flee from South Vietnam he started studying about America and asking if there were “beer gardens”<sup>20</sup> and beautiful women that sing about the wonderful American world.

After the general, his extended family, Bon and the North Vietnamese mole arrived in the temporary refugee camp in Guam, the general came to his friend, the North Vietnamese spy, and showed him a piece of paper, a newspaper clipping, that described the suicide of a South Vietnamese lieutenant colonel in front of the memorial in Saigon. When talking about this person the general compared him to a true hero, and indeed he may be compared with a

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14 Viet Thanh Nguyen, *The Sympathizer*, Grove Press, New York, 2015, p.1.

15 *Ibidem*, p.8.

16 *Ibidem*, p.2.

17 Kathleen Barry, *Economic Development: The Cost to Women*, in „Vietnam’s Women in Transition”, Kathleen Barry (ed.), MacMillan Press, Hampshire, 1996, p.147.

18 Viet Thanh Nguyen, *op.cit.*, p.6.

19 *Ibidem*, p.14.

20 *Ibidem*, p.15.

true Asian hero. This comparison was based on his knowledge that he would be captured, tortured and killed by the enemy and preferred to preserve his honor as a South Vietnamese soldier and commit suicide, as had the defeated Japanese samurais in the Middle Ages in order to preserve their honor<sup>21</sup>.

The South Vietnamese officer, the Captain, is not the only one who can be considered a hero, the general can also be perceived as a hero, because he defended his family and most trusted soldier and brought them to America. He could have stayed in Vietnam and died honorably, but instead he chose to run and regroup elsewhere, therefore following Sun Tsu's advice to "move not unless you see an advantage; use not your troops unless there is something to be gained; fight not unless the position is critical"<sup>22</sup>.

After arriving in the United States of America, Claude helped the South Vietnamese officer find his place in this new country by putting him in contact with professor Avery Wright Hammer, who offered the young Vietnamese officer a scholarship, "venture out of his field to supervise [his] senior thesis, "Myth and Symbol in the Literature of Graham Greene"[...] [and arrange] a clerical position for [him] in the Department of Oriental Studies"<sup>23</sup>. Although he started to study, "serve as the first line of defense against students who sought audiences with the secretary or the Department Chair"<sup>24</sup> and help with various administrative tasks like "answering phones, typing professorial manuscripts, filling documents, and fetching books"<sup>25</sup>, he still felt like a soldier and accomplished his job as a North Vietnamese spy in the America world by sending information about his new life to the communists by addressing his mail to an imaginary aunt. While the North Vietnamese spy became a student and administrative employee at the university, the General prepared to open a liquor store and hired Bon as a store clerk. Bon could only work at the General's store only after he finished his daily job at church, as this job had been imposed by the priest who had sponsored Bon's coming to America.

At the opening of the liquor store, the Captain found out that the General strongly believed that the Major was the traitor that offered valuable information to the communists, after the Captain himself had suggested that the Major could have been a North Vietnamese spy to escape suspicion from the General, when they had been discussing about the possibility of a mole. Unfortunately, after the talk with the Captain, the General truly believed that the Major was a spy, as his family in Saigon was doing well while the families of other South Vietnamese officers were struggling. Therefore, the Captain was asked to kill the Major with the help of Bon and prove his loyalty to the South Vietnamese cause and to the leadership. Although the North Vietnamese spy knew that "he was a relatively innocent man, which was the best one could hope for in the world"<sup>26</sup>, he had to take part of this murder in order to deceive the enemy, as Sun Tzu says that "having doomed spies, doing certain things openly for purposes of deception, and allowing our spies to know of them and report them to the enemy"<sup>27</sup>.

From the perspective of the General, the Captain and Bon were considered heroes after killing the Major, because he had been labeled a spy and by killing him, they had got rid of

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21 Maurice Pinguet, *Moartea Voluntară în Japonia: De la Harakiri la Kamikaze [Voluntary Death in Japan: From Harakiri to Kamikaze]*, Andreea Mihail and Angela Martin (trans.), Ararat, Bucharest, 1997, pp. 93-99.

22 Sun Tzu, *The Art of War*, Harper Press, London, 2011, p.63.

23 Viet Thanh Nguyen, *op.cit.*, p.57.

24 *Ibidem*, p.58.

25 *Ibidem*, p.59.

26 *Ibidem*, p.107

27 Sun Tzu, *op.cit.*, p.66.

the man who had provided the communists information about their new life and their possible plans to get back to Vietnam and conquer the territory back for the Republic of Vietnam.

The Captain is also a recognized hero, because when a Congressman wanted help with the development of a movie about the Vietnamese war and the Phoenix Program, the General recommended the Captain to the movie makers for military advice, as the military leader considered him a cultural attaché. Moreover, he was recommended to help with the movie as he had survived the war and had seen a lot of action. The Captain accepted the role of movie adviser, not because he truly knew what to do, but because he did not want to blow his cover or lose the General's trust.

During the time he advised the movie makers, he had several discussions with the movie director in which the director claimed he knew everything about the Vietnamese as he had studied books written by Joseph Buttinger and Frances FitzGerald, Western researchers who talked about the savage way in which the Asians behaved. The Captain tried to illustrate to the director that context is relevant to the situation in Vietnam, and he used screaming as an example: even a scream was different from situation to situation. This episode may indicate that the mention of "AIIIEEEEE!" is a reference to the *Preface* and *Introduction* of the *Aiiiiieee! An Anthology of Asian American Writers*, wherein Frank Chin, Jeffery Paul Chan, Lawson Fusao Inada and Shawn Wong explained that Western Orientalists forced Asian American women authors to write autobiographical novels in which they described Asian men as savages, and proposed new typologies for the Asian American man. Among those is Frank Chin's model of manhood, the heroic model most likely copied by Viet Thanh Nguyen in this novel, which is not only a conceptual projection by Frank Chin, but also a literary project clearly introduced in the *Donald Duk* novel.

The movie about the Vietnamese war was shot in the Philippines. The Captain was shocked because Auteur, the director, had created a sick movie, in which the majority of the scenes were about dead bodies, blood on the ground, US planes bombing Vietcong targets and the destruction caused by the North Vietnamese. Furthermore, in the last scene the main character of the movie was shot down by the mother of a North Vietnamese soldier, who was then killed by an American soldier. During the filming, there was an accident and the Captain had to be hospitalized just before the end and he missed the cleaning of the stage.

When he returned from the Philippines, the General informed him that he was collecting money for a new campaign in Vietnam, as "it was never too late to fight"<sup>28</sup>. Moreover, "he had found an isolated stretch of terrain to carry out training and maneuvers for his nascent army, in the sun-exposed hills of Los Angeles"<sup>29</sup>, a place where he hoped to train his loyal South Vietnamese soldiers. He sent Bon and the Captain, together with three officers, on a reconnaissance mission to Vietnam. Unfortunately, as Sun Tzu said in his famous book about war "a kingdom that has once been destroyed can never come again into being; nor can the dead ever be brought back to life"<sup>30</sup>.

Although his North Vietnamese friend told the Captain to stay in America, as he was of better use there than in Vietnam, he came back to Vietnam not because of patriotism, but because he wanted to save Bon. He managed to do so by making Bon surrender when they were surrounded by communists, although he could have ordered their group to charge towards the enemy with empty guns. Fortunately, the commissioner sent to question the Captain was a friend, and he offered bribe to the right officials and soldiers so that Bon and the Captain would be released, and moved to Saigon where Bon's cousin would help them flee from the communist country. In the end, the Captain's loyalty to his friend Bon was

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28Viet Thanh Nguyen, *op.cit.*, p.210.

29*Ibidem*.

30Sun Tzu, *op.cit.*, p.63.

rewarded with another chance at the American life, with or without his role as a communist spy in the United States of America.

In conclusion, it might be said that all the main characters were heroes as each of them was a strong and intelligent man that wanted to save the Republic of Vietnam and devoted their power to this, but due to the corruption of some South Vietnamese and the lack of interest by the Americans they lost the war. Although the Captain was a spy, he was also a hero for the communists, because he relayed information about the enemies, and for the General and Bon, as he was a trust-worthy person, who seemed to help the rebuilding of the new South Vietnamese army. Bon was a hero, as he obeyed the General's orders and was prepared to die for the good of the Republic of Vietnam, and the General was a hero because he saved many people from the hands of the communists, and because he tried to recreate the Republic of Vietnam by preparing an invasion with the South Vietnamese forces.

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