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Translation in Vietnam and Vietnam in Translation: Language, Culture, and Identity

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**TRANSLATION IN VIETNAM AND VIETNAM IN TRANSLATION:
LANGUAGE, CULTURE, AND IDENTITY**

A Dissertation Presented

by

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DEDICATION

To my big family

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As a convention, the Acknowledgments names those people who in different ways have helped shape the outcome of an academic endeavor. For that matter, it is also a reductive representation of the scope and depth of support that an individual has received throughout his/her graduate career. It is nonetheless a meaningful convention that one could not ignore. In writing this Acknowledgments, I am mindful of its essential reduction, and I understand that as I put down a name, I immediately risk missing someone. My eight years at the University of Massachusetts Amherst is simply too long, and I cannot fully recount the kinds of support – academic, emotional, spiritual, administrative – that I received from my generous professors, friends, and colleagues.

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growing, just as I was saddened to see my parents aging. After all, they are my life and I

love them. To them, this first achievement of mine is dedicated.

ABSTRACT

TRANSLATION IN VIETNAM AND VIETNAM IN TRANSLATION: LANGUAGE,

CULTURE, AND IDENTITY

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This project engages a cultural studies approach to translation. I investigate different thematic issues, each of which underscores the underpinning force of cultural translation. Chapter 1 serves as a theoretical background to the entire work, in which I review the development of translation studies in the Anglo-American world and attempt to connect it to subject theory, cultural theory, and social critical theory. The main aim is to show how translation constitutes and mediates subject (re)formation and social justice. From the view of translation as constitutive of political and cultural processes, Chapter 2 tells the history of translation in Vietnam while critiquing Homi Bhabha's notions of cultural translation, hybridity, and ambivalence. I argue that the Vietnamese, as historical colonized subjects, have always been hybrid and ambivalent in regard to their language, culture, and identity. The specific acts of translation that the Vietnamese engaged in throughout their history show that Vietnam during French rule was a site of cultural

translation in which both the colonized and the colonizer participated in the mediation and negotiation of their identities.

Chapter 3 presents a shift in focus, from cultural translation in the colonial context to the postcolonial resignifications of femininity. In a culture of perpetual translation, the Vietnamese woman is constantly resignified to suite emerging political conditions. In this chapter, I examine an array of texts from different genres – poetry, fiction, and film – to criticize Judith Bulter's notion of gender performativity. A feminist politics that aims to counter the regulatory discourse of femininity, I argue, needs to attend to the powerful mechanism of resignification, not as a basis of resistance, but as a form of suppression. The traditional binary of power as essentializing and resistance as de-essentializing does not work in the Vietnamese context. Continuing the line of gender studies, Chapter 4 enunciates a specific strategy for translating Annie Proulx's *Brokeback Mountain* into contemporary Vietnamese culture. Based on my cultural analysis of the discursive displacement of translation and homosexuality, I propose to use domesticating translation, against Lawrence Venuti's politics of foreignizing, as a way to counter the displacement and reinstate both homosexuality and translation itself.

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CHAPTER 1

BEYOND THE CULTURAL TURN: TRANSLATION STUDIES AND THE PROMISE OF SOCIAL JUSTICE

A turn often carries with it promises. Each turn is an overturn of old paradigms and a look into new ones that promise exciting discoveries and inventions. Translation studies, albeit its brief history, has welcomed several turns: the ideological turn, the ethical turn, the cultural turn. Another turn, it seems, is taking shape in the horizon: the international turn of translation studies. Each turn represents a rigorous shift in focus, methodology, and object of study. Yet a turn is not just a turning away or an overturn, but also a return, a return to the self, self-reflexivity, to challenge its own constitution and connect itself with the outside. Any turn in translation studies has been a promising one, for the field always returns to itself, connects itself with other disciplines, both assertively and receptively, to expand its own possibilities, insights, and significance.

This chapter reviews some of those turns in translation studies in a way that points out established connections and fulfilled promises, all the while illuminating gaps, blind spots, and discontinuities for new connections and promises. In a way, the chapter tells the story of translation studies while showing what is yet to be told. The five sections that follow will do just that. In "Rethinking Translation: The Subject and Political Change," I connect the current international turn of translation studies with issues in subject (re)formation and political change. In so doing, I bring in an array of theoretical models of internationalization and subjectivity to discuss the life of the empowered subject in translation, in the remainder, as a possibility of political change. The next two sections,

"The Cultural Turn: The Idea of Culture," and "Translation and The Moments of Cultural Studies" review and critique the current relationship between translation studies and cultural studies. In these sections, I argue that translation studies, in its cultural turn, needs to more rigorously examine the notion of culture itself in its taking over of the political. Here I emphasize the need to understand culture as fundamentally translingual and transcultural, and from such a perspective, translation emerges as a force underpinning the connection between the cultural and the political. In other words, I argue that only in translation can we see the cultural *as* the political.

The section "Towards the Singularity and Contingency of Translation" attempts to capture the moment of "ethical singularity," which I understand as the translator's staging of his/her own particular occasion of translation and theorization. In this section, I argue against any wholesale translation theory that attempts to contain the translator within global enunciations of practical techniques and strategies. Translation must be personal, local, and particular, rather than global and wholesale. The last section, "Translation and Justice: From the Material to the Cultural," continues the theme of political change, which is configured here as justice. I discuss the different models of justice and how translation plays a crucial role in the distribution of justice to or the withholding of it from particular groups and individuals. This section serves as a political maneuver for me in the contemporary academic culture of Vietnam where there has been a prominent emphasis on the material within political economy at the expense of the cultural. In enunciating translation as a force connecting the cultural, the material, and the economic in the realm of justice, I hope to bring translation studies as developed in the

Anglo-American world into the purview of contemporary social and literary criticism in Vietnam.

All in all, the five sections of Chapter 1, each corresponding to a thematic issue, attempt to connect translation studies to subject theory, cultural theory, and social critical theory. In bringing together the various theoretical trajectories with translation as an underpinning force, I aim to show the rich and promising venues in which translation studies can provide nuanced insights in social, cultural, and political processes. The overall theme of the chapter is a vision into what has been done in the field as a possibility of new connections, on the basis of which I proceed to the research projects engaged in subsequent chapters.

1.1 Rethinking Translation: The Subject and Political Change

In the preface to the third edition of her book *Translation Studies*, Susan Bassnett assesses the multifaceted growth of translation studies since the first edition of the book in 1980 and claims that "perhaps the most exciting new trend of all is the expansion of the discipline of Translation Studies beyond the boundaries of Europe" ([1980] 2002: 4). Although the claim does not officially announce those turns such as the "cultural turn" in translation studies or the "translation turn" in cultural studies – the shaping announcements commonly credited to Bassnett and André Lefevere – this observation speaks to the current work of a great many literary and translation scholars. Anchored in her European setting, however, Bassnett is speaking here of an expansion in which her Europe is located at the center, and locations such as North America and Latin America are subsumed within the purview of this expansion. While Europe is certainly a power

assuming the position of the center so as any movement away from it can be described as an expansion, Bassnett misses the critical condition of the contemporary world in which power is invariably constituted at multiple centers. One such center is the United States, which is curiously absent from Bassnett's peculiar list: "In Canada, India, Hong Kong, China, Africa, Brazil and Latin America, the concerns of scholars and translators have diverged significantly from those of Europeans" (ibid.: 4). She then goes on to recount works by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Tejaswini Niranjana and Eric Cheyfitz as an illustration of the divergence under discussion. Not to mention the much contested totalizing conception of Africa, Bassnett's observation is Eurocentric at heart, and thus overlooks the hegemony that the United States has exercised upon the rest of the world through its cultural, political and epistemological institutions. If we are to conceptualize an expansion of the kind that Bassnett observes, I think it is the United States rather than any other nations that should be placed at the center. Considering their educational backgrounds and current professional positions, Spivak, Niranjana, Cheyfitz are all working *at* this center while working *through* it. Any expansion is necessarily a working through if it is to resist the restrictive foundation of knowledge and power that constitutes the center itself.

In her most recent book, *Enlarging Translation, Empowering Translators* (2007), Maria Tymoczko expresses her disscomfort with the way translation studies as a discipline has been exclusively constructed on the basis of Western translation norms and practices. As well documented in works by scholars such as Niranjana (1992), Cheyfitz (1991), Lawrence Venuti (1992, 1995, 1998a, 1998b), norms governing translation are complicit in ideologies and power. Considering the powerful pull of globalization in the

contemporary world, a process characterized by Western norms spreading to various parts of the world and even becoming dominant there, scholarship built on such norms constitutes a form of imperialism. Practices and perceptions that diverge from Western frameworks of translation are effaced and silenced within the field, which effectively reinforces Western imperialist ideologies. While acknowledging the effort to enlarge the field of translation studies by several groups of scholars in the United States, Tymoczko notes the urgent need for the field to open up to the realities of translation existing in other cultures and histories. Her use of the term "enlarging" here is an acute one as it does not confuse the prospect of moving beyond the Western tradition with the colonial and imperial projects of expansion. In the current situation of translation studies, enlarging, as Tymoczko formulates it, means the much needed de-Westernization of definitions, concepts, and categories widely reiterated in contemporary theories. According to her, one way of achieving this enlargement is to re-conceptualize the definition of translation itself, turning it into a Wittgensteinian cluster concept readily open to the various meanings that translation may have across histories and cultures (2006; 2007: 54-106). In a similar vein, Edwin Gentzler (2008a), following the lead by the Israel scholar Gideon Toury, also advocates an open definition of the object of study for the field. For Gentzler, what is considered as a translation is often bound up in differing definitions and national traditions, so as any enclosure in regard to the definition of translation is prone to silencing "hidden" translations existing in a culture. He cites China and the United States as two examples where such hidden translations need to be recovered, a project that he completed with success in his recent book *Translation and Identity in the Americas: New Directions in Translation Theory* (2008b). Presenting the

multiple theoretical models used in his work, Gentzler suggests increasing dialogues across translation traditions and cultures to help advance translation studies into an ever more interdisciplinary and international field. He certainly does not forget to caution against uncritical application of European models in a global context (2008a: 125).

The internationalization of translation studies that Tymoczko and Gentzler vehemently call for can be viewed as a direct response to much of postcolonial and poststructuralist thinking. Critical texts emerging over the last half century by poststructuralist thinkers such as Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, Judith Butler, Gayatri Spivak, Homi Bhabha, Trinh T. Minh-ha, and so on, have in their own ways called into question the foundation of knowledge and power, exposing the acting of ideology and discourse on the formation of subjectivities and the establishment of meaning and signification. Structures of power have been shown by these scholars to be coterminous with structures of meaning, modes of signification, or even constitute the social and cultural spheres in which subjects become (un)intelligible, live and interact in the trajectories of class, race, and gender. Most important to the advancement of translation studies into a separate academic discipline, albeit its multidisciplinary inclination, is the poststructuralist destabilizing of meaning and of other concepts hitherto assuming uncontestable positions within the protective walls of modernism; the author, authority, textuality, originality, territory, identity, and gender are a few examples of such concepts. Drawing upon the poststructuralist stance of self-reflexivity in regard to the foundation of knowledge and its consequential constructs and concepts, translation studies in the past few decades has highlighted its plasticity, which is also its survivability, by switching, turning, and adapting its terms and methods of

inquiry, incorporating new insights from a wide range of disciplines. Cultural and literary studies, gender studies, linguistics, anthropology, history, sociology, political science, philosophy, as well as the sciences such as computer science, neurology, psychology, just to name a few, have all contributed to pushing the limits of translation studies and extending the field well beyond the early linguistic engagements exemplified in the works of Roman Jakobson (1959), W.V.O. Quine (1959; 1960), Eugene Nida (1964), and J.C. Catford (1965).

Another development in critical theory that has significantly informed the works of translation theorists and scholars over the past decade is the so-called postcolonial studies. "Postcolonial" is up to this day a loaded term that needs continued defining and redefining. For some, the term denotes a historical transition achieved after the collapse of formal colonial institutions under the weight of liberation movements around the world; for others, it refers to a cultural positioning that gives rise to conditions of being variously rendered as in-between, hybrid, ambivalent, liminal, subaltern, and more recently, translated. As a discursive stance, "postcolonial" has sparked off a proliferation of modes of writing, analysis, and critique that explore the penetration of other voices, histories, and experiences into metropolitan cultures and seek to resist the passage to truth of knowledge and history that have been predominantly written by and for Western powers. Edward Said's influential *Orientalism* (1978), Homi Bhabha's "Signs Taken for Wonders: Questions of Ambivalence and Authority under a Tree outside Delhi, May 1817" (1985), Gayatri Spivak's provocative "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988), among other works, have channeled into geopolitics an influx of repressed voices demanding to be heard and bodies to be re-presented. Massive migration facilitated by increased

mobility and the seamless diffusion of digitized information have characterized the mapping of populations around the world in a way that defies any desire for fixity, containment, or division. Theodor Adorno captures this mobile condition of modernity in his *Minima Moralia: Reflections on a Damaged Life*, stating succinctly that "dwelling, in the proper sense, is now impossible" ([1951] 2005: 38). Indeed, for millions of people home is no longer a dwelling securely rooted in some original culture of birth, but as Iain Chambers puts it, it is "a mobile dwelling" or "a mode of inhabiting time and space not as though they were fixed and closed structures, but as providing the critical provocation whose questioning presence reverberates in the movement of the languages that constitute our sense of identity, place and belonging" (1994: 4).

Language, identity, home, and affiliation are all in trouble, to resonate Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble.* As people migrate and thought travels, categories spill and overlap, boundaries blur, realities leak into one another as Salman Rushdie has perfectly said. Yet such a scenario does not culminate in a seamless and transparent totalizing world that prefigures the demise of mediation and negotiation. On the contrary, while the massive and constant movements of human energies and resources put to the test established frameworks and norms of conception and division, of Self and Other, such a world continues to demand acts of translation as the only way we get to know the world, the Other, and the Self. Such a world makes it increasingly clear that translation constitutes our very being in the world, as after all we are "translated beings," to borrow Rushdie's words again. Postcolonial subjects inhabit the in-between, the borderlines as the most viable space for life and agency. Trinh Minh-ha notes in a commanding voice:

Working right at the limits of several categories and approaches means that one is neither entirely inside or [sic] outside. One has to push one's work as far as one can go: to the borderlines, where one never stops walking on the edges, incurring constantly the risk of falling off one side or the other side of the limit while undoing, redoing, modifying this limit. (1992: 218)

Does such a mode of being, of self-positioning defy translation? It certainly traumatizes translation if translation is taken to only mean the carrying of fixed meanings across stable linguistic and cultural borders. As migrants and those who "never stop walking on the edges" undo and redo limits and borders, undermining the discursive mapping of human populations into distinct and unified geopolitical realities, the definition of translation as a carrying across, an act done as needed, an act we can do without, is also shattered. Such an understanding of translation is certainly challenged and traumatized in the face of postcolonial realties. Rather than an act we can do without or a job assigned to a certain group of professionals, translation has been revealed to be not merely an activity we do between cultures and languages, but a fundamental economy in the constitution of knowledge, culture, identity, and certainly, of ideology and power.

The French philosopher Paul Ricoeur (2004) even goes so far as to posit in his hermeneutics that to speak is already to translate, resonating Octavio Paz's notion that "language itself, in its very essence, is already a translation" (Paz [1971] 1992: 154). In the same vein, George Steiner (1975) contends that to understand is already to translate. Language in the condition of migrancy inheres in a fundamental double translation. To be heard and understood, migrants constantly translate themselves as well as the Other that they encounter in the process of their mobility. Such a condition of being in migrancy, in transit, and thus in translation, which has come to characterize the condition of the majority of populations around the world, including the most sedentary citizens, requires

a rethinking of translation. Rethinking translation means first of all seeing it not as a profession taken up by some people or as a set of skills to be learned in the classroom. Michael Cronin makes it clear that:

> Translation is thus not a matter of idle theoretical speculation or a hidebound classroom exercise destined to excite the jaded appetites of pedants but is a question of real, immediate, and urgent seriousness. The ability to translate (autonomous practices) or be translated (heteronymous practices) can in some cases indeed be a matter of life and death. (2006: 45)

Translation represents a matter of life and death confronting millions of people who are for various reasons living and working in a language and culture not their own. Cronin practically frames this matter of life and death in terms of the physical condition of individual migrants who desperately rely on the provision of interpreting services for their diagnoses and treatment at hospitals. Yet life and death, as Edwin Gentzler (2008b) seems to suggest in his analysis of "the hidden translation history of the United States," involve matters larger than the physical wellness of individuals. It concerns the cultures of ethnic citizens residing in segmented territories: Amerindian reservations, Chinatowns, black urban ghettos, Latino *barrios*. The monolingual policy, a practical expression of the aspiration to a homogenous melting pot, has repressed the cultural "remainder" of different ethnic cultures to produce a seamless, unitary cultural whole of the United States. This strategically repressed translation, Gentzler argues, is constitutive of culture and identity (2008b: 9-39).

While the structural anthropology of Claude Lévi-Strauss, exemplified in his classic *The Raw and the Cooked* (1969), postulates a transition from the natural to the more cultivated in the formation of culture, and by extension identity, the poststructuralist

take on the issue problematizes this very transition and exposes the essential repression of

practices and values deemed anomalous to the composition of culture. The structuralist

postulation of such a transition, blind to the return of the repressed, invariably represents

culture as a stable, self-contained, and complete translation from "the raw" into "the

cooked." It is at best a translation constantly haunted by that which is not translated, the

not-cooked, the remainder, and Gentzler makes plain the hegemonic workings of identity

politics through exclusionary mechanism and links it to translation theory:

> In terms of translation theory, I suggest that the repression of this remainder by
> the English-only advocates enables the nation-state as a whole to construct its
> national identity. Yet that remainder will always return to haunt the dominant
> majority, accounting for the repetition of the repressive ideology over time.
> (2008b: 9)

Rethinking translation in Gentzler's formulation therefore involves a recovery of

repressed translation, the least visible "bottom" of translation phenomena.

The thesis of the cultural remainder haunting the hegemonic ideology that

essentially relies on its absence reverberates in many of Judith Butler's works, especially

her theory of gender performativity in *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of

Identity* (1990), *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex* (1993), and

Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative (1997b). In Butler's works, the

remainder is configured as a "constitutive outside" of the domain of intelligibility. It is

the illegible site of abject and unlivable bodies fundamental to the very constitution the

normative, intelligible body. In a similar note, Butler also argues that the remainder is the

very incompleteness in the constitution and operation of hegemony that prefigures

democratic possibilities. Butler's dialogues with Ernesto Laclau and Slavoj Žižek in

Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left (2000)

consolidate her approach to the issue of subject formation in relation to the notions of

hegemony and universality. Rejecting Žižek's installation of a Lacanian structural bar as

a founding and defining limit to the emergence of the subject within a political horizon,

Butler highlights the resilient and historical condition in which subjects are formed

despite the interpellative acting of hegemonic and universalistic claims upon them. While

agreeing that subject formation is inherently incomplete, she punctuates it as a historical,

rather than structural, incompleteness. It is within this resilient and revisable space of

incompletion that agency becomes possible and the political employment of the

Gramscian notion of hegemony can produce practical democratic change. She writes:

> My understanding of hegemony is that its normative and optimistic moment
> consists precisely in the possibilities for expanding the democratic possibilities for
> the key terms of liberalism, rendering them more inclusive, more dynamic and
> more concrete. If the possibility for such a change is precluded by a theoretical
> overdetermination of the structural constraints on the field of political
> articulability, then it becomes necessary to reconsider the relation between history
> and structure to preserve the political project of hegemony. (2000: 13)

For Butler, power has to be remade within everyday life, and democratic change is

brought about not simply by mass movements, but by this very historical and

transformable horizon of incompleteness in the work of hegemony. The incompletion of

the subject signified in the possibility of an excess – anomalous and subversive practices

– that escapes the interpellation of power finds it echo in the not-cooked, the not-

translated, the remainder. Exploring the repressed history of translation, as Gentzler has

done with regard to the constitution of the United States culture and national identity, is

thus a significant step towards reviving a silenced articulability without which the subject

would be dead in its complete repetition and reproduction. In many ways, the life of the

subject is nourished not within the purview of power, but within the historical

incompletion of hegemony. Punctuating incompleteness as historical rather structural,

Butler aims to revive the possibility for agency and political change.

Several models of power have been put forward to explicate the formation of the

subject: the Gramscian hegemony, the Foucaultian subjugation, or the Althusserian

interpellation. These models are bounded in their particular philosophical frameworks,

and each formulation in its own way articulates the formation of the subject in relation to

the workings of power. Modified by works in critical theory such as that of Butler's and

in translation studies such as that of Gentzler's, these models, despite their discursive

differences, show within the apparatus of power a possibility for the subject to forcibly

crack open a space in which it crafts itself while being continually crafted. This self-

crafting, the refusal to be fully crafted by power, hegemony, and universality, itself the

remainder, is a virtue, an art of performance (Butler 2002). It is this art of creating and

living in or as the remainder that sustains the true life of the subject, since life within the

perfect and complete cycles of reiteration is no life at all. Cronin is right in his assertion

that translation is in some cases a matter of life and death, and I suggest that this matter

should be extended beyond the physical wellness of individuals to veer towards the

life/death of the subject caught in the cycle of reproduction. Configured in its ambivalent

relation to power, the life/death of the subject, as I see it here, is analogous to that of text

as posited in Jacques Derrida's "Border Lines." If "a text lives only if it lives *on* [sur-vit],

and it lives *on* only if it is *at once* translatable *and* untranslatable" (Derrida 1979: 102;

italics and brackets in the original), then in the same vein, there is no life or death for the

subject, but only "its living *on*, its life after life, its life after death" (ibid.: 103). Totally

reproduced (translatable) within the pregiven frame of its existence, the subject disappears as subject, and there is no site for its agency and action, or as Hannah Arendt would say, no quality of distinctness (1958: 176). On the contrary, totally unrecognizable (untranslatable) in the cultural frame that defines and delimits its emergence, the subject, like the text, dies immediately. The subject lives on, because it lives on both its own pre-designed reproduction and the failure, the incompletion of such a design. It lives on, on the ambivalence of its self-crafting and being crafted.

Rethinking translation, either by way of Tymoczko's internationalization or Gentzler's recovery of the remainder, I suggest, ultimately explores and expands this site that lies between the subjective/creative performance of the translator and the regulating demand for a certain mode of translating derived from the translator's being in a socio-political continuum. Internationalization consists in using concepts and practices outside of the Western place of enunciation to enlarge the site of possible performances, thus empowering translators. Recovering the remainder tells untold stories; it re-sites, re-members, re-translates, so that the subject comes alive and lives on, barring any sedimentation of power, any violent insertion of an authoritative, imperial I/eye in language. What Trinh Minh-ha says about writing is true for translating:

> For writing, like a game that defies its own rules, is an ongoing practice that may be said to be concerned, not with inserting a 'me' into language, but with creating an opening where the 'me' disappears while 'I' endlessly come and go, as the nature of language requires. (1989: 35)

What role does translation play in subject formation, or rather, in the incompleteness of it? How can translation forge a possibility for political change? Emily Apter succinctly states in *The Translation Zone: A New Comparative Literature* that

"translation is a significant medium of subject re-formation and political change" (2006: 6). I see in this statement two important areas for research in translation studies: the subject and political change, and on top of that, the connection between the two areas as prefigured by Apter. Subject re-formation in relation to translation, as I have enunciated thus far, is this opening space beyond normative formation made possible through translation. Political change in its relation to translation is conceptualized in my current project along the line of both socioeconomic and cultural politics. I have observed in the field of translation studies at its cultural turn a consistent silence around the current debate regarding the kind of change that politics should aim at and the relationship between the political and the cultural. Along the axis of political change, one pole of the debate criticizes the cultural turn in social sciences and the humanities for its orientation towards culturalism, which is often accused of dissociating politics from the immediate socioeconomic injustices and indulging in the demands for cultural recognition or identity politics. This line of criticism often amounts to the reclaiming of economic redistribution as the ultimate aim of political change. At the opposite pole are those who champion issues in the representation and signification of difference – ethnic, national, racial, sexual – as the main categories of social justice whereby the ultimate goal is to regain justice in cultural recognition for historically marginalized subjects. Generally, the debate between these opposing configurations of what constitutes justice or injustice and what kind of political change is needed occurs under the umbrella tension between two academic disciplines: political economy and cultural studies. Along the axis of the relationship between the political and the cultural, the debate often revolves around how politics has been over-culturalized with the arrival of poststructuralism in cultural studies,

literary studies as well as social and cultural movements such as feminism and multiculturalism, particularly in the United States. Culture comes to the fore in critical theory as it appears to encompass the entire political field of the political, and political change is consequently configured exclusively in terms of the cultural problematic.

I suggest that while contemporary translation studies borrows and imports from theoretical movements such as poststructuralism, postcolonialism, and feminism for its concepts and methodologies, it can and should in a reciprocal manner make visible the possibility for these movements to be more practically – that is, materially and economically – connected with the life and work of those translation theorists have touched upon in their enunciations: the subaltern, marginalized immigrants, the ex-colonized subjects, and the transgendered and homosexual individuals. I also suggest that the silence in translation studies around the multiple axial debates mentioned above is antithetical to the interdisciplinary aspiration that the field has nurtured since its emergence. The silent and nonreciprocal borrowings have somewhat isolated translation studies and mitigated its own power to raise political voices and realize effective agendas for political change. Participating in the debate about the political and the cultural as taking place across research areas and academic disciplines can provide translation studies with new theoretical and practical angles that enrich its insights and empower its articulations. More importantly, situating translation studies in the discourse of the debate can connect on the one hand the research on discourse, representation, ideology, and power – or the cultural in general – with the presumably more practical critiques of material and economic mechanisms on the other. Such a connection, if fully realized, will make a significant contribution to the enlargement of translation studies that is so much

needed for a young field. Translators too will be empowered if they can conceive of themselves as major actors in bringing in not only cultural recognition or justice in representation, but also more democratic socioeconomic redistribution for the voices and bodies that they represent through their translations. At a more personal level, using translation as a mediator between the two opposing lines of critical thought is a necessary maneuver for me to introduce contemporary translation theories into the critical landscape of Vietnam, where there has been a predomination of Marxist materialism and revolutionary politics. While cultural politics takes a central position in discourses on national emancipation at some critical junctures in the history of the country, particularly the early contact with the French civilization, it is often effectively dissolved by allegations of betrayal, inaction, collaboration with the enemy, desirous embracement of the foreign, or even poisoning the national spirit of heroism. Bringing in translation studies with all its current indulgence in culture, or culturalism, without some sort of premeditated critical maneuver can encounter harsh rejection on the critical plane, just as what happened to the cultural stance in politics in Vietnam at the turn of the twentieth century. In what follows, I offer an account of the cultural turn in translation studies in a way that situates the field amid the political/cultural debate with the conviction that translation is neither entirely textual nor material, neither cultural nor economic. It embraces both realms as an activity and as a category for theorization.

1.2 The Cultural Turn: The Idea of Culture

Since André Lefevere and Susan Bassnett's call for the cultural turn in translation studies in the volume *Translation, History, and Culture* (1990), the idea of culture has been somewhat taken for granted by scholars in the field. Not long after Bassnett and

Lefevere's announcement, Sherry Simon points out in passing that translation studies often evades the question of defining "culture" and for that reason, the term is used "as if it had an obvious and unproblematic meaning" (1996: 137). More recently, Tymoczko recapitulates the situation, suggesting that not much has changed since Simon's observation as "the question of culture has been approached in terms of *surface* cultural elements operating chiefly at the level where language and material culture intersect" (2007: 223; emphasis mine). Lefevere and Bassnett themselves do not offer any definition of culture in their introduction essay of the volume of which they serve as editors. But rather, they base their understanding of what constitutes culture on a theoretical break with the formalist approach to translation and the new focus on the "larger issues of context, history and convention" (1990: 11). Such an understanding of culture, which relies on an opposition to what has been done before, has proven to be both advantageous and inimical to the development of translation studies.

On the one hand, the idea of culture as anything beyond the linguistic approach seems to render the field more open and receptive and encourage multiple theoretical directions as well as methods and objects of inquiry. Bassnett and Lefevere's 1990 volume shows a coherent demonstration of this openness in the way the concept of culture is used. From Maria Tymoczko's analysis of literary translation across oral and written traditions to Mahasweta Sengupta's insight in Rabindranath Tagore's self-translation, and Barbara Godard's feminist translation, the volume as a whole reflects an understanding of culture as a largely open category characterized mainly by ideological manipulation. Culture as such in the early stage of the cultural turn, according to Mona Baker (1996), does not provide entirely new insights because ideological issues have

been investigated in the critical linguistics branch of translation studies even before the rise of cultural studies, a point that Baker uses as a touchstone for uniting the cultural and the linguistic approaches to translation. At any rate, the language of translation studies as set forth in this volume by Bassnett and Lefevere has moved from the "how" of translating and teaching translation – as often found in prescriptive pronouncements – to the actual processes of translation within networks of cultural signs, power, and ideology. The prescriptive how has been replaced by the how that describes and problematizes: how the translator navigates, manipulates, negotiates, or mediates between the source and the target cultures; how translation forms, deforms, reforms, represents and re-presents identities and voices – sexual or ethnic; how translation liberates, suppresses, or represses; how translation refracts originals, rewrites histories, and redefines the category of meaning itself; and certainly there are more questions of this sort. These new lines of research, informed by poststructuralist and postcolonial thinking, have been continued to this day and produced numerous works that not only confirm the growth of translation studies as an independent discipline with legitimate methods and objects of study, but also capture the attention of other fields such as literary and cultural studies. More importantly, translation studies has significantly expanded the political field of action and transformed the horizon from which new identities and subjectivities can emerge and vie for recognition. Poststructuralist and postcolonial politics seems to have gained new ground for theoretical enunciations and praxis with the emergence and the subsequent transformation of translation studies. Derrida, Bhabha, Spivak, Butler, have all talked about translation extensively in their works.

On the other hand, the idea of culture as circulated in translation studies is in a sense too broad to define and theorize about its relationship with the economic and the material realms traditionally considered to constitute, or at least impinge on, the political. While translation studies continues to make claims about its relevance in politics with politically charged conclusions and resolutions, it seems to withdraw and immunize itself from the continuing debate about what constitutes the political and the cultural and how the relationship between the two can be theorized. Charges of the culturalization of politics or the politicization of culture are rarely discussed by translation theorists and scholars. Instead, they tend to silently accept the equation between the political and the cultural that poststructuralist and postcolonial theories are often accused of, and even more problematic is the fact that the cultural itself, as I have mentioned, is often understood in terms of an opposition to the linguistic. The divide between the linguistic and cultural strands within translation studies, clearly manifest at most international conferences on translation, has to some extent invigorated the idea of culture as that which extends beyond the linguistic reach. While this condition has rendered the field more heterogeneous and diverse, it risks losing sight of the possibility of practical and effective political action that translation studies is capable of. I am not suggesting here that studies done so far in the field has no political valence. On the contrary, I contend that insights from translation studies have tremendously expanded the political field, opening up alternative political articulations. Nevertheless, the cultural turn in translation studies is at its pinnacle an uncritical adoption of the idea of culture as used in cultural studies within poststructuralist and postcolonial politics. I suggest that it is time for translation studies to look at the cultural turn in a larger context that includes what has

happened in the humanities and social sciences in general as well as the kinds of criticism that have been raised from different perspectives.

The cultural turn is not peculiar to translation studies alone. Rather, it is a movement that has swept across social sciences and the humanities over the past few decades, dramatically shifting the inquiry paradigm of several fields of study. The rise of culture as a central concept in literary and critical discourses is often coupled with the emergence of postmodernism in the second half of the twentieth century. Terry Eagleton, in *The Idea of Culture* (2000), traces the etymology of the word "culture" and underscores the often paradoxical semantic shifts that render the term extremely fluid and susceptible to historical appropriations. One such appropriation, which Eagleton is characteristically uncomfortable with (see also Eagleton 2003), takes place at the dawn of postmodernism whereby "culture" comes to mean "the affirmation of a specific identity – national, sexual, ethnic, regional – rather than the transcendence of it" (2000: 38). Traditionally culture signifies a universal realm of values, a form of subjecthood that transcends the contingent empirical particularisms of individuals, an encompassing space that every individual can identify with, a kind of abstraction that connects subjects in their common humanity, itself a solution for a society riven by religion, class, and particular interests. Such an understanding of culture has faded, Eagleton tells us, and instead, culture has been turned into a site of contestation and conflict, or even, and he quotes Edward Said, "a battleground on which causes expose themselves to the light of day and contend with one another" (ibid.: 38). In this light, Eagleton polemically argues that such an inflation of culture, from an antithesis of politics to politics itself, is more paralyzing than enabling and relegates politics to merely cultural practices.

Postmodernism embraces cultural studies as such, and therefore, Eagleton continues, "it fails to see not only that not all political issues are cultural, but that not all cultural differences are political" (ibid.: 43). In the final chapter of the book, "Towards a Common Culture," Eagleton blames the reduction of politics to culture on the cultural Left: "The celebrated 'turn to the subject,' with its heady blend of discourse theory, semiotics and psychoanalysis, proved to be a turn away from revolutionary politics, and in some cases politics as such" (ibid.: 128). While lamenting the end of collective action, Eagleton calls for a return of culture to its original place, as for him, the new political significance that culture assumes has little to contribute to "the primary problems which we confront in the new millennium – war, famine, poverty, disease, debt, drugs, environmental pollution, the displacement of peoples" because these problems, Eagleton insists, "are not especially 'cultural' at all" (ibid.: 130).

There are a few disturbing things about Eagleton's argument. First, he seems to completely ignore the fact that there are still places in the world where people are imprisoned for their speech and killed for their differences, bodily or spiritual, material or non-material. If the problems that he invokes are material problems simply because they involve the matter of life and death, then language, identity, symbolism are exactly the same matter. Or does Eagleton acknowledge death as death only if it takes place visibly on the massive scale as implicated in those problems in his list? Probably for Eagleton, a person lynched to death on the street because of his/her different skin color or bodily stylization does not pose any significant question for politics. Restricting the understanding of politics within the visibly massive phenomena, and hence massive movements, which are undoubtedly manipulated by mass media, overlooks the problem

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of life and death that confronts a range of people under any regime on a daily basis.

Pierre Bourdieu's stunning study in *The Weight of the World: Social Suffering in Contemporary Society* (1999) has really opened our eyes to forms of social suffering that remain largely invisible in the political public sphere and unarticulated by social movements.

Second, Eagleton tells us that this postmodern collapse into each other of culture and politics is "a distinctively American political agenda [that] is universalized by a movement for which universalism is anathema" (ibid.: 43). The assumption here is that culture as a site of contestation is an American invention that has been blindly adopted in other nations. Is it an invention or a discovery, or even a rediscovery, in the first place? This is a question that certainly requires more labor on Eagleton's part. There is yet another question, which Edward Said has convincingly answered in his *Culture and Imperialism* (1994): Is the rest of the world, including Eagleton's Britain (in opposition to the United States), some sort of conglomeration of passive peoples who are hardwired to uncritically and unquestioningly adopt American dogmas? Eagleton's claim ignores the history of culture as conjunctural, politically contested, and historically unfinished, as James Clifford (1988) would put it. Even in the most "original" meaning of culture that Eagleton nostalgically wants to return, the Arnoldian model of culture as perfection, culture has always been a site of contestation and negotiation in which individuals and groups continually vie for recognition and acceptance, or at the opposite end, for domination. Interestingly enough, in *Culture and Anarchy* ([1869] 1993), Matthew Arnold works on a configuration of culture that stresses its essential incompletion: "Not a having and a resting, but a growing and a becoming, is the character of perfection as

culture conceives it" (1993: 62). He then notes the intersubjective dimension of such a

becoming and the risk of deviation from the compulsory intersubjection:

> The individual is required, under pain of being stunted and enfeebled in his own
> development if he disobeys, to carry others along with him in his march towards
> perfection, to be continually doing all he can to enlarge and increase the volume
> of the human stream sweeping thitherward. And here, once more, culture lays on
> us the same obligation as religion. (ibid.)

Arnold's prose here is symptomatic of his inclination in later writings towards the view

that the self in its relation to culture and others, as Stefan Collini puts it, is "a

battleground where the forces of the higher self of conscience and rationality were

perpetually in conflict with those of the lower self of appetite and animality" (1993: xxi).

Eagleton's nostalgia, ironically, also ignores the more "sombre Arnold," to use Collini's

description, who later in his career reformulates culture in terms of antagonism and

struggle rather than unifying perfection. The struggle has always been there in culture,

and if a shift in the contemporary understanding of culture is to be mapped out, it is not

the collapse of culture into politics, or vice versa, but the nature of the struggle itself:

from the Arnoldian struggle between the lower self and higher self to the

poststructuralist/postcolonial struggle between the dominant and the dominated.

Even within one group, one community of common language and history, where

cross-cultural antagonism seems to have no bearing, culture is divided temporally. What

is the past, how the past is formulated and reformulated, and who does the reformulation

are questions that have become commonplace in historiography today. The questions

themselves reveal what Said calls "the combativeness with which individuals and

institutions decide on what is tradition and what not, what relevant and what not" (1994:

4). Octavio Paz, in his essay "Translation: Literature and Letters" ([1971] 1992), reveals the demise of the human assurance of universality in the face of the confusion of Babel at the advent of modernity. Paz uses the figure of translation to enunciate the modern epoch in which translation ceases to serve "to reveal the preponderance of similarities over differences," but instead, "illustrate the irreconcilability of differences, whether these stem from the foreignness of the savage or our neighbor" (ibid.: 153). The modern world is marked by a troubling insight of diversity, and thus division and antagonism. Paz succinctly characterizes this transformation from conceptual universality to empirical particularisms in the modern conceptualization of the world:

> Each nation is imprisoned by its language, a language further fragmented by historical eras, by social classes, by generation. As for the intercourse among individuals belonging to the same community, each one is hemmed in by his own self-interest" (ibid.: 154).

Every version of culture delineated in Eagleton's *The Idea of Culture* can be countered by historical examples that prove the conflictual and contesting nature of culture. However, it is not my concern here to embark on such a project of citing examples. It suffices for the current purpose to note that Eagleton's frustration with the way culture is understood and used in contemporary cultural studies derives from a systematic repression. The notion that culture represents a peaceful, non-political, somewhat utopian and sacred, realm upon which rests the commonality of individuals invariably represses the often antagonistic cross-cultural dimension that cultural studies has fruitfully engaged over the past few decades. When Said talks about culture as a battleground, he is placing it within an international framework characterized by asymmetrical power relations that fuel both domination and resistance. *Culture and*

Imperialism, together with *Orientalism* (1978), lays bare "how the processes of

imperialism occurred beyond the level of economic laws and political decisions," a

significant level, "that of the national culture, which we have tended to sanitize as a realm

of unchanging intellectual monuments, free from worldly affiliations" (Said [1993] 1994:

12-3). Said's analyses throughout the book are guided by the commitment to connect

rather than separate, "for the main philosophical and methodological reason that cultural

forms are hybrid, mixed, impure, and the time has come in cultural analysis to reconnect

their analysis with their actuality" (ibid.: 14). At another occasion in the book, Said

emphasizes the need to look at the legacy of imperialism, which certainly involves both

the metropolitan and ex-colonized cultures, "as a network of interdependent histories that

it would be inaccurate and senseless to repress, useful and interesting to understand"

(ibid.: 19). Central to such a project is the well known notion of worldliness that Said

develops some ten years earlier in *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (1983), a kind of

secular criticism that in Apter's words, "weans the ideal of a sacred unity of culture from

its underpinnings in theology" (2006: 66). More important for my current argument,

however, is the cross-cultural perspective that Said has shown with insistent rigor to be

organic in any cultural analysis. Apter underscores this position with acute precision in

what she calls Saidian humanism:

> Taking translingual perspectivalism as an a priori, Saidian humanism pivots on
> the vision of the intellectual who refuses to see languages and cultures in
> isolation. What legitimates the intellectual's claim to knowledge and freedom is a
> sensitivity to the demography of Babel. The radical side of Saidian humanism –
> its agitation of the status quo and refusal of congruence with the contoured,
> habituated environments called home – lies, I would suggest, not so much in its
> philological ecumenicalism (which could easily become watered down linguistic
> multiculturalism), but rather, in its attachment to the shock value of cultural
> comparison. (2006: 59)

The history of any culture is invariably the history of cross-cultural contact, albeit mainly in the form of domination and resistance. Eagleton's yearning for an understanding of culture as a kind of comfort zone for individuals to retreat from politics invoked by difference and particularism blatantly overlooks this history of antagonism across cultural borders, unless what he means is an all-inclusive comfort zone hospitable to the entire human race. Theorizing about culture as a site of antagonism, positioning the intellectual in the translational post-Babel spectrum, therefore, is not an invention or an overturn of tradition peculiar to the postmodern epoch, but rather a rediscovery brought about by an engagement with the cross-cultural, transnational, and translational constitution of world cultures. Such an engagement also shows that the notion of culture as espoused by Eagleton, if ever existed, would no longer be retrievable. It is rather ironic to deny the problems of war, famine, poverty, and environment of their transnational depth and magnitude, and it is even more so not to incorporate a cultural perspective in these material issues.

Apter has remarkably proven that the 'n' of transNation necessarily involves the 'l' of transLation, culminating in what she calls the translation zone (2006: 5). The cultural turn in translation studies, at least since the official announcement by Bassnett and Lefevere in 1990, has indeed explored this zone in multiple dimensions, particularly the involvement of translation in the shaping of identities, voices, aesthetic, and the political agendas of different individuals, groups, and communities. The insights gained in the field over the past two decades have informed the study of cultures and politics, and the translation zone as a concept for research promises an extremely rich site for theorizing about translation, and also for uncovering the hidden aspects of historical

narratives around the world. Gentzler's *Translation and Identities in the Americas* (2008) presents one of the first projects that engage in exploring a dimension of the translation zone that is still undertheorized. Contending that "translation, whether in an overt or covert fashion, is ingrained in the very psyche of the individuals who live in the Americas," Gentzler concludes the book by pointing towards the need for more research on the social-psychological dimension of the translation zone, to expand a functional approach to translation that includes both "social effects and individual affecs [sic]" (2008b: 180). Gentzler's work not only provides useful insights into the translational constitution of political movements such as feminism in Canada, cannibalism in Brazil, or fiction by writers such as Luis Borges and García Márquez, but also figures out a workable model for theorizing translation that builds upon the translation zone outlined by Apter. Apter's own analysis of what happened in the Franco-Prussian war provides a thought-provoking example for how translation intervenes in important issues such as war and peace. The translation, mistranslation, or non-translation of a single word, Apter rightly reminds us, can change history, kill and/or save human lives. From the transnational/translational perspective, it is clear that culture cannot represent an abstract realm divorced from politics, a solution for the problem of antagonistic specificities – class, race, gender, ethnicity, nationality. The conception of culture as solution succumbs to an imaginary space of universal unity and coherence and registers an amnesia of the historical dynamics of cultures. What is more striking for me in Apter's narrative is her use of language as she enunciates the role of (mis)translation in diplomatic affairs:

> Mistranslation in the way I have conceived it is a concrete particular of the art of war, crucial to strategy and tactics, part and parcel of the way in which images of bodies are read, and constitutive of *matériel* – in its extended sense as the hard- and software of intelligence. (2006: 15)

"Concrete," "particular," "part and parcel," *matériel*," "hard- and software" highly connote a sense of materiality, and it is this sense of materiality inherent in translation that I focus on in the last section of this chapter, with the aim to counter the charge that the cultural turn in human sciences has somewhat moved away from the material and economic aspects of the political.

1.3 Translation and the Moments of Cultural Studies

Let me first recapitulate the emergence of cultural studies and its entry into translation studies before I elaborate on the idea of the materiality of translation. Mona Baker (1996) distinguishes between culture studies and cultural studies approaches to translation; the former is the general study of culture that offers neutral insights into cultural disparities and asymmetries, and the latter views translation as an ideologically charged act and aims to expose and counter translation-based processes of hegemony by using translation itself. The specific lexicalization existing in different languages, for example, often poses a challenge in translating between culturally distant languages. For instance, in Vietnamese there are over a dozen distinct words for rice, while speakers of English would use the same word "rice" to form compound nouns to denote what is expressed in single and distinct words in Vietnamese. Elaborating on such gaps and asymmetries between languages, often in a factual and neutral manner, represents an aspect of culture studies. For the cultural studies approach to translation, Baker cites Venuti's "foreignizing" strategies as an example. In this approach, Venuti notes how the "fluent" strategy that dominates the Anglo-American translation scene is complicit in Western colonial and imperial projects, and he suggests using "foreignizing" translation

as a way to undo this ideological complicity, thus de-hegemonizing Western norms of translating and of representing non-Western cultures. Baker rightly points out that the general awareness of cultural disparities is not new in translation studies and cannot be attributed to the cultural studies approach to translation. Works prior to the cultural turn by scholars such as Eugene Nida, Peter Newmark, and Baker herself have long incorporated pragmatic and cultural considerations. As early as 1954, Joseph Casagrande recognized that "in effect, one does not translate LANGUAGES, one translates CULTURES" (cited in Baker 1996: 13; capitalization in the original). Nida's notion of dynamic equivalence (Nida 1964) also reflects his understanding of cultural asymmetries and the attempt to incorporate them in theorizing translation. Thirty years after his first elaboration of this notion, Nida seemed even more perceptive to the central position of culture in contemplating translation techniques, albeit still in a sharp contrast to linguistic approaches: "It is true that in all translating and interpreting the source and target languages must be implicitly or explicitly compared, but all such interlingual communication extends far beyond the mechanic linguistic similarities and contrasts" (1994: 1; cited in Schäffner 1995: 1). In her *In Other Words: A Coursebook on Translation*, Baker acutely posits cultural contexts as the underpinning principle for her designs of exercises as well as her choice of language for illustrative examples – non-European languages such as Arabic, Chinese, and Japanese as a way to "counterbalance the current preoccupation with European languages in translation studies" (1992: 7). Her rich thematic explications of linguistic issues in translation are consistently sensitive to the cultural aspects of language. The common central concern of the several works just mentioned is the engagement with sociolinguistics and pragmatics, linguistic areas that

look at language as used in specific socio-cultural contexts, rather than as an abstract system bound by rules derived from structural linguistics. However, this perspective of culture does not generate any political constructs and agendas. Instead, it investigates in a neutral manner what Tymoczko would designate as the surface interaction between language and material culture.

The cultural studies approach to translation, on the contrary, engages in various political issues. The turn to culture as a major category of analysis in translation studies has brought to the fore a wide range of issues imported from cultural studies. Formally, Cultural Studies is an academic discipline established in Britain after the Second World War, with prominent founding figures such as Raymond Williams and Edward Thompson. Later scholars of the Birmingham School such as Richard Hoggart and Stuart Hall, who founded and directed the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham in 1964, also played a vital role in shaping the field in its early stage. Cultural Studies has developed and changed tremendously since then with diverse approaches and methodologies. Indeed, right at its inception, Cultural Studies, Hall says, "is not one thing; it has never been one thing" (1990: 11). Hall's memories of the early days of the field, consisting "mainly of rows, debates, arguments, and of people walking out of rooms," compelled him to reject even the idea of "the Birmingham School" because such a designation might evoke a sense of coherence and unity foreign to the actual atmosphere of Cultural Studies in the 1960s (ibid.).

The plurality of Cultural Studies is best captured by Chris Rojek, who in his book *Cultural Studies* proposes four "moments" to summarize the rich development venues of the field while stressing the "overlapping streams and cross-currents" of research and

debate in the field (2007: 39). He calls the first moment the "National-Popular," a term

derived from the writings of Antonio Gramsci, who opposed the economism of classical

Marxism and instead focused on the questions of group formation in the field of politics

and cultural hegemony. The hallmark of Cultural Studies in this moment was the

instigation of a new intellectual attitude that later came to constitute the general political

agenda of all branches of cultural studies, the original British Cultural Studies as well as

subsequent developments in North America, South Africa, and elsewhere. That is the

aspiration to "breaking the mould" by "asking questions that were not being asked in

other disciplines and to take seriously what was elsewhere dismissed as trifling or of no

importance in cultural relations" (ibid.: 42). Thus, the popular, lived culture of the

working class, and later under the influence of Stuart Hall, mass media, state power, and

race were all rigorously investigated and theorized. The commitment to socialist change,

the eclectic amalgam of diverse theories from other disciplines, the resistance to cultural

essentialism and elitism were the main agendas of social praxis and theoretical

articulations in this moment. The spirit of this moment can be best summarized in Stuart

Hall's editorial introduction to the first issue of the *New Left Review*. Hall wrote:

> The purpose of discussing the cinema or teen-age culture in *NLR* is not to show
> that, in some modish way, we are keeping up with the times. These are directly
> relevant to the imaginative resistances of people who have to live within
> capitalism-the growing points of social discontent, the projections of deeply-felt
> needs. Our experience of life today is so extraordinarily fragmented. The task of
> socialism is to meet people where they *are*, where they are touched, bitten,
> moved, frustrated, nauseated—to develop discontent and, at the same time, to
> give the socialist movement some *direct* sense of the times and ways in which we
> live. (1960: 1; emphasis in the original)

Rojek names the second moment of Cultural Studies the "Textual-

Representational." In this moment, mass culture was conceived as the representational

world in which texts were produced and meaning constructed. Drawing upon semiotics and structural linguistics, especially works by Roland Barthes, the earlier stage of this moment aimed to demystify this representational world by decoding the hidden processes of meaning construction conducive to the establishment of order and hierarchy. Social phenomena were no longer taken as an immediate presentation of experiences and realities, but rather portrayed as signs to be decoded and interpreted for underpinning codes of signification, symbolic rules and conventions, as well as mechanisms and structures of power and ideology. A work that reflects the dominant methodology of this moment is A.C.H Smith's *Paper Voices: The Popular Press and Social Change 1935-1965*, written with Elizabeth Immirzi and Trevor Blackwell (1975) and with an introduction by Stuart Hall. Hall opened his introduction by succinctly announcing the objectives of the project: "to examine how the popular press interprets social change to its readers; and to explore and develop methods of close analysis as a contribution to the general field of cultural studies" (1976: 11). Hall frequently stressed the importance of examining news not as news *per se* as if newspaper institutions were transparent in their existence, immediate and unmediated in their reportage. Rather, Hall contended that analysis must disclose how news was instituted as news within a continuum, including readership, continuous practices, traditions, routines, and all that "defines what constitutes 'news', how to get it, how it should be presented, which is the hottest story" (ibid.: 11). Thus, the task of the analyst was conceived of as passing through the manifest content of news to delve into the latent meanings of texts. Such a task was only made possible by a combination of methods, literary-critical, linguistic and stylistic, which would allow insights into the patterns, codes, tones, styles, and emphases of

representation that structured the production and reception of news. Hall pointed out that "the flow of news, from news gatherers to readers, is a highly organized and institutionalized social process: a process of 'cultural production and consumption'" (ibid.: 17). The ultimate goal of cultural analysis in the early stage of this moment, as predictable in its structuralist aspiration, was to bring to light the structures of meanings, their historical genesis, evolution, and disintegration (ibid.: 24).

This early stage of the second moment, which drew upon structural linguistics and semiotics, was rigorously transformed at the advent of other theoretical and critical movements, such as poststructuralism, Lacan psychoanalysis, and deconstruction. Faith in the decodable monolithic meaning of signs faded as a range of new questions were asked about cultural meaning and new concepts emerged, such as Derrida's *différance*, Barthes' polysemy, Volosinnov's multi-accentuality, and Bakhtin's heteroglossia. The belief in the finality and fixity of meaning was quickly replaced by an embracement of ambivalence and ambiguity. The free play of signs and intertextuality were viewed as the conditions for the possibility of meaning. At this juncture, the multiplicity and diversity of politics came to prominence, displacing the neo-Marxist principle of class struggle with its exclusive interest in the material level of culture. The major concern now turned to how meaning was inscribed through texts and representations. Rojek cites Dick Hebdige's *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979) as a leading example of textual-representational analysis. In this book, Hebdige revitalized Lévi-Strauss's notion of *bricolage* as a tool to probe into how economically and socially marginalized groups appropriated, relocated and resignified objects from consumer culture as a way to parody that very culture and re-position themselves within it. Beginning his project with the

notion of "style as a form of Refusal," Hebdige offered a probing description of "the process whereby objects are made to mean and mean again as 'style' in subculture" (1979: 2-3). Preoccupied with the process of resignification, which Hebdige often referred to as "crimes" or "meaningful mutations," rather than the final objects in their "meaning-again," Hebdige revealed the possibility of *polysemy*, which also means the possibility of resistance to dominant values and institutions that claimed authority over monolithic, fixed meanings. For Hebdige, polysemy was the condition for the text "to generate a potentially infinite range of meanings," and therefore cultural analysis should abandon "extracting a final set of meanings from the seemingly endless, often apparently random, play of signifiers" and turn attention to "that point – or more precisely, that level – in any given text where the principle of meaning itself seems most in doubt" (ibid.: 117-18). In Hebdige's work, polysemy represented a methodological break with the structuralist interest in *langue* and the turn to "the *position* of the speaking subject in discourse," in *parole* (ibid.: 118; italics in the original).

Concluding the second moment of Cultural Studies, Rojek points out that "Politics here is not so much concerned with achieving social and political transformation as recognizing the dynamics and legitimacy of difference" (2007: 54). This change of analytical focus prefigures the tension between what Nancy Fraser (1997b) would call the politics of recognition and the politics of redistribution (see section 1.5). Hebdige began his book with economically subordinate groups and eventually arrived at the level of the semiotic, the textual-representational, thus assuming the polemic position of recognition politics, at the expense of economic and political redistribution opportunities. Hebdige's *Subculture* displayed a kind of polysemy in its methodology, as Richard Lee observes,

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"with its eclectic use of concepts from Gramsci, Althusser, Lacan, Barthes, and Eco it manifests emphatically the range of theoretical modes and practices operative in the field" (2003: 124). *Subculture* is also exemplary of the Textual-Representational moment in the sense that it underscores "the inexhaustible dynamics of cultural styling and the prolific and subtle inventiveness of cultural resistance" (Rojek 2007: 54). Transcendence into universal structures of meaning ceased to be favored as the prominent methodology; in its stead, the contextual, real particularisms of social performances prevailed in the Textual-Representational moment.

Rojek identifies the third moment as Globalization/Anti-Essentialism. In this moment, the notion of identity ascended to the central stage of Cultural Studies as a whole new range of vocabulary emerged to represent the increasingly globalized condition of the world. As capital flows via multinational corporations to reach what used to be considered the most distant corners of the earth just a few decades before, barriers of all kinds among nations – cultural, social, political – were increasingly threatened to be dismantled. Mass migration, travel, and the rapid development of the internet and other virtual technologies posed a serious challenge to the orthodox knowledge of the nation-state and identity that was primarily based on disparate and self-contained geopolitical areas. Terms such as disembedding, uprooting, hybridity, mobility, intertextuality predominated in the cultural discourses of this moment. Class, race, gender, nation were no longer perceived as possessing fixed and unified meanings that precede discourse and interpretation. In this respect, Jacques Derrida's writings were foundational. His *Of Grammatology* (1976) and his essay "Différance" (1982) provocatively postulated the self-referentiality of language through the free play of signs. Derrida exposed the

metaphysical self-presence underlying Western philosophical discourses that posit

meaning as a unified identity and the sign as wholly present to itself. For Derrida, free

play, *différance*, or trace, constituted the possibility of meaning, and meaning was but an

effect of language itself, rather than a transparent mimesis of reality. What presented

itself as meaning, as presence, necessarily involved an Other that was always absent;

meaning was thus possible only within a trace-structure in which the sign always carries

with it the trace of other signs that are forever absent. Within the field of Derridian re-

conceptualizations, political action in this moment was also re-articulated, focusing now

on "disrupting the logic of capitalism and exposing the limits of fixed identity thinking"

(Rojek 2007: 59). In this light, Rojek cites Edward Said's work as exemplary in this

moment, emphasizing his contribution to shifting the study of culture from the national to

the "national-global level" by tracing "the vast contours and obscure tectonics of the

Western cultural representation of the Orient" (ibid.: 60).

The last moment in Rojek's account is Governmentality/Policy. The key thinker

whose work provided the theoretical background for research in this moment of Cultural

Studies is Michel Foucault. Rojek notes the affinity of this moment to the Textual-

Representational, yet decides to single it out as a separate moment on the ground that

"Foucault's work is distinct in systematically relating questions of culture and

representation to history, power, knowledge, problems of social justice and government"

(ibid.: 62). With his rigorous investigations into the genealogy of knowledge and power,

Foucault (1970, 1977, 1978) exposed systems of representation, discourses, ideals,

regulatory practices, or regimes of truth in general, that shape and govern culture and

identity. For Foucault, governmentality is a paradigm of power that consists in

mechanisms of command that are exercised not through a network of *dispositifs* operating from outside the social field, but through subjugating and normalizing practices that are immanent rather than transcendent. Governmentality, therefore, appears as a "democratic" form of power as it permeates the brains and bodies of its subjects. Operating as such, power is decentralized from the normative sites of social institutions such as the prison, the clinic, the school and becomes immanent in the subject itself. The category of sex, for example, embodies a process of regulating and normalizing sexual practices and knowledge that serves the purpose of organizing and subjugating social relations. In Foucault's historical analysis, sex is exposed as constructed through discourse in the form of confession (Foucault 1978). Along this line of thinking about social behaviors and performances, constructedness became the major concern in this moment of Cultural Studies, which gave rise to an array of questions relating to the government of culture: the allocation of public funds in projects of preserving cultural heritage, the promotion of cultural values in particular communities, cultural nationalism, and so on. Bennet (1992) even went so far as to suggest that Cultural Studies should aim at producing "technicians" to manage culture.

Another dimension that Rojek identifies in this moment is the growth of the so-called global public sphere in which images and texts are circulated at an international level (Garnham 1992; McGuigan 2000). Rojek rightly points out that this global public sphere does not in any way constitute cultural unity around the globe because it is far from being a homogenous totality of television viewers, internet surfers, and other mass media recipients. Millions of people watched the funeral of Princess Diana in 1997 as it was broadcasted in several countries, yet the event did not create "a one-world position

with respect to the meaning of her life and its relation to the British royal family. Global

events are inflected and scrambled by local conditions" (Rojek 2007: 63). Both Homi

Bhabha (1994) and Judith Butler (2000) hint at this issue in their elaborations on the

concept of cultural translation in relation to, respectively, colonial power and hegemony.

For Bhabha, the representation of colonial authority is invariably ambivalent as it is

mediated through localization, and for Butler, any hegemonic claim has to go through

local inflections. Localization has also been a much discussed issue in translation studies.

The most interesting aspect in Rojek's discussion of the Governmentality/Policy

moment is the connection between culture on the one hand and economic empowerment

and distributive justice on the other (see 1.5). Culture was perceived not only as

belonging entirely to the textual-representational realm of politics, but also as an

economic resource and as tools for social engineering. Identity politics, commonly

characterized by political struggles for recognition of culturally defined differences,

would now struggle for recognition and inclusion at the same time as it challenged

positive discrimination in the distribution of economic resources across race, ethnicity,

and gender. Through cultural governance and policy, programs were designed to invest in

and develop cultural resources, not just as an end in itself, but as a means towards

increased economic attraction and eventual egalitarian distribution. The remote

mountainous areas of Vietnam populated by different ethnic minorities, for example, are

burgeoning economically as a result of planned cultural investment. State-sponsored

programs to restore ethnic handicraft and arts for touristic purposes are now vital to the

quality of life in these regions as they provide employment opportunities for local people

while presumably preserving ethnic identities. Tourism also boosts investments in social

projects that help improve literacy, welfare, communication, and housing. Such a redistribution of economic and material resources by way of commodifying ethnic cultures is certainly not without problematic consequences. However, it is not my intent here to discuss how touristic activities, and by extension, cultural governance and policy, cut across the cultural life of ethnic minorities in Vietnam. Rather, at stake here is the conceivable link between cultural governance and distributive justice and how this link provides a rich area for research in cultural studies. Even in the urban context of major cities in the United States such as Seattle, San Francisco, Austin, and Boston, economic flourish is largely owed to strategic cultural investment (Florida 2002). Indeed, the dependence of economic growth on the deployment of cultural material, in its most extreme form, has resulted in what Jim McGuigan (2004) refers to as neo-liberal instrumentalism, a way of rationalizing and justifying cultural policy exclusively in terms of economic reason.

The four moments in Cultural Studies narrated by Rojek that I have discussed at length, often with my own intervention, recapitulate the major contours of cultural studies over the past half century. This account, as Rojek carefully reminds us, does not represent a linear chronological development of cultural studies with one moment displacing or superseding another. Indeed, it aims to foreground the complex, often spiral and antagonistic, venues in which methods and objects of research were constantly contested and reconceptualized as new concepts and paradigms were introduced into the field. In terms of space, the account encapsulates the various strands of cultural studies as developed in different parts of the world: Britain, North America, South Africa, and Asia. Temporally and spatially fuzzy, Rojek's narrative of cultural studies provides an

overview of the rich developments in the field across time and space. Such a view is apt

for drawing multiple links between cultural studies and contemporary translation studies,

an endeavor initiated by Susan Bassnett and Lefevere in *Constructing Cultures* (1998). In

the last essay of the book, Bassnett and Lefevere underscore multiple parallel contours of

the two fields of study and call for a "translation turn" in cultural studies (1998: 123-39).

Drawing on Antony Easthope's account of the major strands of cultural studies (1997),

which stresses the successive transformations of the field from culturalism of the 1960s

to structuralism of the 1970s, and to poststructuralism and cultural materialism of the

1980s and onwards, Bassnett and Lefevere point out several parallel movements in

translation studies. For the "culturalist phase" of translation studies, they cite Eugene

Nida, Peter Newmark, among some others, for "their attempts to think culturally, to

explore the problem of how to define equivalence, to wrestle with notions of linguistic

versus cultural untranslatability" (1998: 131). The structuralist phase is assigned to the

polysystem theorists who are concerned with "a more systematic approach to the study

and practice of translation" (ibid.: 132). Finally, Bassnett and Lefevere recount the effect

of globalization on cultural studies which orients the field towards increased

internationalization and intercultural analysis, uprooting it from its British beginnings and

bringing it closer to translation studies.

While agreeing with Bassnett and Lefevere on the necessary orientation towards

increased interdisciplinarity between cultural studies and translation studies, I contend

that drawing parallels between the two disciplines in a mechanical and somewhat

coercive way as in *Constructing Cultures* is inadequate and even misleading. Affinity

does not necessarily ensure the possibility of interdisciplinary dialogues, nor does it

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promise novel insights. In the worst case, it is tantamount to the collapse of one field into the other and the loss of the dynamic vital for academic disciplines to mutually contest premises and illuminate their respective blind spots. Citing Richard Johnson's argument that "cultural studies must be interdisciplinary or a-disciplinary in its tendency" (1986: 279), Bassnett and Lefevere refer to the Leuven seminar of 1976 where participating scholars, Lefevere being one of them, laid the foundation for translation studies to undertake an interdisciplinary direction, uprooting it from within either literary studies or linguistics. Johnson's vision of interdisciplinarity, however, registers neither a lookout for similar approaches and methodologies in other disciplines nor an aggregation of different ones. It is not, he says, "a bit of sociology here, a spot of linguistics there," but a question of "reforming different approaches in relation to each other" (1986: 280). Following Johnson's view, I suggest that interdisciplinarity must include in its purview the possibility of mutual contestations derived from the fact that "each approach is theoretically partisan, but also very partial in its objects" (ibid.: 279).

1.4 Towards the Singularity and Contingency of Translation

Tracing the contours of the cultural turn in translation studies, it reveals that the field has to some extent uncritically accepted concepts and methodologies as developed in cultural studies, and this is probably because of the received assumption of affinity, rather than critical difference, in the understanding of interdisciplinarity. The concept of culture itself has never been rigorously examined in translation studies, probably owing to the shifting meaning of culture and research paradigms in cultural studies across time and space. This is not synonymous to saying that the relationship between the two fields has never been fruitful. Indeed, there have been achievements that could not have been

attained without interdisciplinary dialogues. On the one hand, the shifting condition of

cultural studies has undoubtedly generated a diversity in objects and methods of study in

translation studies, and more importantly, has rendered the latter ever more open to new

knowledges and insights. On the other hand, the translation turn in cultural studies

apparently enriches the venue of Saidian humanism that has existed in cultural studies as

Rojek's account of the third moment suggests. Saidian humanism, with its "shock value

of cultural comparison," as highlighted by Emily Apter, will do away with the

understanding of culture as something only played out within modern territorial states

and bring it beyond the circumscription of national borders. Such translingual and

transcultural perspectivalism promises to delve into the dynamic of cultural domination

and resistance as well as issues in acculturation and transculturation. Drawing upon

insights from translation studies, cultural studies is furnished with translation as a new

object of analysis that helps illuminate how the cultural dynamic is played out across

nation-states, discourses, and subjects.

What concerns me here, however, is that although translation studies has enjoyed

the multifarious touch of the cultural turn, the field has in a way re-registered the

descriptive stance initiated in the 1980s. The initial problematic of descriptive translation

studies is to survey and document cases of translation in terms of similarities, differences,

shifts, gaps, or translational behaviors in general. Insights from descriptive study are then

supposed to help scholars formulate norms and laws of translation which in turn inform

the actual work of translators. Much has gone beyond this problematic as Gentzler has

delineated in his *Contemporary Translation Theories* (2001), particularly in the

penultimate chapter on deconstruction and postcolonialism. Later research has filled the

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gap left over by descriptive translation studies by examining and explicating the cultural and political underpinnings of the translational behaviors at hand. Research no longer ends in a thorough description of textual configurations that bear the fingerprints of the translator. The more pressing task is now conceived of as explaining why such choices, maneuvers, and manipulations on the part of the translator, and to this end, the translator and his/her works are often examined against the continuum of ideology and power relations. Translation analysis has acknowledged the translator and the text as ontologically bounded in specific cultural and political contexts that to a large extent determine, implicitly or explicitly, translation processes. An overview of the insights brought about by such scholarship, however, reveals that translation studies is still for the large part operating with the descriptive impulse that seems to hold sway persistently. In a way, description is not all together abandoned but only shifts from text to context. A description of textual features is now often followed by the description of the context of translation, of the translator's background, of the forces at work in the translation process. The researcher then, rather ritually, offers explanations that often relate text to context. Sometimes, we may see an enunciation of the translator's aims and objectives. The cultural turn in translation studies has been in essence a turn where culture becomes part of the description of the translation processes. This is not, however, to diminish the achievements of the field at the cultural turn. Knowledge of how ideology and power relations are played out in translation is certainly of great value to scholarship not only in the field itself but also in other disciplines.

What I want to emphasize here is the fact that more attention needs to be paid to the social and cultural *effects* of the translator's work that such scholarship should

illuminate and turn into instructive frameworks for translators. My contention is that on each particular translating occasion, the translator should be able to articulate his/her own theory, amid theories, that applies for that particular translation project, something that I attempt to do in Chapter 4. As translation scholars attempt to answer questions such as how the translator mediates in between cultures, how a certain translation affirms authority, reinforces domination or resists power, so on and so forth, research also needs to be geared towards the seemingly outdated question of how to translate. Such a positing does not aim to reinstate the prescriptive stance, since this how-to-translate is not retrospectively speculated and imposed on translators by an individual or a group deemed to be authorial in making determinate and final claims about translation. Rather, the enunciation of how-to is a matter of personal strategizing informed by insights of the cultural and ideological forces at work coupled with the translator's knowledge of his/her own position within the continuum of power relations and the specific translating task at hand. The how-to is therefore never universal and final, but specific, singular, and contingent. It comes out of every specific occasion of translating, and for that reason, it comprises of a contingent set of investigations and reflections on the part of the translator that are text-and-task specific.

I find that the "holistic approach" to translating culture that Tymoczko proposes in *Enlarging Translation, Empowering Translators* (2007) is relevant here to my notion of the singularity and contingency of strategizing. One of the merits of Tymoczko's theory as I see it is the commitment to theorizing in a way that instructs with concrete guidance and procedures for translators. Her holistic approach to cultural translation comprises of a set of procedural considerations that translators are advised to take before

choosing a translating strategy. In her view, translators should go beyond the surface of material culture to unearth "the embodied and situated knowledge related to cultural configurations and practices," a kind of habitus, of both the source and the target texts and cultures, before embarking on a translating task (ibid.: 227). The holistic toolbox that she provides contains several elements that a translator should not overlook in forming a translating strategy, namely the signature concepts of the cultures involved, discursive formations, cultural practices and paradigms, overcodings, and so on (ibid.: 238-49). She also notes the metonymic nature of translation conducive to the condition that "only part of the habitus will be mobilized as particularly relevant to any given text" (ibid.: 239-40). In my view, it is in this metonymic condition of translation that the singularity and contingency of a given translating project arise. Here, I suggest that theorizing needs to rigorously explore this singular and contingent aspect of translation, since every translating project is unique in a way that renders any global theory of translation irrelevant, if not violent. But the question here is how we are to conceptualize the relationship between singularity/contingency and the holistic cultural analysis proposed by Tymoczko. It is unclear in Tymoczko's account whether cultural analysis, which precedes strategizing, is done once and for all in the translator's entire career, or it should be done, redone, or even undone, on each translating occasion, given the fact that cultures are never monolithic and static and that translation is invariably metonymic. Although Tymoczko acknowledges that cultural analysis is essentially incomplete, quoting Clifford Geertz and Michael Cronin, her notion of holistic analysis seems to be soon exhausted with her positing in the translator's work of "an important dialectic between thinking about large-scale dispositions and practices related to the habitus that are presupposed in

a particular text and identifying more specific elements that embody or relate to those larger frameworks" (ibid.: 240). It seems that she returns here to Saussurean structuralism, conceptualizing culture as a dialectic between *langue* and *parole*. How are we to situate the agency of the translator if he/she is absolutely and completely subsumed in the habitus? How is the translator supposed to perform within the dialectic between the structural universals and the particular actualizations of culture? Judith Butler's criticism of Bourdieu's habitus, which I discuss in Chapter 3, is useful here if we are to conceptualize cultural translation in a way that features the agency of the translator and the alternative possibilities beyond the compelling interpellation of the *langue* of culture.

For the current discussion, I suggest that apart from describing and critiquing translations to unearth the cultural underpinnings of translation processes, a task that has been very well accomplished by scholars in translation studies, theorizing translation should also be focused on the specific translating instances that often yield particular and distinct strategies. But theorizing does not stop at describing strategies that correspond to results from a holistic cultural analysis; it must, I argue, articulate the how-to-translate as part and parcel of the translator's agenda. In this sense, the how-to does not just involve relating textual and cultural specifics to the habitus as Tymoczko suggests, but at a deeper level, it addresses the question of how to navigate out of the habitus for democratic changes, since the habitus, Foucault would tell us, is precisely the site where power operates through the body and embodied knowledge. This is precisely what Gayatri Spivak has done in her translations of Mahasweta Devi's stories collected in *Imaginary Maps* (1995). *Imaginary Maps* presents an interesting case of what I call performed theorizing, in which the translator not only translates and presents the final

product in print, but also articulates her own position in the cultures involved and her

relations to the text and the author. Spivak's performed theorizing manifests in *Imaginary*

Maps as a totality of a preface, an interview with the author, the stories themselves, and

an afterword. In such a presentation, the translated stories themselves appear as a

continuation of a larger project, and not the project itself. While telling the poignant

stories of Indian tribals, the translations are immersed in the translator's performance of

theorizing, and in the process, the telling becomes only as part and parcel of Spivak's

postcolonial/feminist/translating project. Gentzler has pointed out that "translation, thus,

becomes a key component of Spivak's theory, for it lends her project the specificity

lacking in many Western discussions of postcolonial texts" (2001: 184).[1] In such a

performance, Spivak's theorizing connects indigenous feminist writings, postcolonialism,

and translation altogether, and it performs all these in front of the reader's eyes and ears.

By articulating her stance of "ethical singularity" and her political conviction of "learning

from below" in relation to the networks of power at work – Western metaphysical and

humanism, Spivak renders visible the translation process with corresponding translating

strategies and techniques. By interviewing Devi, she also allows the author to speak, thus

rendering audible the writing process, and in this particular case, we hear the author's

direct address and appeal to American readers: "But I say to my American readers, see

what has been done to them, you will understand what has been done to the Indian

tribals" (Devi 1995: xi). The book thus does not simply tell but show the staging of

Spivak's theorizing through different means, dialoguing, critiquing, translating. On that

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[1] For Gentzler's further comments on Gayatri Spivak as a postcolonial theorist
and translator, see also Gentzler (2002: 206-13).

stage, Spivak does not simply play the role of a mediator between the stories of Indian tribals and the receiving readers of English, but a performer whose show connects different processes of the creative and critiquing work, including the translation process, and enacts her postcolonial/feminist articulations and translating strategies. Bringing an interlocutor into the scene of translation, namely the author of the original text, Spivak does not relegate herself into further invisibility, but on the contrary, she presents herself as a major actress on the theoretical stage, as Gentzler puts it, "Spivak as translator is self-effacing and ever-present simultaneously" (2001: 185).

In such performed theorizing, or "double-writing" as Gentzler calls it (ibid.: 186), Spivak shows us with rigor the moment in her work when several tasks are performed simultaneously: translating, critiquing, and ultimately, theorizing. Spivak as translator has captured that moment to theorize about translation, feminism, and postcolonialism, and embeded her theory in the presentation of the book as a whole. *Imaginary Maps* can hardly be read easily as a book of exotic stories from the East. It often vexes us with a language that Sherry Simon describes as "stark, angular; there is no softening of the harsh sequencing of phrases, no addition of mollifying connectives or literary-like phrases" (1996: 147). The language of translation seems to draw attention to itself, referring to itself as the story unfolds. Discussing Spivak's translating techniques, Gentzler observes that "the differences are enough to allow the text to escape its formulaic appropriation. The deconstructive devices arrest easy consumption and continually point to the mediated nature of the communication as well as to Spivak's political agenda" (2001: 185-86). With defamiliarizing language, Spivak marks her intervention at the same time as she cancels it out. For her, foreignizing is not a universal technique, a totalizing language of

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resistance and intervention, as presumed in Venuti's translation politics (see Chapter 4),

but an occasion to solve the specific task at hand, a means to her "ethical singularity."

Through reading and translating Mahasweta Devi's stories, Spivak finds "ethical

singularity" as a necessary "supplement" to collective struggles (Devi 1995: xxv).

Indeed, the singularity of the individual in history lies at the heart of Devi's writings, and

Spivak observes that "Mehasweta Devi's own relationship to historical discourse seems

clear. She has always been gripped by the individual in history" ([1987] 1998: 336). Yet,

Devi's individuals in history are never totally subsumed in history, but always carve onto

history distinct interruptive patterns that resist the seamless flow of historiography and

ethnographic narratives of tribal identity and culture. "The Hunt," one of the three stories

in *Imaginary Maps*, for example, features an individual who does not fully belong to the

constructed collective history, and who from that non-belonging position, performs ritual

into resistance. Gentzler best captures the singularity of the protagonist of "The Hunt":

"Mary in the story 'The Hunt' is not representative of the collective, but a *single*

individual in a *particular* situation who chooses a *specific* ritual to stage her resistance *in

her own way*" (2001: 185; emphasis mine). In a sense, Mary represents the remainder, the

excess of history, of the grand narratives of identity and culture. For Spivak, "ethical

singularity" bypasses the thick layer of historiography and power relations that more

often than not obscure the faces of singular individuals who do not totally belong to the

narrated and constructed image of the collective. "Ethical singularity," therefore, requires

a profound engagement with the individual that resembles a kind of "love," an element

that determines the success of political movements in the long run, also an element that

turns ethics into "the experience of the impossible" (Devi 1995: xxv).

All in all, what Spivak shows us in *Imaginary Maps* is not just a collection of translated stories from Mahasweta Devi, but the staging of her own resistance, through theorizing, alongside the resistance in and by Devi's characters. Spivak's own resistance aims to make visible and audible to the English reader the indigenous resistance that is often effaced in the Western writing and reading of Third World realities. Also, it is an effort at what she calls the "slow, attentive mind-changing" and "ethical singularity that deserves the name of 'love' – to supplement necessary collective efforts to change laws, modes of production, systems of education and health care" (ibid.: 201). Spivak presents an interesting case of holistic approach to translating culture that radically diverges from what Tymoczko proposes. Instead of relating cultural specifics in the text to the structural frameworks of culture, Spivak uses translation and paratranslational devices to deconstruct the frame of universals and the very habitus of reading and writing for the particular to emerge. Nationalism, for example, represents a discursive narrativization of emancipation that suppresses innumerable examples of subaltern resistance throughout imperialist and pre-imperialist centuries. Situating Mahasweta Devi's stories against the grand narrative of nationalism, Spivak contends in an essay in *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* that "Mahasweta's text [Breast-Giver] might show in many ways how the narratives of nationalism have been and remain irrelevant to the life of the subordinate" ([1987] 1998: 338-39). Her holistic approach thus consists in her deployment of dialogues and critiques alongside specific translating techniques to not subsume the subaltern particular into the universal but position it as a questioning presence that haunts and restlessly pushes the limits of the habitus in thinking about politics and history. If for Tymoczko the habitus constitutes an operative category that

guides the translator's strategizing, for Spivak, I argue, it is a critical category deployed to think through structures of power and reach the domain outside of habitual cognition where unrepresented subaltern subjects are cast in their singularity and exclusion. Spivak's theorizing, in its intimate relationship with translating, underscores what I have referred to as the singularity and contingency of translation, the moment in which the translator articulates his/her self-positioning within history and politics through translation and paratranslational activities. Theorizing about translation, as I have suggested, should be geared towards this aspect of translation as part of the empowerment of the translator, so as each translator is able to capture every translating occasion in its singularity and particularity. Every translation occasion is different just as every text is different and every character is singular, thus demanding the translator to constantly analyze and re-analyze cultural dispositions and hegemonic articulations in politics and history. Each translation therefore yields specific and contingent strategizing.

This is precisely what I attempt to do in translating Annie Proulx's *Brokeback Mountain* into Vietnamese (see Chapter 4). The occasion of translating this novella has given me an understanding of a particular condition of homosexuality in the receiving culture that I perceive to be highly fluid and transformable. The life of homosexuality in a country like Vietnam does not and cannot remain static and unitary. Fluidity is the very mechanism of survival in suppression. Translating within such fluidity of the receiving culture, the translator must understand that his work only constitutes an occasion to address not fluidity itself but a contingent element, an element that is hardly self-identical. There is nothing so certain about strategizing, about the meaning and position of a text. David Damrosch has shown us an interesting case of the fluid circulation of a

text in translation, Milorad Pavic´'s *Dictionary of the Khazars*. Damrosch points out that

"the book international success involved the neglect or outright misreading of its political

content," yet it is Pavic´'s international reputation as an author of a book received by

audiences around the world as "an Arabian Nights romance," "a wickedly teasing

intellectual game," and an opportunity "to lose themselves in a novel of love and death"

that grants him a more powerful voice of nationalist politics at home (Damrosch 2005:

381). If there had been an articulation of some sort on the part of the translator and/or

author – as in *Imaginary Maps* – the political undercurrent in Pavic´'s novel could have

withstood the sweeping force of postmodernism in the reception of the book. Like a

body, a text in its circulation is exposed to the touch, caring or violent, of the other, and

for that reason, is perpetually vulnerable. Staging an articulation the way Spivak does, I

suggest, constitutes part and parcel of the translation process. It shields the text from the

violent touch of the massive force of cultural dispositions, academic assumptions,

political biases, or of power in general. Chapter 4 aims precisely at this effort to construct

such a shield.

1.5 Translation and Justice: From the Material to the Cultural

Walking on the streets of Hồ Chí Minh City, formerly named Sài Gòn, gives one

a unique experience of navigating the fabric of Vietnamese official history. The city lived

through colonialism for almost a century and witnessed the fall of the Southern Regime

in 1975 after twenty years of American intervention, yet the history one experiences

while traversing the city is one of a symbolic order rather than of experiential history.

The few remaining buildings of colonial times can hardly remind the Saigonese of

colonial legacy. Most of these buildings are cherished today as ornamental artifacts

accentuating the charm of a city once called, and still proudly remembered as, the *Pearl of the Far East*. History cannot be relived or remembered, as it were, through the material remnants of the past. The cathedral, the post-office, the city hall, the grand theatre, once representing the anchoring of colonial power, are made anew, signifying charm and luxury which entice rather than memorialize. They are enmeshed in modern high-rise buildings, busy shopping centers, glaring commercial neon lights and panels. Enmeshing here also entails amnesia. The memory of experiential history, of history as experience, is effaced within the urban space of anachronisms. The chronological order of history collapses as it is totally absorbed into space. Temporal differences are flattened out and space becomes the only register in one's view of the differential layout of the city, as if a cathedral built in the nineteenth century differed from a modern construction only in terms of physical appearance and location. One is desensitized of the flow and growth of the city from its birth to the present. Space spans over history and presents itself as the only dimension in which one navigates through the labyrinth of streets and alleys. The city becomes a vast simulacrum of history in which, to borrow Fredric Jameson's characterization of the postmodern, "our daily life, our psychic experience, our cultural languages, are today dominated by categories of space rather than by categories of time" (Jameson 1991: 16).

From another angle, traversing the different corners of the city through the multitudinous collection of street signs constantly subjects one to a confrontation with history, not in its absolute absence or disappearance, but in its perpetual presence as referent, a kind of ahistorical, transcendent signified. In the spatialization of time, history is vacuumed of what happened in it, its stories are divested of all differential experiences.

The diverse vectors of the past are unified, not without violence in many cases, into a single story, a master story of nationalism and patriotism that reminds by means of amnesia. Every street is named after a national hero, an official artist, or a sanctioned historical event. The cartography of history spans thousands of years, from the mythical birth of the nation to contemporary figures. From the Sài Gòn river, one can head north on the street named after the Trưng Sisters, the first national heroes fighting against the Chinese in the first century, and meet up with Lê Thánh Tôn, the fifth king of the Later Lê Dynasty ruling in the second half of the fifteenth century, then Nguyễn Đình Chiểu, the nineteenth-century anticolonial poet, then Điện Biên Phủ, the final battleground of the French in Vietnam. Lê Lợi, who defeated the Chinese Ming occupation in the fifteenth century, and Nguyễn Huệ, leader of the Tây Sơn Rebellion in the eighteenth century, occupy the most beautiful avenues of the city leading to the emblem of Vietnam's modern nationalism, the statue of Hồ Chí Minh erected in front of the colonial city hall. Chronology no longer matters in the geo-historical fabric of the city. History stops as it is carved onto space, its flow arrested and itself becoming ever present. A timeless story of nationalism.

History stands still in its telling and inhabiting space, yet the cartography of history is far from being static. As a political instrument of remembrance and amnesia, it is highly fluid and junctural. None of the thirteen Nguyễn kings, the last imperial dynasty of Vietnam, which ended in 1945, are included in the map. A conference was held in Hà Nội a few years ago where history scholars gathered to rethink and re-assess the virtue of the Nguyễn dynasty. A unanimous conclusion was reached which seemed to favor naming a street after one of the excluded kings. At some points, all foreign names, mostly

French, were erased, some of which to be reinstated later. Pasteur and Alexandre de Rhodes have suffered the junctural disposition of remembering politics. Mapping, with its naming and renaming, as Brian Friel has shown in his play *Translations* (1981), constitutes the imperialist translation of the other's history, language, and subjectivities into the imperial I. The mapping of every city and town in Vietnam can be said to constitute the site where postwar politics manifests itself most visibly. History in such a cartography does not flow in the linear dimension of time, but in the inclusion-exclusion direction of the present. Born and growing up in the city, I have learned and relearned the names of streets around the city, each relearning reminding me of a juncture in the contemporary conception of the past, of a successful negotiation in the politics of remembering. Huỳnh Thúc Kháng street and Ngô Đức Kế street are probably two of the most familiar for me, since they are located in the financial and commercial center of the city, and from where I live, I have to pass by them to go to work. Every day, I am reminded of the two anticolonial scholar-gentries and their patriotism. At the same time, as if under some gravity of history, I am also reminded of a historical figure who has no place in the geo-historical mapping.

It would be certainly unjust to think of a figure of such historical magnitude as Phạm Quỳnh on the sidelines of one's memory of Huỳnh and Ngô (see Chapter 2 for a more detailed discussion of Phạm Quỳnh's life and works). During his time, Phạm Quỳnh was harshly criticized by his contemporaries, Huỳnh and Ngô among them, for his support of cultural renovation. For Quỳnh, Vietnam's independence from French colonialism could never be obtained without learning from the French culture and civilization. His advocacy of Western learning, however, did not aim at an erasure of

classical education that had existed in Vietnam for over a thousand years. On the

contrary, Western learning in Quỳnh's view must be carried out in tandem with an ardent

preservation of the best works in Vietnamese culture, and particularly, the Vietnamese

language. With a conviction of cultural syntheticism, Phạm Quỳnh became a prolific

translator of French literature and wrote extensively on issues in literary criticism,

philosophy, and culture. His passionate exaltation of Nguyễn Du's classic epic *The Tale

of Kiều* in many of his essays could be said to best represent his politics of dynamic

essentialism, in which he believed an essential layer of Vietnamese culture must be

preserved while learning from Western values and philosophies. From the perspective of

those who supported radical revolutionary politics, however, Phạm Quỳnh represented an

elite class of traitors and puppets of the French authority who employed culturalist

discourse to sideline the real and urgent issue of national emancipation. Ngô Đức Kế

condemned Phạm Quỳnh's culturalism as a kind of "evil learning" and vehemently called

for an "official learning" that would focus on practical sciences (Nguyễn Đình Chú

2008).[2] Đặng Thai Mai, a prominent Marxist literary critic of North Vietnam, even

called Phạm Quỳnh, among many vulgar titles, "a traitor of the Vietnamese people in

disguise of an intellectual" ([1974] 2003: 367). In Mai's view, by exalting French

humanitarianism and French history and culture, Phạm Quỳnh's politics of Franco-

Vietnamese collaboration blatantly endorsed colonialism and considered it an ethical and

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[2] Criticisms of Phạm Quỳnh's culturalism by his contemporaries can be found in Ngô Đức Kế (1924) and Huỳnh Thúc Kháng (1930). Phạm Quỳnh reflects most clearly his thoughts on *The Tale of Kiều* in a speech he read at the 200th anniversary of Nguyễn Du's birthday, December 8, 1924. The speech was then printed in the journal *Nam Phong*, of which Phạm Quỳnh served as editor-in-chief for almost its entire life, from 1917 to 1932. The journal was closed two years after Phạm Quỳnh left for a position at the imperial court in Huế in 1934. See Phạm Quỳnh (1924).

humane project that would benefit the Vietnamese people. Such thinking, as Mai puts it,

is but a kind of *học thuyết liếm gót* (bootlicking theory) disguised in Phạm Quỳnh's most

"treacherous manipulations" of discourse and knowledge (ibid.: 364). In a similar critical

tone, the Marxist historian Trần Văn Giàu denounces Phạm Quỳnh for his "conspiracy to

use culture as a means to lure [Vietnamese] youths away from politics and patriotism"

([1973] 2003: 1012).

Traveling through the urban fabric of Sài Gòn constantly invokes not only my

country's perpetual struggle against foreign invasions, but also the diverse political

trajectories taken by the Vietnamese themselves that more often than not would trigger

further antagonisms among the natives. Phạm Quỳnh is only one of the many examples

of historical figures who chose "the road not taken" by mainstream Marxist political

groups and endured exclusion from the work of collective memory. It is true that Phạm

Quỳnh's early writings published in his home playground, the *Nam Phong* journal,

clearly reflect his naïve embrace of colonialism, his contributions, mostly through

translations and critical essays, to the maturation of the Vietnamese language and the

shaping of new literary sensibilities in Vietnam are enormous.[3] It seems that culture as

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[3] Dương Quảng Hàm applauded Phạm Quỳnh's translations because they helped "render our [Vietnamese] language capable of expressing new ideas" ([1941] 1986: 419). Phạm Thế Ngũ considered Phạm Quỳnh a "teacher" of the novel genre for his pioneer work in translation and criticism (1965: 246). After 1975, Phạm Quỳnh was completely absent in the cultural and literary landscape. Vương Trí Nhàn, a well known literary critic, completed in 1992 an essay that revisits Phạm Quỳnh's legacy, only to publish it thirteen years later, in 2005, in the *Journal of Literary Studies*. A version of this essay was printed in his newest book, where the title was changed from "The role of intellectuals in the reception of Western cultures in Vietnam in the early twentieth century" to "Phạm Quỳnh and the reception of Western cultures in Vietnam in the early twentieth century"; see Vương Trí Nhàn (2009). Contrary to official Marxist accounts, Nhàn calls for a more open understanding of patriotism and argues that Phạm Quỳnh's

politics never holds sway in Vietnam and remains at the margin of the political field. During the course of this study, I have taken a number of trips home and revisited those corners of the city that remind me of the irreconcilable tension of the past. Each revisit, however, has sharpened my sense of a possible theoretical articulation beyond the divide of materialist and culturalist politics. Working on contemporary translation theories with a sheer indulgence towards cultural politics, I have always been concerned about how my new ideas can be articulated without a certain preconditioned prejudice that inhibits the field of articulation and proliferates biased denunciations.[4] Indeed, at the heart of this concern is articulability itself. What Phạm Quỳnh experienced in his times was a result of competing frames and models of thought available from outside sources. Revolutionary politics along the Marxist line or cultural politics along the collaborationist line are all imported products from Russia, China, Japan, France, and the United States. Phạm Quỳnh was sidelined in the colonial context probably because his cultural articulations were foreign to Vietnam's history of fighting invaders for thousands of years. During the Chinese colonial era, Vietnamese culture and politics were entirely subsumed in the Sino realm and thinking collaborationist in terms of culture was simply impossible. Expelling the invaders was reduced to sheer violent rebellions. It was the political and economic control of the foreign power, or merely its material presence in the homeland, that needed to be overthrown, and not its culture. This is probably why Marxism was readily adopted

patriotism is clearly articulated in his cultural theories, and thus deserves merits. See Vương Trí Nhàn (2005). Most recently, Trần Văn Toàn (2008) designates Phạm Quỳnh as "the most important figure" in opening the Vietnamese vision to Western literatures and generating new literary sensibilities.

[4] My attempt at introducing contemporary translation studies to Vietnam was realized last year in an article published in a major literary journal in Hà Nội; see Phạm Quốc Lộc and Lê Nguyên Long (2009). In the same issue of the journal, we also contributed our translation of an essay by Susan Bassnett, "Translating Genre" (2006).

and took roots in Vietnam during colonialism. Culture, therefore, has had a history of absence within the political field and articulating it anew as a political agenda, be it nationalist or collaborationist, would be deemed anomalous and ineffectual.

My concern here is not to bring Phạm Quỳnh back into sanctioned memory. It is about articulability itself. At any rate, Phạm Quỳnh's voice was silenced at a time when Marxist revolutionary politics was still a nascent project in the process of taking shape. What I am experiencing in contemporary Vietnam is wholly different where Marxist thinking has taken deep roots in all discourses, and cultural issues are simply alien in the political field. How can I then speak of contemporary translation theories with all their poststructuralist dispositions in such a context? Can I speak at all? What discourses are available for me to open up a space for articulability? It is here that translation comes to my mind as both a solution to my problem of articulability and a connection between culturalist and materialist positions. Translation, as I see it, destroys the very divisive terms that govern the debate between materialism and culturalism, since translation itself resides in the in-between of both realms of politics. It is neither entirely cultural nor entirely material. If articulability resides in the interstice of the historicity of the speakable and the Derridian splitting of that very historicity in its own reproduction, then I have to find within what is now excluded from the frame of speakability an enunciatory part that relates to that historicity. That is to say, if cultural politics can find in its own constitution an enunciation that repeats and reproduces the speakable, then it will have the prospect of speaking legitimately all the while insidiously pushing the limits of the established frame of speakability. The project of bringing translation studies in its intimate relationship with cultural studies to Vietnam must be then presented as a realm

between culturalism and materialism, an empowering position of hybridity between the speakable and the unspeakable.

The intersection between cultural and material realms in which translation figures as a mediator is best reflected in Bharati Mukherjee's short story "The Management of Grief" printed in her collection *The Middleman and Other Stories* (1988). The story is based on the 1985 terrorist bombing of an Air India jet carrying over three hundred passengers, most of whom were Canadian citizens of Indian birth. The aircraft, on route from Toronto to Bombay, exploded in midair while crossing Ireland and crashed into the Atlantic Ocean, becoming the worst mass killing in modern Canadian history. "The Management of Grief" revolves around the aftermath of the incident as experienced by the narrator, an Indian Canadian woman, Mrs. Bhave, whose husband and two sons were among the victims of the tragic flight. The opening of the story takes place in her home, now crowded with men and women from the Indo-Canada Society, many of whom she does not even know. They are busying themselves with minor chores around the house, including listening to the news for more information about the incident. They all try not to disturb the bereaved mother and wife with their presence, and their effort to reach out to her is always taken with care and prudence. The first few sentences of the story are brief, yet they do more than set up the mood and context of the story. Within the space of a few lines, Mukherjee subtly uncovers the condition of liminality and uncertainty endured by Indian immigrants, especially during the vulnerable times of grief and the rationally prescribed management of it.

> A woman I don't know is boiling tea the Indian way in my kitchen. There are a lot of women I don't know in my kitchen, whispering and moving tactfully. They

open doors, rummage through the pantry, and try not to ask me where things are kept. (1988: 179)

A sense of ethnic bonding is here mixed, paradoxically, with alienation. "Boiling tea in the Indian way" invokes identity while the uncertainty over the subject that does the boiling in the intimate place of the kitchen splits the identitarian bonding at the personal level. The kitchen, the familiar and intimate place of Indian women, is now occupied by busy "women I don't know," and the repetition of "my kitchen" within the space of two short sentences echoes almost as a cry reclaiming what is most personal and intimate of the grieving subject. The strangers come on grounds of ethnic identity to soothe the woman's grieving, and although grieving is cultural or even "furnishes a sense of political community of a complex order" as Judith Butler (2004: 22) argues, it is reflected here rather as a private space trespassed and impinged upon in the name of ethnic identity.

Butler's vision of a political community enlightened to a sense of fundamental dependency through our socially constituted and exposed bodies is enunciated from the perspective of the mourning subject who has the power to wage war and inflict violence upon others, namely the United States after 9/11. In her criticism of the U.S. post-9/11 aggressive policies, Butler calls for a deeper understanding of the task of mourning, and in so doing she has uprooted grief from the private realm and implanted it in the political. Grief in Butler's view is understood as containing "the possibility of apprehending a mode of dispossession that is fundamental to who I am" (ibid.: 28), and therefore, being mindful of it enlightens us to a necessary recognition of our bodies as fundamentally exposed and vulnerable to the touch of others. "Mindfulness of this vulnerability can

become the basis of claims for non-military political solutions, just as denial of this

vulnerability through a fantasy of mastery (an institutionalized fantasy of mastery) can

fuel the instruments of war" (ibid.: 29). The subject of grief in Butler's criticism is one

who has the power to act in retaliation, and in that light, Butler summons grief and

mourning back into self-recognition as a means to prevent violence. For an immigrant

subject, the grieving Indian Canadian mother and wife, however, mourning is deeply

privatizing, and even a prudent touch of ethnic bonding could be damaging. The bereaved

ethnic woman seems to be torn between the cultural appropriation of the personal and an

inner demand to fully experience the emotional dimension of grief. The first passage of

the story has introduced the first level of the tension in one's experience in times of

vulnerability and mourning, the tension between the cultural and personal.

As the story unfolds, Mrs. Bhave's experience of loss is caught at another level,

the tension between the cultural and the material, which is laid bare within the very next

passage of the story:

> Dr. Sharma, the treasurer of the Indo-Canada Society, pulls me into the hallway.
> He wants to know if I am worried about money. His wife, who has just come up
> from the basement with a tray of empty cups and glasses, scolds him. "Don't
> bother Mrs. Bhave with mundane details." (Mukherjee 1988: 179)

As a treasurer, Dr. Sharma's concern about Mrs. Bhave's financial condition is quite

reasonable, while as a woman who cares (or is supposed to care?) about the emotional

trauma that Mrs. Bhave is suffering, Mrs. Sharma condemns that question of money as

mundane and irrelevant in times of grief. Not to mention the gender divide along the line

of material and emotional concerns, there seems to be an irreconcilable tension between

material needs, or rather, the mentioning of needs, and emotional life. Later on in the

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story, we learn that this emotional dimension is impinged upon in many ways and transformed into a site of social and cultural determinations, especially when the Canadian government comes into play in an outreaching effort to heal, materially, the wounds suffered by the hundreds in the Indian community. First of all, medical attention is given to tame a possible outburst of emotion, and in this regard, Dr. Sharma, once again, appears to be on duty:

> The phone rings and rings. Dr. Sharma's taken charge. "We're with her," he keeps saying. "Yes, yes, the doctor has given calming pills. Yes, yes, pills are having necessary effect." I wonder if pills alone explain this calm. Not peace, just a deadening quiet. I was always controlled, but never repressed. Sound can reach me, but my body is tensed, ready to scream. I hear their voices all around me. I hear my boys and Vikram cry, "Mommy, Shaila!" and the screams insulate me, like headphones. (ibid.: 180)

Medical care seems to be given at the most superficial level. The personal emotion, the private struggle over the tragic loss, is occluded from the discursive network of grief management. Care is extended to her home, yet it hurts just as much as it heals. Dr. Sharma reports Mrs. Bhave's condition on the phone to someone unknown to her, and she does not even seem to care, for it would make no difference now that her physical condition and her private grief have been subsumed in the social and cultural network of care. Mrs. Bhave's "deadening quiet" is translated into a kind of "peace," the expected material effect of the calming pills. Controlled emotion is materialized into a bodily sign of calmness, which serves as a necessary condition for Mrs. Bhave to be picked out from among the bereaved to serve as mediator between the government and the affected community.

Judith Templeton, the appointee of the provincial government, comes to Mrs.

Bhave's house in a "multicultural" initiative to provide assistance to the afflicted

families. Her self-introduction is plaintively sincere, and her statement of the purpose of

her visit is full of confusion and anxiety, yet in a sense precise and direct:

> "I have no experience," she admits. "That is, I have an MSW and I've worked in liaison with accident victims, but I mean I have no experience with a tragedy of this scale –"
> "Who could?" I ask.
> "– and with the complications of culture, language, and customs. Someone mentioned that Mrs. Bhave is the pillar – because you've taken it more calmly."
> At this, perhaps, I frown, for she reaches forward, almost to take my hand. "I hope you understand my meaning, Mrs. Bhave. There are hundreds of people in Metro directly affected, like you, and some of them speak no English. There are some widows who've never handled money or gone on a bus, and there are old parents who still haven't eaten or gone outside their bedrooms. Some houses and apartments have been looted. Some wives are still hysterical. Some husbands are in shock and profound depression. We want to help, but our hands are tied in so many ways. We have to distribute money to some people, and there are legal documents – these things can be done. We have interpreters, but we don't always have the human touch, or maybe the right human touch. We don't want to make mistakes, Mrs. Bhave, and that's why we'd like to ask you to help us." (ibid.: 183)

The social worker makes it quite clear that the confusion of language, culture, and

customs poses a hindrance to distributive services, and Mrs. Bhave can help clear the

issue because of her calmness and acquaintance with the locals. Money comes with legal

documents that need to be signed by the beneficiaries, which Judith Templeton is well

aware could not be done with interpreting alone, but with the "the right human touch."

What is here conceived of as the right human touch is precisely translation in its fullest

linguistic, cultural, and psychological sense, and not merely interpreting. Interpreting

may help clear linguistic problems of the legal documents, but it alone cannot create a

cultural channel for distributive services to be intelligible within the culture and customs

of the receiving community. Distributive justice here figures as an original text

unfamiliar and unintelligible to the target language and culture, which thus requires a process of target-oriented translation whereby it is rendered comprehensible within the local framework. Templeton, however, seems to conceive of the task the other way round: To get people "who have never handled money or gone on a bus" to sign some legal documents, that is to bring the locals out of their cultural realm into the material realm she is bringing in. Government money, the material justice itself, is taken for granted as a value readily comprehensible and acceptable within the local cultural norms. In the end, Templeton fails in her effort to reach out despite Mrs. Bhave's liaison. An old couple refuses to sign the document because "it's a parent's duty to hope" for the return of the beloved whose death has never been confirmed in any ways. Signing the documents of justice means giving up this parental hope, and therefore is against their moral and customs. What is even more troubling is the fact that the couple is Sikhs, who Mrs. Bhave knows would not listen to a Hindu like her. The choice of a mediator by way of the material sign of calmness once again shows a complete insensitivity to cultural nuances and contentions. Judith Templeton is vexed by the locals' resistance to her services, and she complains somewhat angrily to Mrs. Bhave: "You see what I'm up against? … their stubbornness and ignorance are driving me crazy. They think signing a paper is signing their sons' death warrants, don't they?" (ibid.: 195). Templeton's initial awareness of the complex cultural issue and the need for "the right human touch" simply vanishes as she approaches the community, leaving in her mind only the material problematic. The problematic at hand is, I argue, the translation of distributive justice into

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local language and culture, a translation of the material into the cultural, if the material is to be accepted as justice.[5]

"The Management of Grief" is in many ways a story about the interface between the material and the cultural and a certain kind of untranslatability between the two realms. We have seen how Mrs. Bhave's personal grief is translated into a material sign of calmness, presenting her as a "pillar" among the bereaved. That translation hurts because her inner voice and feelings can never be heard and felt once unilaterally translated into the visible field of the material. In her role as a mediator, Mrs. Bhave witnesses a form of violent translation from the cultural into the material, which leaves her getting out of Templeton's car in the middle of their way home. The encounter between the two realms as represented in the story poses an agonistic relationship that cannot be mediated, it seems, once and for all. From the medical management of grief and the identification of dead bodies to distributive services, all material determinations

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[5] In some cases, the lack of this sort of cultural translation of justice constitutes a deprivation of justice itself, rather than merely a refusal to accept justice as in the case of the old couple in "The Management of Grief." In *The Sorrow and the Terror: The Haunting Legacy of the Air India Tragedy* (1987), Clark Blaise and Mukherjee records accounts of several parties involved in the tragedy, including the bereaved themselves. Mr. Swaminathan, a bereaved husband and father, sends his grievance to a law firm, contending that the legal differentiation of the death of an adult and the death of a child in determining compensation is against "the Indian way of life." According to him, a parent can be a dependent just as a child is. Bringing up a child means investing in the child's future and also the parent's future, a kind of contract implicated in Indian cultural and moral values and uniformly carried out in Indian society. Loss of a child, therefore, would impinge on the parent's future. More importantly, as Mr. Swaminathan points out, this "unique system of insurance," though unwritten, is honored in Indian courts. The Western category of "dependent," if untranslated, thus denies Indian parents of pecuniary compensation that they would otherwise be entitled to in their home country (Blaise and Mukherjee 1987: 101-03). This is a point I wholehearted identify with, because just as in India, the Vietnamese elderly are not taken care of by the social network of nursing homes and social security benefits, but they live within the embracement and care of their children.

at one point or another impinge upon the delicate cultural fabric of the ethnic community. Bharati Mukherjee seems to hint at a missing process of translation whereby the material is re-materialized in a cross-cultural context. Judith Butler has made clear that for materiality to be conceived as such, it must go through a process of materialization "which takes place (or fails to take place) through certain highly regulatory practices" (1993: 1). Distributive justice as posed in "The Management of Grief" has been solidly materialized, yet its materialization is governed by norms and institutions that are culturally and politically bound and thus fail beyond their boundaries. The task of translation here involves more than the linguistic interpreting of legal documents or the use of local mediators as an extra force, but the necessary transforming of those documents and the money itself into the culture of the beneficiaries. Using calmness, the material effect of calming pills as the first premise for her outreaching effort, Judith Templeton shows throughout her approach to the Indian Canadian community another faulty premise that takes untranslated material justice as the foundation of multiculturalism. Her commitment that "we don't want to make mistakes" becomes ironic, and Mrs. Bhave's response, "more mistakes, you mean," implicates more than a bitter reference to the faulty police procedures that led to the catastrophic bombing. Interpreters and local mediators are provided, yet the Indian community is denied of the very work of translation in the operation of justice. This non-translation is probably implicated in the larger political context of this "houseless" tragedy, as Mukherjee calls it. It is houseless because neither the Indian nor the Canadian government, despite their grief, named the bombing as its own tragedy. Instead, the two governments cross-referred to it as "their," rather than "our" tragedy (Blaise and Mukherjee 1987: 174).

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The interface between the cultural and material realms appears to be a troubling one, especially if no adequate translation is done. It is hard, however, to determine once and for all the definite configurations of what constitutes adequate translation, with a fixed set of strategies and techniques that applies in every context, and this returns us to my notion of the singularity and contingency of translation that I elaborated earlier. But at a more macro level, we can at least talk of justice here as a balanced flow of translation between the two realms. Bharati Mukherjee's "The Management of Grief" has shown us that the hegemonic translation of the cultural into the material and the lack of re-materialization may constitute a form of injustice in the very process of justice. Materiality is not a universal and a priori category that transcends cultural specificities. They are invariably imbricated within frames that vary in size and shape across cultures. Re-materialization, or the translation of the material into the cultural, points at the necessary reworking of the material so as it can be accepted beyond its original context of materialization. Positing a translation of the material into cultural, however, does not presuppose a distinction between the material and the cultural as ontologically separate spheres of life. In her essay "Merely Cultural" (1997a), Judith Butler has convincingly shown that material life is inextricably linked to cultural life, and the separation of the two reflects a certain amnesia of the works of Marx himself. It is precisely because of its grounding in cultural relations that the material can be re-materialized or translated into another fabric of cultural relations.

This process of translation, I argue, must be part and parcel of any project of justice, especially when the notion of justice has undergone tremendous diversifications in the contemporary globalizing world. In her most recent book, *Scales of Justice:*

Reimagining Political Space in a Globalizing World (2009), Nancy Fraser revises her

dual model of economic redistribution and cultural recognition that she developed some

ten years earlier in *Justice Interruptus* (1997). Accordingly, the new model not only

includes economic and cultural aspects of justice, but also recognizes *representation* as

an important dimension of justice in a world where economic, cultural, political processes

no longer work in a Keynesian-Westphalian frame. In Fraser's view, both the substance

and the framing of justice have transformed radically. In terms of substance, there has

been a radical heterogeneity of justice discourse, in which claims of justice are no longer

exclusively concerned with socioeconomic redistribution. There have arisen new

demands for cultural recognition from marginalized ethnic groups and homosexuals as

well as feminist claims for gender justice. Fraser solves the problematic of substance in

the condition of diverse justice idioms by proposing a dual model that recognizes both

socioeconomic and cultural claims as legitimate claims of justice. Although her tone in

Justice Interruptus seems to lean towards reclaiming the prominence of redistribution,

and with it the discipline of Marxist political economy itself, in the face of the rising

cultural politics, Fraser emphasizes times and again that these components of justice are

irreducible to one another (Fraser 1997a; Fraser and Honneth 2003). In *Scales of Justice*,

Fraser acknowledges that her dual model is inadequate in accounting for the increasingly

deterritorialized operations of justice. Instances of injustice in the contemporary world of

economic and ecological interdependence can hardly be handled within the borders of the

nation-state, what Fraser refers to as the Westphalian frame. In this light, she suggests

reframing the subjects of justice by introducing a third dimension, *representation*. While

redistribution and recognition addresses the substance, the "what" of justice,

representation deals with the subjects, the "who" of justice. According to Fraser, the notion of representation pertains to the political dimension of justice, apart from the economic and the cultural dimensions, and serves two purposes. First, it sheds further light on internal injustice, that is injustice within bounded political communities such as the nation state, in which subjects already counted as legitimate members are deprived of parity of participation as peers in social interaction. This impairment of participation is not caused by an economic structure that effects maldistribution or by a cultural order that casts certain subjects, such as gay and lesbians, as abjects, thus effecting misrecognition. Rather, it is rooted in the political constitution of society itself, and therefore the two-dimensional model of redistribution and recognition fails to account for instances of this "ordinary-political injustice."

The second purpose of the notion of representation is to account for the "who" outside of the Westphalian frame of the territorial state. In the post-Cold War era, with the rise of transnational economic and cultural forces, the subjects of justice can no longer be assumed to be the national citizenry. Globalization has rendered the life of citizens exposed and vulnerable to social and economic processes beyond their own national borders. A decision in one territorial state can impact millions of lives outside of its immediate borders. For example, a recent approval by the Chinese government of the construction of a nuclear power plant some sixty kilometers from the northern border of Vietnam has sparked both diplomatic tension and public concern in Vietnam. According to some estimates, radiation can reach Hanoi within ten hours following a breakdown of the plant. A Vietnamese official contends that "China has to follow international safety

regulations, not act on its own."[6] While the scenario of a nuclear leak is still a matter of probability, life in the reality of a globalized world is impinged upon on a daily basis by the operations of multinational corporations, supranational financial investors, international organizations, and so on. The language of justice, therefore, can no longer be couched in the once self-evident framework of the territorial state. Fraser calls the injustice pertaining to this question of the "who" beyond the boundaries of political communities *misframing*. In light of these two functions of the notion of representation related to injustices of ordinary-political misrepresentation and misframing, Fraser has enlarged her theory of justice to include what she calls the political dimension, which she makes clear to be always inherent in claims of redistribution and recognition. In this three-dimensional model, practices of maldistribution and misrecognition constitute the first-order injustices while misframing belongs to a meta-level of injustices.

The most interesting moment in Fraser's theory is when she tackles the politics of framing as a meta-level of justice, which she defines as comprising "efforts to establish and consolidate, to contest and revise, the authoritative divisions of the political space" as it pertains the determination of the subjects of justice as well as the frame of that determination itself (2009: 22). On this account of the politics of framing, Fraser proposes two forms in which social movements seek to redress the injustice of misframing, the affirmative claims and the transformative claims. "The affirmative politics of framing," Fraser tells us, "contests the boundaries of existing frames while accepting the Westphalian grammar of frame-setting" (ibid.). In other words, this politics

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[6] Quang Duan, Kap Long, and Moc Lan, "Vietnam braces for Chinese nuclear plant," *Thanh Nien News.com*, July 23, 2010, http://www.thanhniennews.com/2010/Pages/20100723145515.aspx.

aims to redraw the boundaries of who count as subjects of justice without overthrowing the nation-state as a basic category in which to pose and resolve problems of framing injustices. On the contrary, transformative movements seek to destroy the state-territorial principle itself on grounds that "forces that perpetrate injustice belong not to," and Fraser borrows Manuel Castells' terminology, "'the space of places,' but to the 'space of flows.'" (ibid.: 23). In this way, transformative politics directly questions the process of frame-setting itself, and thus renders it more dialogical and democratic. With the opening of frame-setting to contention and negotiation through transformative movements, Fraser surmises that "what could once be called the 'theory of social justice' now appears as the 'theory of democratic justice'" (ibid.: 28).

In what follows, I would like to connect Fraser's theory of justice to the problematic of translation, which I see as constitutive of both levels of justice, the first-order justice of redistribution and recognition and the meta-level of the politics of framing. The role of translation in the first-order justice has been made somewhat clear in my analysis of Bharati Mukherjee's "The Management of Grief." I have highlighted the translation of the material into the cultural as an indispensable component of justice, especially when the operation of justice has to tread on the borders between cultures. In a sense, the story also poses the problem of ordinary-political injustices where the parity of participation in social life of the legitimate subjects of justice within the same political community is impaired through non-translation. In the case of "The Management of Grief," the Indian Canadian relatives of the victims, under the coverage of the so-called multiculturalism, are construed as legitimate subjects of justice within the borders of Canada. Yet far from being homogenous, the multilingual and multicultural territorial

state is invariably split between mainstream and ethnic cultures, and translation thus

plays a key role in providing the condition for the flow of justice across ethnic

differences. Translation constitutes the very means whereby ethnic subjects of justice

speak and are spoken to. In this way, the political dimension of justice, which is

representation in Fraser's model, intertwines with the problematic of translation.

Withheld translation is itself the injustice of misrepresentation. James Boyd White has

brilliantly said "translation is an art of recognition and response, both to another person

and to another language" (1990: 230). Because of the impossibility of perfect translation,

translation itself figures as an embodiment of ethical attitudes towards others.

Recognition here is not just the recognition of the existence of the other, but must

necessarily turns back to a recognition of the self in its inadequacy. White maintains that

"to translate at all thus requires that one learn the language of another, recognize the

inadequacy of one's own language to that reality, yet make a text, nonetheless, in

response to it" (ibid.: 252). In composing the "material" text in response to the loss of the

Indian community, Judith Templeton forgets to "learn the language" of her targeted

subjects and recognize the inadequacy of her own materialistic language.

There is no lack of translation in "The Management of Grief," since "we have

interpreters," as Judith Templeton confirms. What is needed is "the right human touch,"

and it is unfortunate that instead of an ethical recognition of the limited self and an ethical

response to the other, the human touch is only configured as the use of mediation

(through Mrs. Bhave) to pave the way for the assertion of the self. Non-translation as

injustice here can only be perceived at the level of the cultural frameworks in which

justice is done, since it is covered up at the linguistic level with the provision of

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translators and at the material level with mediation. Although "the right human touch" is

not fully realized in "The Management of Grief," it does complicate the problematic of

translation beyond the sheer provision of translators/interpreters and local mediation.

When material justice is taken at face value and even universalized as readily accepted in

all cultures, the cultural translation of the material itself is often ignored and repressed.

Indeed, there is a tendency to posit materiality as a pre-cultural foundation, and material

relations become the rationale behind anything cultural. The category of sex in the

Beauvoirean sense, for example, reflects one such recourse to the materiality of the body

as the pre-cultural foundation of gender, and Judith Butler has reminded us time and

again that materiality is invariably bounded with the cultural in such a way that the

distinction between sex and gender is but a grammatical fiction. In social life, the

distribution of material resources seems to underpin cultural activities. Michael Cronin

points out that "awareness of the primacy of communicative competence as a means of

economic integration and social survival is the rationale behind the organization of

language classes for immigrants and the stress on the acquisition of the dominant

language as the key to successful integration," leading to the condition of what he calls

translational assimilation (2006: 52). The material is often taken for granted as

transcendent of cultural particularities and does not require translation. "Translational

accommodation," to use Cronin's terminology again, from the vantage point of the

dominant culture, is yet to be accomplished, as seen in "The Management of Grief."

What emerges from my discussion of justice above is a perceptible relation of

translation between the different components of justice within the same territorial state.

Outside of the territorial state, translation figures even more prominently as an

underpinning force that relates the cultural and the material spheres of justice. Eric Cheyfitz has brilliantly shown how the translation of Native American land into the European concepts such as *property*, *possession*, *ownership*, *title* serves as the "prime mode of expropriation that the colonists used in their 'legal' dealings with the Indians" (1997: 48). With the conviction that "from its beginnings the imperialist mission is, in short, one of translation: the translation of the "other" into the terms of empire" (ibid.: 112), Cheyfitz exposes the process of dispossession whereby "Native American land was *translated* (the term is used in English common law to refer to transfers of real estate) into the European identity of *property*" (ibid.: 43; emphasis in the original). Here Cheyfitz explores social and cultural disparities between the European and Native American conceptions of land and place and the colonizer's manipulation of the material through cultural translation, or to be more exact, the programmed occlusion of a balanced cultural translation in which the terms of the "other" are honored. The violent hegemonic translation of the Native American land into the European terms of property corresponds here to the injustice of misrecognition. This misrecognition comprises in the colonizer's refusal to recognize the Native American terms and conceptions of their land, which paves the way for the translation of those terms into European ones, invigorating the imperialist material appropriation. Thus, just as in the case of the Indian Canadians in "The Management of Grief," the native cultural terms are completely translated into the material. There is of course a difference in the two cases: the Indian Canadians are meant to be receiving material justice, whereas the Native Americans are dispossessed of their land.

The exploitative translation of indigenous cultural values into the material realm

of the colonizer is abundant in the history of colonialism and imperialism. History has

shown that imperialist translation does not just take place in the colonizer's "legal"

dealings with the natives. It pervades all aspects of native life and irremediably

transforms the native environment and traditions. The destruction of the bison in the late

nineteenth century is an example of the imperialist translation from the cultural to the

material. Although it is true that the bison population provides a vital source of food for

Native Americans, in the native consciousness and cultures the roaming bison herds do

not just represent a material resource for human exploitation. The human-bison

relationship in the native memory extends back to creation itself (Zontek 2007), and the

hunting of this animal is not merely an act of killing and consuming, since the people

perceive the animal not as inhabiting an objectified material world, but as cohabiting with

themselves within the same realm. Writings in different genres such as John Neihardt's

Black Elk Speaks (1932), James Welch's *Fools Crow* (1986), and Mary Brave Bird's

Lakota Woman (1990) have all revealed to us what American imperialists of the

nineteenth century either refused to see or reluctantly saw with a desire to totally destroy

the other: the native hunting of the bison is a deep-rooted tradition of Native American

cultures that not only reflects a native means of subsistence but also embodies a whole

way of life with deep cultural nuances. In *Black Elk Speaks*, for example, we see how

hunting was performed as an initiation into manhood for Black Elk and Standing Bear,

and also as an activity embedded in the network of interpersonal relationships organic in

the structure of native societies. In the mind of the Euro-American hunters, however,

bison were merely objectifiable animals that provided them with basic material for

consumption. The American government itself advocated slaughtering the bison

population through legal and military means. Directives such as "Kill every buffalo you

can. Every buffalo dead is an Indian gone" (cited in Zontek 2007: 25) would not invoke

any feelings of abhorrence among the majority of Euro-Americans, and instead, it was

received as the natural progress of history. Cultural misrecognition, configured as the

wholesale translation of the cultural into the material as I have elaborated thus far,

underpins the material destruction of the indigenous livable worlds and the disintegration

of their cultures. To probe into the problematic of justice in relation to translation,

therefore, necessarily means to instigate the reverse flow of cultural translation that has

been historically repressed. The problem has been provoked powerfully by Cheyfitz in

The Poetics of Imperialism, and his question continues to invite inquiry: "Can one

translate the idea of place as *property* into an idea of place the terms of which the West

has never granted legitimacy?" (Cheyfitz 1991: 58; italics in the original).[7]

    In my discussion of the relationship between the two dimensions of justice above,

I have treated the material as encompassing economic relations. A close reading of

Fraser's redistribution/recognition framework, however, reveals that the economic and

the material do not inhabit the same sphere, and Fraser herself has made clear the

necessary distinction between the economic and the material in her debate with Judith

Butler (Fraser 1997a; see also Butler 1997a). Nevertheless, the way Fraser situates her

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    [7] Another profound example of this imperialist translation can be found in
Clayton W. Dumont Jr.'s book *The Promise of Poststructuralist Sociology: Marginalized
Peoples and the Problem of Knowledge* (2008). In a chapter on the Native American
Graves Protection and Repatriation Act of 1990, Dumont offers a deeply engaged
account of the struggle against the holding of the remains of deceased Native Americans
by museums and universities for "scientific data" (Dumont 2008: 108-48).

theory within what she refers to as the postsocialist scenario gives the impression that the notion of economic redistribution, in contrast to the increasingly prominent politics of cultural recognition, is synonymous to the material. Both Axel Honneth (Fraser and Honneth 2003) and Butler (1997a) tend to understand the economic in Fraser's theory in this way. Fraser herself would not object to the fact that injustices of misrecognition could be just as material as injustices of maldistribution. What I have discussed thus far illuminates precisely this overflow between the material and the cultural without touching upon the economic. In regard to economic relations, a significant body of research in translation studies has been focused on the role of translation in the (re)organization of economic structures and the negotiation of economic power and interests. As the structuring of economies changes from a local scale to regional and international scales, the manners in which translation is done and perceived and the way it functions in society also fundamentally alter. In this respect, Michael Cronin's *Translation and Globalization* (2003) offers an exciting account of how the transformed economic factors, including the use of new information technologies, new networks of communication, the global organization and management of capital, labor, raw materials, information, markets, and so on, have had a fundamental impact on the practice and theorization of translation. Although many of Cronin's claims about the changed nature of translation in the age of globalization are too general and tend to apply in any case of cultural production, thus failing to account for the specific impacts of globalization on translation, they provoke more thinking and unsettle any stubborn clinging to traditional ways of thinking about translation.

But translation is not just a passive activity perpetually influenced by globalization. Translation appears as an active force underpinning economic operations. In this sense, translation has been proven by scholars as an agent in the establishment of economic relations and transactions, or even in the mediation of economic orders. *Translating Slavery: Gender and Race in French Women's Writing, 1783-1823* (1994), a volume edited by Doris Y. Kadish and Françoise Massardier-Kenney, explores translation as an ideologically driven process with norms and strategies that are fluid enough to articulate political agendas that either efface or reinforce the abolitionist cause embedded some French women's writing. The book, however, is a little disappointing in the sense that the authors, while dealing with writings that speak to the economic and political order of their times, often draw conclusions that are limited to emphasizing translation as a process of ideology. It seems that Kadish and Massardier-Kenny refrain from making claims about the effects of translation on the economic and political order of slavery that the writers and translators under discussion engage so vehemently in their works. By abandoning the themes of slavery and returning to translation studies in its conclusions, the volume has in a way failed its own title, which appears to promise too much.

The reluctance to delve into issues beyond translation studies itself that we see in *Translating Slavery* could be attributed to the nascent phase of the cultural turn in the field in the early 1990s when the book was published. At the time, ideological aspects of translation were not yet a prominent object of study, and research was still confined in the methods of contrastive linguistic studies, and hence the authors' emphasis on the ideological underpinnings of translation. As the cultural turn has taken deep roots in

translation studies and has swept across the humanities in general, there emerges a body of research that makes resolute claims about the role of translation in constructing economic, cultural, political order. Sabine Fenton and Paul Moon, in their essay "The Translation of the Treaty of Waitangi: A Case of Disempowerment," have forthrightly stated that "although the treaty had seemingly brought together two distinct cultural groups in an act of enlightened respect for and trust of each other, ironically, the translation to a large extent has managed to destroy both and has become the cause of much confusion and bitterness" (2002: 25). For these authors, translation plays a primary role in the "imposition and reproduction of power structures" that obliterate the sovereignty of a nation and annex it to the British Crown. Interestingly enough, Fenton and Moon show how translation functions in the case of the Waitangi Treaty as a secret code to override English humanitarianism, which was at its height in British politics in the nineteenth century. The abolition of slave trade, the establishment of numerous political and religious groups such as the Church Missionary Society, the Aborigines Protection Society, and the Society for the Civilisation of Africa were in part the direct result of humanitarian aspirations. Fenton and Moon also point out that "the new humanitarian imperative found its highest expression in the establishment of the 1837 House of Commons Select Committee on Aborigines to consider the best ways of improving the conditions of the natives in the colonies of the British Empire" (ibid.: 28). In a sense, humanitarianism inspired a revision of the frame of justice, and natives became legitimate subjects to enjoy Empire's distributive justices.

Within this new framework of heightened humanitarian sentiments, Captain William Hobson, assigned by the British government to negotiate with the Maori the

transfer of their sovereignty to the British Crown, found himself in the middle of a contradiction. On the one hand, he must achieve the transfer of sovereignty, and on the other hand, all transactions were to be, as instructed by the Colonial Secretary Lord Normanby, "conducted on the principles of sincerity, justice, and good faith" (cited in Fenton and Moon 2002: 29). As if magic, the translation of the treaty from English to Maori language, done by Anglican missionary Henry Williams, helped achieve the double task, of course not without hindsight. Fenton and Moon observe that "the convoluted and technical English text is recast in simple Maori, with glaring omissions. Certain crucial terms were not translated into the closest natural Maori equivalents" (ibid.: 33). They conclude that "Williams was a product of his time, his religion, and the prevailing ideology. His translation reflected all three" (ibid.: 41). I read the translation and signing of the Treaty of Waitangi as a complication of the injustice of misframing in Fraser's new model. New humanitarian sentiments permeate politics and unsettle the framing of justice within colonial rule, effecting a discursive inclusion of colonized subjects as legitimate subjects of justice. Yet the reframing here is not obtained in actuality due to a certain way of translation. Empire expands its border to account for new subjects of justice, and simultaneously, it surreptitiously withholds justice through translation. Just as in the case of redistribution and recognition, where translation must be called upon to mediate between the material and cultural spheres, I suggest that in the framing dimension of justice, with its necessary extension beyond the border of the nation-state, translation also plays a primary role, and that without insight into the insidious working of translation, justice could hardly be achieved.

CHAPTER 2

VIETNAM IN TRANSLATION AND TRANSLATION IN VIETNAM: FROM PREMODERN CONFUSION TO COLONIAL AMBIVALENCE

2.1 Homi Bhabha and Colonial Ambivalence

In *The Location of Culture* (1994), Homi Bhabha has shown us with insistent rigor the fundamental ambivalence that constitutes colonial power. For Bhabha, the presence of colonial authority, signified through the book of God translated into the native tongue and read by native men, women, and children in the indigenous context of India, is invariably an *Entstellung*, "a process of displacement, distortion, dislocation, repetition" ([1985] 1994: 149). Such an institution of power, Bhabha tells us, does not rely on a universal symbol of English identity, but necessarily undergoes a process of cultural translation that produces Englishness as a sign of difference. Consisting in this scene of colonial articulation is a movement from the symbol to the sign, from the universal to the particular as the symbol participates in local enunciations. English identity is split within itself, disrupting itself through translation for its readability and intelligibility in the colonial context. Yet, such a scene of translation is not entirely visible, as it is concealed under a transparency of reference, a kind of *technē* that registers a certain originality and authority. In the context of colonial India, the Bible translated into whatever tongues and taught by individuals of whatever nationality is still perceived as an English book. Translation is covered up, erased, and rendered invisible and inaudible underneath this field of constructed visibility in which colonial presence emerges as immediate – unmediated – truth. In Bhabha's view, such is the structure of

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colonial discourse, the fundamental mechanism of the representation of colonial power. It

is a structure, a mechanism that represses that which it relies on – translation. However,

the repressed process of translation does not vanish entirely, but keeps returning and

haunting the very structure that relies on its absence, and thus creating discursive

instabilities and inner dissonance within colonialism's utterances. Employing and

disavowing translation at the same time as a necessary condition for its presence, colonial

power is perpetually split and ambivalent and is caught in a situation that Bhabha notes

time and again to be agonistic rather than antagonistic. Cultural translation, as a

constitutive process in colonial presence, a strategy of colonial subjugation that involves

both repetition and displacement, creates a slippage between the Western sign and its

colonial signification. It is within this slippage created by the colonial condition of

translation that makes resistance possible, and here resistance takes the form of mimicry

and hybridity. In this light, translation is exposed as a double-edged strategy: it

undermines the very program of domination that it participates in inaugurating. An

economy of representation, a strategy of subjugation slips into its own disfigurement and

destruction. In Bhabha's formulation, resistance is no longer configured as a capacity or

an agency on the part of the colonized, but an *effect* of the ambivalence of colonial

presence. Bhabha writes:

> In the doubly inscribed space of colonial representation where the presence of
> authority – the English book – is also a question of its repetition and
> displacement, where transparency is *technē*, the immediate visibility of such a
> regime of recognition is resisted. Resistance is not necessarily an oppositional act
> of political intention, nor is it the simple negation or exclusion of the 'content' of
> another culture, as a difference once perceived. It is the effect of an ambivalence
> produced within the rules of recognition of dominating discourses as they
> articulate the signs of cultural difference and reimplicate them within the
> deferential relations of colonial power – hierarchy, normalization, marginalization
> and so forth. ([1985] 1994: 157-58)

The voice of colonial power perceived as such generates within itself what Benita

Parry, in her book *Postcolonial Studies: A Materialist Critique*, calls "an auto-critique

that disables colonialism's will to power" (2004: 61). Resistance conceptualized within

the a priori condition of cultural translation, as Parry points out, is defused and removed

from the lived actualities of the colonized whose resistance invokes insurgent practices

"directed at undermining and defeating an oppressive opponent – practice which also

effected experiential transformation in the colonized" (ibid.: 66). Unsurprisingly, Parry

mounts a Marxist attack on Bhabha's notions of hybridity and translation with which he

defines the field of anticolonial resistance as textual performance derived from the

invariably doubled inscription of empire. While the debate between the Marxist tradition

focusing on the economic and social dynamic of power relations and the poststructuralist

position trumpeting discourse and representation as the core analytical categories is

worthy of reconciling efforts (see Chapter 1), what concerns me here is that Bhabha's

conceptualization of resistance as an *effect* of discursive ambivalence is inadequate, not

just from the Marxist perspective, but because it is based on a rather monolithic concept

of translation. In what follows, I attempt to show that cultural translation does not simply

represent an a priori condition compelling the colonizer to undertake hybridity,

ambivalence, and thus instability, in its enunciation of power. Power and resistance to

power, as will be shown, are not totally implicated in the aporia as if without agency and

subjective calculation, without choices and manipulations, especially when translation

comes into play as the background to power relations. If it is true that cultural translation

pervades the colonial scene, then it is inadequate to take translation superficially as

hybridity and ambivalence. Contemporary translation studies has shown that translation

carries not only meanings, but also identities and cultural nuances. More importantly, it is a process infused with ideological manipulations and negotiations. To conceptualize colonialism as a site of cultural translation, therefore, necessitates an examination of this process whereby the different actors of colonialism play their parts, reflecting, deflecting, and contesting one another.

If it is true that colonial authority invariably undergoes the ambivalence of the totalizing condition of cultural translation, the terms of this ambivalence are not entirely independent of the colonizer's will and manipulative power. In many ways, the colonizer defines the terms of its own ambivalence. Such a definition is possible because first of all no culture is homogeneous and presents one single option of a fixed target into which the colonizer translates itself. If the heterogeneity inherent in culture renders any translation a metonymic act that involves differing and privileging certain parts for the representation of the whole as Maria Tymoczko has stipulated in *Translation in a Postcolonial Context* (1999: 41-61), there always exists a spectrum of metonymies susceptible to ideological selection. Here, the concept of hybridity construed as a realm of the "foreign element that reveals the interstitial," "the unstable element of linkage," or "the indeterminate temporality of the in-between" that Bhabha espouses (1994: 326), obscures the spectrum of choices offered by the relation, symmetrical or asymmetrical, between the cultures in contact. In his essay "The Disciplines in Colonial Bengal," Partha Chatterjee has asked, "How are we to distinguish between hybrid and hybrid?", suggesting that a loosely defined notion of hybridity paradoxically imposes "a quality of sameness upon all products of dissemination" despite its "plea for acknowledging variableness and contingency" (1995: 20). In line with Chatterjee's demand for more nuances in the

conception of hybridity, I suggest that hybridity, configured through translation,

represents a spectrum of choices, strategies, and manipulations, rather than an elusive

measure of indeterminacy, a defying interstitial condition that cannot be resisted or

controlled. The sign of colonial authority is hybridized as it is situated in enunciating

contexts foreign to its original signification, thus invoking cultural translation. Yet, in this

process of translation, the colonizer is presented with an array of questions regarding the

form, the shape, and even the content of its eventual hybridity, questions that colonialism

responds to with varying degrees of aggressiveness and with multiple institutions and

policies.

Another question that is evaded in Bhabha's conception of colonial ambivalence

and the related issue of cultural translation is the ambivalence of the colonized itself.

There is a paradox in contemporary postcolonial studies. Part of postcolonial criticism is

about deconstructing the representation of colonized cultures as static and homogenous

entities and the totalizing Othering in the Western imagination of other cultures.

However, postcolonial theorization, in its exclusive focus on the colonizer, forgets the

fact that many theoretical categories developed from the critiques of colonial power can

be further complicated if placed in the perspective of the colonized. Hybridity and

ambivalence as intricately enunciated in Bhabha's theories are examples of such

categories. In this chapter, I argue that hybridity and ambivalence are not only a priori

conditions divested of all subjective calculations and manipulations on the part of the

colonizer, but also the very mechanism whereby the colonized deals with their hybrid and

ambivalent oppressor. If cultural translation yields hybridity and ambivalence, I suggest

that the very meaning of translation, as the cultural studies approach to translation has

adequately shown us, should be understood as invariably bound up with political strategizing. To use cultural translation as a notion in the constitution and presentation of colonial power should entail an understanding of colonialism as involving strategizing and manipulation, rather than as mere a priori hybridity and ambivalence. On top of that, cultural translation should be historicized not at the point of contact between Western colonial powers and the rest of the world, but prior to that point, at the various historical moments when cultural translation had always taken place among those "other" cultures before they were exposed to the West. Such a way of historicizing shows that cultural translation cannot be just an *effect* in the colonial contact zone. Rather, it is an active process in which both the colonizer and the colonized are actively involved and negotiate their differing objectives of domination and resistance. The concept of translation itself does not allow us to think of the colonial space as a vacuum void of subjectivity and agency.

In what follows, I examine the Vietnamese history of hybridity and ambivalence prior to the arrival of the French and argue that cultural translation has always been the Vietnamese way of survival and resistance. As the French came to the Vietnamese land in the nineteenth century, they encountered a linguistic and cultural realm that had been translated and translating itself through different means and mechanisms for thousands of years. In such a context, ambivalence emerges as a background upon which colonial relations of power are played out in very complex ways. Domination and resistance in the matrix of cultural translation involve calculated negotiations of identities and subjectivities. In "The Hybrid Birth of Vietnam," I look at the mythical genesis narrative of the birth of the Vietnamese people and nation as an indication of the Vietnamese

power to absorb foreign elements in the construction of their national identity. The pride that the Vietnamese take in this narrative is indicative of the degree to which, as William Duiker puts it, "the Vietnamese gave precedence to national survival over cultural purity" (1976: 287). The next two sections, "The Confucian Confusion" and "The Linguistic Confusion," explore in greater depth the cultural and linguistic hybridity and ambivalence in the Vietnamese experience of themselves and of their foreign others who came into contact with them. Here I borrow the Derridian notion of post-Babel confusion to denote a kind of linguistic and cultural heterogeneity underneath the unified surface of language and culture. These sections mainly use secondary materials to delineate the several analytical models and paradigms that have been used in historical research, and ultimately, to show a certain measure of confusion among the researchers themselves regarding the Vietnamese linguistic and cultural identities. Some secondary materials, however, can serve as primary sources, especially works by Vietnamese scholars during French colonialism on the Vietnamese history of Confucianism. The way these authors wrote about Confucianism amid modern Western colonialism reveals a great deal about the Vietnamese intellectuals' experience of colonialism. Together, the two sections lay out a background of linguistic and cultural ambivalence in the Vietnamese identities upon which the process of cultural translation takes place in the form of localization and appropriation.

The next section, "*Diễn nôm* and Premodern Translingualism in Vietnam," can be seen as a follow-up section that uses more primary materials to explore some of the ways in which the Vietnamese forged their identities through cultural translation during their contact with the Chinese language and culture. The concept of translingualism itself

appears at times in this section as an ambivalent category, as the Sino-Vietnamese

relation can hardly be categorized as a home-foreign relation. The ambivalent position of

the Chinese language and culture in Vietnam indicates a certain degree of fluidity that

characterizes the Vietnamese way of survival. Also comes to the fore in this section is the

multifaceted translation between home and foreign cultural materials. *Diễn nôm* as an act

of radical domesticating translation popular in premodern Vietnam has a lot to offer to

translation studies. *Diễn nôm* is examined here as a kind of translation that serves diverse

purposes, from personal agendas to nationalist causes. Through this kind of translation,

the Vietnamese literati of the medieval times created new sensibilities and expressions

and forged new identities beyond the realm of Confucianism. *Diễn nôm*, I suggest,

represents the pinnacle of the Vietnamese power of translation, an invisible force that

faced the French and rendered futile French military and economic superiority.

The last section, "Cultural Translation: Redefining Ambivalence and Hybridity,"

returns in practical ways to the theoretical discussion in the first section while showing

the continuing relevance of *diễn nôm* in the modern times. Here, I look at the different

actors of power within the colonial context of Vietnam and show how such a context

cannot be simplistically conceptualized as the colonizer versus the colonized or the

colonist versus the native. I discuss in this section how the French carried out their

colonial projects in Vietnam within the larger context of global colonialism in the

eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The debate on assimilation and association in Paris

played a part in what the successive French governors in Indochina did. Yet, French

colonialism in Vietnam was not determined by the philosophical discourses in the

metropole as much as by the Vietnamese themselves. As the French colonists engaged

the native in their projects, their aims and objectives were soon deflected and even disfigured by an array of personal dispositions, perspectives, agendas, and ideologies, forcing the colonizer to constantly navigate and negotiate their projects within a dynamic of power relations, of its own ambivalence and hybridity.

2.2 The Hybrid Birth of Vietnam

The early history of Vietnam is a matter of uncertainty, first of all because of the scanty material sources that remain today. Despite recent archeological work, the history of pre-Chinese Vietnam is immersed in mythological narratives. The Chinese occupation in 111 B.C of the northern part of present-day Vietnam started a period of history that is somewhat more accessible thanks to a body of Chinese historical texts that survive up to this day. However, a new kind of uncertainty surrounds research on this period of recorded history. Talking about the eleven centuries of Chinese domination, it seems, will eventually boil down to the uncertainty regarding the question of whether this belongs to Vietnamese history or Chinese history. In such a context of historiographical confusion, Keith Taylor's *The Birth of Vietnam* (1983) presents an impressive and ambitious attempt to narrate Vietnam's past from the pre-Chinese Đông Sơn civilization to the tenth century. For some scholars, the title of the book vis-à-vis the period covered is misleading. Trương Bửu Lâm, for example, points out in his review of the book that the presumed birth in Taylor's account "occurs when the infant is already twelve hundred years old" (1984: 834). Lâm is probably referring here to the popular belief in the "four-thousand-year-old civilization of Vietnam," which bears very little cultural and material evidence. Also reviewing Taylor's book, Hue-tam Ho Tai reminds us that "the name 'Vietnam' did not come into use until the nineteenth century. Thus, the Vietnam of the

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title refers only to the territory occupied by the ancestors of present-day Vietnamese; at the time of independence [from Chinese rule], it covered barely more than the Red River Delta" (1984: 359-60). The title of Taylor's book, therefore, seems misleading on both accounts, the birth as well as the name Vietnam itself. However, the title, as I will show later, is suggestive of Taylor's innovative conception of the notion of birth and of the name Vietnam rather than a mere misleading use of historical facts.

Taylor opens his book with a mythical narrative of the birth of the Vietnamese people and nation, which is often cited by historians of all political affiliations and historical moments as an affirmation of the distinct existence of a people. The myth tells the story of Lạc Long Quân, a hero coming to the Red River plain from the sea, and his acquisition of Âu Cơ, the wife of an intruder from the north. After defeating the invading enemy, Lạc Long Quân took Âu Cơ to the top of Mount Tân Viên. Âu Cơ then gave birth to the first of the Hùng kings, who are revered today as the founding fathers of the Vietnamese nation.[1] What Taylor finds in this myth is a "theme of the local culture hero neutralizing a northern threat by appropriating its source of legitimacy [which] foreshadowed the historical relationship between the Vietnamese and the Chinese" (ibid.: 1). In this light, Taylor's account of the birth of Vietnam tells us more of "a prolonged process of adjustment to the proximity of Chinese power" than of a starting point, a single moment of a nation's coming into existence (ibid.: xix). The myth of the hybrid birth underpins Taylor's book as he seeks to underscore throughout the various stages of the birth the localized Chinese civilization in the context of Vietnam, rather than the

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[1] For more information on the story and its historical modifications, see Taylor (1983: 303-305). For a discussion of how the myth is transmitted among peasants in contemporary Vietnam, see Nguyễn Thị Huế (1980).

assimilated Vietnamese culture within the Chinese realm. The Vietnamese identity, in Taylor's view, is reflected in the birth itself, and birth here represents a process of coming to terms with outside powers, of localizing and incorporating foreign elements, as Taylor says in the conclusion, "The Vietnamese grasped Chinese ways of doing things as a means of survival" (ibid.: 298).

The genesis narrative of Vietnam resonates what Gayatri Spivak, using the Derridian notion of trace in an essay in her collection *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (1998), describes as the "trace-structure." For Spivak, "in our effort to define things, we look for origins. Every origin that we seem to locate refers us back to something anterior and contains the possibility of something posterior. There is, in other words, a trace of something else in seemingly self-contained origins" (ibid.: 64). In a way, the birth of Vietnam is also a continual process of rebirths, with each (re)birth bearing the mark of "something posterior" so as any origin essentially carries the trace of some other origin and the potential to transform and translate the Other for the survival and cultivation of the Self. The legend of Lạc Long Quân and Âu Cơ returns in Taylor's concluding chapter, reminding us of this trace-structure in the formation of a culture. Birth in Taylor's conception does not connote a starting point, but a difference, as Barbara Johnson aptly notes, "the starting point is … not a *point*, but a difference" (1981: xi; emphasis in the original). In *Vietnam: Nation in Revolution*, William Duiker has interestingly compared Vietnam to the United States as both nations "can be described only as a result of the interaction between foreign cultures brought by immigrants and the indigenous environment" (1983:117). In such a way of national constitution, energized by the interaction among multiple cultural and linguistic sources, translation definitely

plays a crucial role, as Edwin Gentzler (2008: 8-39) has shown us in the case of the

United States culture and identity. The institution of translation policies, Gentzler tells us,

directly participates in the construction of cultural identity and ideology. From the

founding concepts such as democracy and independence to the expansionist ideologies

that shape the history of the United States and its position in the world, the way the nation

is narrated, or the way history is remembered, all shows the underpinning work of

translation and translation policies. What is interesting about the case of Vietnam is that

translation not only inaugurates the nation, shapes its identity and culture, but also

participates in shaping the Vietnamese patterns of responding to foreign powers.

2.3 The Confucian Confusion

It is generally believed that the ancient inhabitants of the Red River delta were at

a preliterate stage and did not have a writing system before the first Chinese conquest in

111 B.C.[2] As the Chinese came to the land of the Lạc lords, they brought both the

Chinese language and an imperial control based on Confucian teachings. Their land

incorporated into the Hán empire, the Lạc lords at first could retain their feudal offices as

the Chinese applied an indirect and lenient administration that used more local authorities

than Chinese officials. However, together with the increasing southward migration from

mainland China, cultural and political assimilation policies intensified, and major roles in

the imperial bureaucracy were increasingly occupied by Chinese personages. This policy

of Sinicization soon undermined the social status and political position of the native

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[2] Some scholars contend that a Vietnamese phonetic writing system did exist in the prehistoric era but was suppressed and eliminated by the Chinese invaders. See DeFrancis (1977: 9) and sources therein cited.

magnates and started to trigger rebellions. The earliest insurrection as recorded in

Chinese historical accounts was led by the Trưng Sisters, who were widows of noble men

executed by the Chinese governor for their recalcitrance. The Trưng Sisters' revolt was

successful and the Trưng Sisters declared independent rule, which lasted only three years.

A Chinese army of twenty thousand men led by Ma Yüan returned and crushed the new

fragile state in 43 A.D.[3] For many historians, the Trưng Sisters' uprising represents the

birth of the Vietnamese nationalist consciousness, a heritage that was challenged time

and again by perpetual foreign invasions, and yet has survived over the centuries into the

modern times (Karnow 1983: 100).[4] The fall of the Trưng Sisters also marked the

beginning of direct Hán rule and intensified assimilation attempts. Ma Yüan's expedition

and subsequent establishment of immigration from the north soon initiated a process of

Hán-Việt intermarriages which later transformed the very administrative system and

culture imposed upon the indigenous community from outside. Vietnam was not to be

assimilated into the dominating culture throughout a millennium of Chinese occupation.

In this respect, Keith Taylor even goes so far as to claim in *The Birth of Vietnam* that

"Hán immigrants became members of the regional society and … developed a regional

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[3] For a detailed story of the Trưng Sisters, see Taylor (1983: 37-41).
[4] Phan Bội Châu, a Vietnamese nationalist in the early twentieth century, translated the Trưng Sisters' revolt into a drama in 1911, becoming the first to link the theme of feminism to anticolonial cause (Hue-Tam Ho Tai 1992: 95-96). For the text of the play, see Phan Bội Châu ([1911] 1967). Regarding the birth of Vietnamese nationalism, scholars are divided. Trương Bửu Lâm, for example, broadly defines nationalism as "a sense of ultimate loyalty to, or inclusion in, a community of people (1967: 29). Accordingly, resistance against invasion from China qualifies for nationalist status. On the contrary, William Duiker considers leaders of revolts and insurgences against Chinese domination up to the Cần Vương Movement (1885-1889) against the French only as protonationalists, because they "were only dimly aware of the nation-state system as it existed in the West, and did not clearly distinguish between the concept of nation and that of monarchy" (1976: 30).

point of view [of their original civilization] that owed much to the indigenous heritage"
(1983: 53). In this dynamism of home and foreign cultures, the Vietnamese language
survived and was spoken by the immigrants themselves. Taylor claims that "Hán
immigrants were more effectively 'Vietnamized' than the Vietnamese were sinicized"
(ibid.: 53). Nhung Tuyet Tran and Anthony Reid, however, suggest that Taylor's view is
tainted by a "sympathy with the nationalist model" seeking to rediscover "timeless 'Lạc-
Việt' characteristics that lay dormant during Chinese rule" (2006: 12). Despite Taylor's
affinity with nationalist essentialism, the survival of the Vietnamese language till this day
as a distinct language certainly provides an irrefutable testimony to a process of
transculturation, and not assimilation, at work throughout Vietnamese history.

A glimpse of the Vietnamese tradition of nationhood that successively dispelled
the strongest powers in the world may render the memory of historical figures such as
Shih Hsieh (士燮, or Sĩ Nhiếp in Vietnamese) an anomaly. Shih Hsieh (137-226) was a
Confucian scholar who served first as magistrate of Wu District in Eastern Ssu-ch'uan
then as prefect of Giao Chỉ, north of present-day Vietnam, during the Wu dynasty. What
is peculiar about this man of Confucian learning is his position as a mediator between his
service for the Hán and his role as leader and defender of a local society which he
"nurtured … in the context of Chinese civilization" (Taylor 1983: 71). During his service
in Giao Chỉ, the area was already a mixed Hán-Việt environment, and coming from
mixed ancestry himself, Shih Hsieh performed a mixed role. From the Chinese
perspective, he was a frontier guardian, and on the Vietnamese side, he served as
defender of territorial autonomy. It is probably because of this in-between legacy that Shi
Hsieh has figured quite variously in the Vietnamese historiography of different periods.

Lê Văn Hưu (1230–1322), a court historian of the Trần dynasty (1225-1400), author of the now lost *Đại Việt Sử Ký*, the first comprehensive record of Vietnamese history, praised Shi Hsieh for his ability to prevent Chinese direct intervention in Giao Chỉ. Two centuries later, Ngô Sĩ Liên, who served as court historian for the late Lê dynasty (1428-1776), extolled Shih Hsieh for his introduction of Confucianism, Chinese art and literature to Giao Chỉ, turning the land into a "civilized" polity.[5] This cultural legacy of Shih Hsieh, however, is not without controversy. For example, Trần Trọng Kim, a scholar and historian who briefly served as Prime Minister of Vietnam when Japan took control of the country from the French in 1945, contended that Shih Hsieh only continued and developed a tradition established centuries before his rule ([1920] 2003: 42-3). The Communist treatment of Shi Hsieh has been somewhat more ambivalent through different political junctures. The annual ceremony commemorating Shi Hsieh was only resumed for the first time in 2009 after sixty six years of suspension. Shi Hsieh could be seen as representative of a class of historical figures who undergo the politics of remembering, dismembering, and re-membering, contingent upon the dominant ideology.

Whether Shi Hsieh was the first to bring Confucian scholarship to Vietnam is still a controversial issue, yet it is clear that Confucianism did not remain unchanged as it reached Vietnam, especially during the independence period between the tenth century and the French occupation in the nineteenth century. Oliver Wolters (1988), for example,

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[5] Ngô Sĩ Liên's birth and death dates are unknown. He is best known for his major contribution to the compiling of *Đại Việt Sử Ký Toàn Thư* (The historical record of Đại Việt, the complete books) in the fifteenth century. Much of what is known about Lê Văn Hưu's *Đại Việt Sử Ký* is based on references and quotations in this later work by Ngô. For the text of this work, see Ngô Sĩ Liên ([1479] 1993). For a comparative analysis of how these two court historians living two centuries apart treated different historical figures in their works, including Shih Hsieh, see Yu Insun (2006).

reveals that the Trần dynasty did not manifest Confucian values in its administration, and rather than uncritically embracing Confucian canons in their entirety, the Vietnamese fragmented the Confucian texts, ignoring the political, social, and moral frameworks that gave coherence to Confucianism in China. The Vietnamese appropriated and localized Confucianism as a body of tested and affirmed experiences of antiquity, which they chose to cite at their discretion for practical purposes.[6] "In this way," Wolters contends, "their statements were furnished with additional authority, derived from the experience of antiquity" (1988: 6). Alexander Woodside, who in the first edition of *Vietnam and the Chinese Model* (1971) considered Vietnam a member of the East Asian classical civilization, revised his early position and claimed in the second edition of the book that the country "was also more dominated by its own medieval past, and by the many pockets of that past that survived" (1988: 4). Research on Vietnam's past in the last few decades has shifted to an attempt to reinstate Vietnam in the Southeast Asian realm. For example, in his essay "'Elephants Can Actually Swim': Contemporary Chinese Views of Late Ly Dai Viet" (1986), John Whitmore looks at the social structure and the cultural and economic life in Đại Việt during the Lý dynasty as revealed in Chinese reports existing from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Whitmore concludes that "the time has come to treat Đại Việt as an integral, not an exceptional, part of Southeast Asia and to conduct our teaching and our studies in this vein" (ibid.: 133). In a similar line of

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[6] An example of the Vietnamese appropriation of foreign materials as a source of wisdom, authority, and legitimacy is the case of the childless king Lý Nhân Tôn (1072-1127), who issued a death-bed edict to appoint as his heir a young nephew. This appointment deviated from the established institution of succession that relied on father-son lineage. The edict was indeed a reproduction, with necessary modifications, of that of the Han emperor Wen-ti (202-157 BC). According to Wolters (1982), such an appropriation of the famous piece of Chinese literature served to legitimize the king's deviation, even if the deviation itself was out of necessity. See (Wolters 1982: 63-4).

argument, Keith Taylor (1986) questions the presumed primacy of Confucianism in Vietnamese politics and culture by underscoring the non-Chinese patterns of thoughts and rulership practiced during the Trần dynasty. In a recent study, *Print and Power: Confucianism, Communism, and Buddhism in the Making of Modern Vietnam* (2004), Shawn McHale explores the limits of Confucian influence in Vietnam. Focusing on the debates on Confucianism among some major Vietnamese scholars in the first half of the twentieth century, McHale suggests that "Confucianism's impact on Vietnam has been exaggerated and misconceived" (2004: 67). Through the works of some well-known Vietnamese scholars, McHale seeks to articulate the uneven and at times contradictory conceptions of Confucianism and its role in the formation of Vietnamese culture and identity, thus challenging the common understanding of Vietnam as a complete model after China, what Liam Kelly calls the "little China theory" (2005: 9).

While most scholars outside of Vietnam, particularly those in the English-speaking world, often look at the dynamic relationship between Confucianism and Vietnamese culture, at times emanating a postcolonial overtone, some prominent Vietnamese scholars, especially before 1975, tended to disregard this dynamic aspect and fall into opposing poles. On the one hand, well-known scholars such as Trần Trọng Kim ([1929-1930] 1992), Đào Duy Anh (1938), and Nguyễn Khắc Viện (1974) emphasized Confucianism as constitutive of Vietnamese identity to the extent of essentialist logic. In their view, Vietnamese past was entirely subsumed in Confucian morality and ideology. On the other hand, particularly at the turn of the twentieth century when French colonialism had penetrated every aspect of Vietnamese life, this constitutive role of Confucianism was rethought and challenged in heated debates. Trương Tửu ([1940]

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1945), for example, relocated Vietnamese identity in folk legacy, denying Confucianism as the core or essence of Vietnamese culture. While agreeing that Confucianism constituted the moral and political codes for the ruling elite, Trương Tửu maintained that it was the Vietnamese folk culture predating Confucian impact that best represented the Vietnamese "soul force" (*linh hồn*) connecting the entire population as a whole. Today's research seems to pick up on Trương Tửu's methodology and looks at the limits of Confucian impact. Li Tana (1998), for example, focuses on life in Đàng Trong, as southern Vietnam was called during a north-south separation of the country in the seventeenth and eighteenth century. She argues that the ruling Nguyễn clan of Đàng Trong attempted to "differentiate themselves from their own ancestral people in the north in order to secure their own political survival" (ibid.: 101). Tana discovers that the Nguyễn rulers established their legitimacy vis-à-vis the north, which was ruled by the Trịnh family, through "an eclectic weaving of indigenous spirits and beliefs into a syncretic (Vietnamese) Buddhist framework, a hybrid religious system that bestowed moral legitimacy on Nguyễn authority in Đàng Trong" (ibid.: 102). In this light, Tana concludes that "Confucianism in Đàng Trong played a political and social role that was relatively minor compared to its role in the north" (ibid.: 103). The extent to which Confucianism asserted its impact on the Vietnamese culture was thus uneven and sporadic both temporally and geopolitically, depending on specific local appropriations.

A cursory survey of research on the role of Confucianism in Vietnam reveals that the majority of scholars seek to explore the limits of Confucian impact on Vietnamese society and culture and uncover voices from past Vietnamese experiences, voices that, as Keith Taylor puts it, "undermine the idea of a single Vietnamese past" (1995: 5).

Although some Vietnamese scholars such as Trần Trọng Kim and Đào Duy Anh seemed to emphasize to an essentialist extent the constitutive role of Confucianism in the formation of the Vietnamese identity, they were indeed writing in a modern colonial era when French civilization was penetrating the deepest corners of Vietnamese life. Their positions on Vietnamese past were undoubtedly colored by their experiences of the dramatic social and cultural transformations at the advent of French colonialism. Thus, Kim's discussion of Confucianism was overwhelmed with a sense of nostalgia, whereas Anh's narration aspired to a constructivist vision of turning to Western thoughts and values to construct a new and stronger Vietnam (McHale 2004: 88). Despite rhetorical phraseology such as "breathing Confucian atmosphere," "feeding on the milk of Confucianism," "eating Confucianism," or "dying with Confucianism," their writings were not meant to consolidate or prove a certain timeless Confucian essence of the Vietnamese culture and identity, but instead, emphatically enunciate the historical legacy of Chinese domination at the face of the penetrating French civilization. For these scholars, the presence of the French on Vietnamese soil inflicted a deep, almost incomprehensible, disjuncture on the country's history. Kim described such a disjuncture in the preface to his *Nho Giáo* (Confucianism) ([1929-1930] 1992) as a "collapsed house" whose inhabitants were disoriented and unable to reconstruct it. His attempt to re-present Confucianism, therefore, only aimed to reconstruct a certain "map," as if to offer an artifact for display in the museum, rather than reinstate a lost world in terms of an essence.

Literary critics Hoài Thanh and Hoài Chân best captured this historical disjuncture during French colonialism in their *Thi Nhân Việt Nam, 1932-1941*

(Vietnamese poets, 1932-1941) ([1942] 1985). Reflecting upon the sixty years of French colonial presence in Vietnam, they could only be stunned by the rigorous changes the country had undergone: "How many changes in roughly sixty years! Sixty years, but it seems like sixty centuries! …. The West today has penetrated into the deepest part of our soul. We can no longer be happy like the happiness of the past, sad like the sadness of the past, love, hate, be angry as before" (ibid.: 11; quoted and translated by McHale 2004: 5). Trần Trọng Kim and Đào Duy Anh certainly shared this perception of the transformations. And in Hoài Thanh and Hoài Chân's work, there echoes a similar rhetoric used by Kim and Anh in their depictions of the penetration of Confucianism. If for Kim and Anh Confucianism constituted Vietnamese ways of thinking and behavior, French civilization for Thanh and Chân provided the means whereby Vietnamese sensibilities became possible and were expressed anew. For all of them, the Vietnamese soul represented the ultimate realm that foreign civilizations would penetrate and mark the completion of the process of acculturation. However, while their rhetoric seemed to reach a point of absolute assimilation, their discourses often oscillated between the old and the new, between sedimented historicity and open possibilities. In Kim, discursive oscillation gave rise to a nostalgic perception of Confucianism, in Anh, a constructivist vision of change, and in Thanh and Chân, a fluid essence that was transformed, yet never destroyed.

A vision of complete acculturation did not mean for Thanh and Chân a total erasure of the past, tradition, and the national spirit embodied in traditional literary genres: "Never before have they [Vietnamese poets] recognized that the national spirit and old poetic genres can only be transformed, and never destroyed. Never before have

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they felt the need to trace back to the past and hold on to what is timeless for the future" ([1942] 1985: 55). Such treading on both ends of the scale, complete Westernization versus timeless historicity, might appear self-contradictory. Indeed, if placed in the social and cultural context of colonial Vietnam in the first half of the twentieth century, such rhetoric, including that of Kim and Anh, did not emanate an essentialist aspiration. Rather, these authors used essentialist rhetoric to contrast past and present, thus enunciating the powerful force of the French civilization as it was imposed upon the Vietnamese and accentuating the resilience and fluidity of the Vietnamese society and culture, which appears to be both hostile and hospitable to foreign influence. Reading into the works of these scholars, therefore, requires an ear for rhetoric, a kind of rhetoric conditioned by dramatic social and cultural transformations and historical disjuncture, rather than for what is said literally. It is rhetoric that reveals what was going on in the writing context and the way Vietnamese scholars positioned themselves within change and transition. None of the scholars under discussion, I believe, attempted to trace or construct a timeless essence merely for the sake of an essence. They constructed an essence of the past only to deconstruct it later on in their own writings, and in between the alternation of construction and deconstruction, there emerged an image of a resilient and fluid culture and identity perpetually at the crossroads of past and present, East and West, historicity and possibility, timelessness and change, stagnation and mobility.

Recent scholarship on Confucianism has begun to problematize its own terms and premises, with the definition of Confucianism being the first to undergo revision. In "Confucianism in Vietnam: State of the Field Essay," Liam Kelly notes that although Confucianism originated in China, "there is no term in Chinese for which 'Confucianism'

is a translation" (2006: 314). Kelly then, citing Lionel Jensen (1997), goes on to claim

that "the term is partially of Western manufacture and mould, and it tends to essentialize

a rather disparate set of practices and beliefs" (2006: 314-5). In discussing Confucianism

in Vietnam, Kelly uses the concept of "repertoire," which is gaining currency in recent

scholarship on "religions" such as Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism. Accordingly,

Confucianism is not understood as a coherent and fixed body of codes and wisdom, but

as a "'repertoire of resources,' from which individual marshaled different ideas and

practices at different times and in different circumstances but which never constituted an

all-encompassing ethos, or cultural system" (ibid.: 315). Confucianism as a concept is

constituted from multiple perspectives and possibilities that involve contingent

interpretation and appropriation, and it is thus but "an invented signifier that bears a

problematic relationship to the thing it signifies," as Thomas Wilson (2002: 24) puts it.

The thing signified is elusive and implicated in the infinite chain of differing and

deferring, rendering inexhaustible the use of elements from the repertoire. With this

concept, Kelly aims to contest both the "little China" theory and the view that Vietnam

constitutes a separate realm despite its subordination to Chinese influence for thousands

of years.[7] While acknowledging the possible changes that cultural practices undergo as

they are upheld in other lands, the concept of repertoire enables Kelly to re-emphasize the

role of Confucianism as he challenges the term Confucianism itself. Maintaining that

repertoire constitutes a much broader analytical category with which scholars can probe

into the relationship between China and other cultures than such concepts as

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[7] See also Kelly (2005) for his analysis of Vietnamese envoy poetry from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century. In this book, Kelly challenges the attempt to de-emphasize the role of Confucianism in Vietnam.

"Confucianization" and "Sinicization," Kelly reclaims for Confucianism what other scholars contend to be deeply localized cultural forms and practices. It is clear that Kelly attempts to mediate between opposing paradigms: Vietnam as a replication of China versus Vietnam as a distinct realm with the power to absorb and appropriate foreign elements. However, implied in Kelly's use of repertoire is an assumption of a source and a target that are somewhat separate and a perception of the Confucian repertoire as composing of irreducible and unchangeable elements. Supposedly a more inclusive category, repertoire presupposes China as the source of influence and Vietnam as the perpetual receptor, so as in the final analysis, any cultural form emerging in Vietnam could be traced back to a certain element of the indefinitely inclusive repertoire of Confucianism. My contention here is that repertoire as used by Kelly is too inclusive and panoramic to account for the intricacies of the dynamic interaction between cultures, which invariably involves processes of translation.

In regard to Confucianism and translation, Lionel Jensen's book *Manufacturing Confucianism: Chinese Tradition and Universal Civilization* (1997) is of interesting relevance. In a manner that somewhat invokes Edward Said's *Orientalism*, Jensen reveals the fictive quality of the term Confucius and its derivative Confucian. Accordingly, Confucius, or Kongzi as we know him today, is less a real historical character than a "figment of the Western imagination," and in the same vein, Confucianism is but a "conceptual product of foreign origin, made to articulate indigenous qualities of Chinese culture" (ibid.: 9). Jensen convincingly shows that the discursive invention of Confucius involved representational mechanics employed by early Jesuit missionaries in China in the sixteenth century. Rather than a body of objective knowledge of Chinese history and

culture, what the Jesuits constructed as Confucianism was instead concerned with their

own self-positioning in a strange culture. As they navigated the boundaries between their

own world and the unknown in China, a condition of cultural dislocation, the first Jesuits

had to re-constitute themselves by inventing local knowledge as a starting point for the

creation of their local identity. Jensen sees in this dynamic of inventing and self-

constituting a process of translation:

> … the first Jesuits were a self-constituting intellectual community, whose local
> identity was obtained through a lengthy process of translating themselves into
> native reference while translating Chinese texts into the language of their faith.
> Their translation was a complex negotiation of identity on native terrain in which
> they were assisted by Chinese while also helping themselves to the multiple
> symbolic resources offered by the culture that they quickly made their own. (ibid.:
> 35)

Jensen's insight is important here as it points to the process whereby the colonizer

participates in the negotiation of the native identity through the work of regulated

translation that I mentioned earlier in this chapter. Born out of cultural and linguistic gaps

and differences, translation not only renders visual the barriers between languages and

cultures but also brings forth "lines of filiation" that facilitate conversion. Jensen is well

aware of the nature of translation when he states that "the meaning of Jesuit translation

was not unequivocal, because translation is never a simple re-presentation but a careful

selection and retelling in another guise" (ibid.: 80). Although Jensen believes that

Confucius is "more than translation" (ibid.: 33), and throughout his voluminous project

he seeks to articulate the fictiveness and constructedness of this character, what is clearly

shown in his narrative is the underpinning force of translation that fueled and formulated

the terms of the construction itself. On several accounts, this construction inhered

insidiously in the work of translation, and this is probably the reason why it seemed to be "largely fortuitous, even accidental, and not the action of a willful authorial impulse" (ibid.: 72).

As scholarship on the role of Confucianism in Vietnam tends to be divided between essentialist and assimilationist perspectives, Jensen's thesis reminds us of the work of both implicit and explicit forms of translation underlying the dynamic of domination and resistance. Highlighting the power of popular culture, Trương Tửu characterizes the history of Vietnamese culture as "an intense conflict between the common people and Confucianism" ([1940] 1945: 69). In the same note, David Marr observes a division in Vietnamese society at the advent of Confucianism and the Chinese language in Vietnam. Those Vietnamese who possessed Chinese competence and Confucian wisdom, Marr notes, "might aspire to a lifestyle having more in common with a literatus in Peking or Hangchow than with an illiterate countryman living just across the paddy field" (Marr 1981: 141). While the masses would sing folksongs and tell folktales in Vietnamese, the literati would recite passages from Confucian classics in Chinese. It was a division across social status, cultural affiliation, and linguistic competence, a division between a learned written culture imported from the north on the one hand and a daily oral culture lived by the common men and women on the other. Yet, such a division did not pose any tension of difference or incite the anxiety of transgression as in Sherry Simon's experience of the divided city of Montreal (Simon 2006). On the contrary, stepping into the other sphere in the divided society of premodern Vietnam seemed to be only a matter of daily life, as Marr describes:

> … while Vietnamese peasants were engaged in such tasks as spinning thread, repairing nets, or making handicrafts, literati might drift in and participate not in the labor but in story recitations, folk-singing, and composition of verses. Some literati improvisations entered the oral tradition, just as some peasant narratives and improvisations came to be used in literature. (1981: 141)

Marr is presenting here a scene of labor where communication across social and cultural traditions takes place in a mutually hospitable environment. The interpenetration of cultural forms and practices may signal what Simon calls "a positive form of failure [of translation], a breakdown that indicates an evolution towards new forms of expression" (2006: 9). Marr cites *hát Phường Vải*, a practice of folk-singing in verse form in the provinces of Nghệ An and Hà Tĩnh, as a product of this cultural mélange. What is peculiar here is that differences across the divided cultural topography give rise to the possibility of cohabitation and hybridization, and yet never lead to complete assimilation. Vivifying exchange across boundaries takes place and effects new forms of expressions while each side of the exchange remains distinct within its own realm.

The cultural exchange between Confucianism and local cultural practices and religious beliefs is reflected in the practice of stele inscription in premodern Vietnam. Nguyễn Nam (2005) examines stele inscriptions during the Mạc dynasty (1527-1592) that were made on occasions of constructing or renovating Buddhist and Daoist temples. Confucian literati, as intellectuals in the village, were often invited to compose the text for inscription. As Nguyễn Nam notes, a common trope in these texts by sixteenth-century Confucians was the self-identification of "I am a Confucian" situated in the larger cause of doing good and maintaining harmony between the Confucian himself and his local communities. An inscription written by Nguyễn Bỉnh Khiêm (1491-1585) reads:

After finishing the work [casting the statues of the Three Teachings and Miao Shan], they asked me to compose the inscription to record the event. I also have a mind and heart fond of doing good, and dare not refuse. However, I am a Confucian. Although I am not well versed in Buddhism and Daoism, I have read broadly and dispelled my doubts and learned something of their theories. Generally speaking, the Buddhist teaching is rooted in illuminating phenomena and the mind, and analyzing cause and effect. Daoism is based on concentrating on the vital energy… to make it supple, preserving oneness and keeping to genuineness. The sage Confucius rooted his teaching in morality, benevolence, and righteousness, literature, life's realities, loyalty, and good faith. Aren't all of them the teachings that follow human nature in order to cultivate the Way? (cited in Nguyễn Nam 2006: 297-98)

Nguyễn Nam suggests that by affirming their Confucian identity in composing the texts for non-Confucian events, the authors of the stele not only showed modesty but also protected themselves from the detailed discussion of the unfamiliar faiths. I surmise that this trope of self-identification in the Confucians' dealings with other faiths and religions in their communities also created a certain cultural distance that kept alive the separation of different ideological systems during their exchanges for the cause of common good and harmony in the public sphere.

From another angle, the limits of Confucian impact could be attributable to the fact that very few Vietnamese bothered to master the Chinese language even if it existed in Vietnam for thousands of years. Nguyễn Khánh Toàn et al. even suggest that illiteracy in Chinese could be indeed an advantage in the colonial context, as it created cultural pockets that were untouched by colonialism ([1967] 1975: 11). In a more controversial note on the reach of Confucianism in Vietnam, Phan Ngọc surmises that a formal system of Confucianism had never been formed in Vietnam until at least the Lý dynasty (1009-1225) because the adoption of Confucianism would also mean the adoption of a form of

government (2006: 56). Ngọc seems to suggest that Confucianism as a system of codes could only be located within the realm of the ruling elite even though there were common people who managed to acquire Chinese and Confucian wisdom. Cao Tự Thanh (2006), contrary to Trương Tửu and Phan Ngọc, acknowledges the reach of Confucianism to popular culture, particularly from the sixteenth century onward, yet designates it as a separate and even antagonist sphere of influence. Together with the process of Confucianization in legal and political spheres during the period between the tenth and the fifteenth centuries, this process of popularization formed an antagonistic struggle between what Thanh calls officialized Confucianism and popularized Confucianism.

On the limits of Confucianism in Vietnam, Trần Đình Hượu contends that "Confucianism could never completely conquer the soul of the Vietnamese elite nor the entire Vietnamese society" (1995: 52). However, unlike Cao Tự Thanh, Hượu views these limits of Confucian influence in Vietnam as a condition of cohabitation and synthesis that paved the way for Vietnam's entry into modernity. For Hượu, Vietnamese modernity began, not with the introduction of Western civilizations, but with the rise of anticolonial revolution along the Marxist line. In his book *Nho giáo và văn học Việt Nam cận trung đại* (Confucianism and Vietnamese literature in the premodern period, 1995), Hượu makes clear his view on what constitutes modernity. Throughout the book, Hượu focuses his analysis on figures who lived in the tension between tradition and modernity such as the blind poet Nguyễn Đình Chiểu, the anticolonial nationalist Phan Bội Châu, and the poet Tản Đà. The life and works of these figures, as Hượu see them, best reflect the social and cultural reality of premodern Vietnam. The tension between tradition and modernity pervaded their writings and political views, and it should be noticed here that

tradition itself was already marked by a split between indigenous culture and Confucian values before the coming of Western cultures. While Nguyễn Đình Chiểu's verses often embraced Confucianism as an anticolonial aspiration, Phan Bội Châu's writings embodied Western scholarship, by way of Chinese and Japanese translations, as a way to liberate Vietnam from Western subjugation. However, Hượu sees in these anticolonial writings some sort of irresolute politics that returned to the comfort zone of Confucianism rather than fueling radical change and overthrowing the French colonial power. For Hượu, while these characters were greatly influenced by the tremendous social transformations of their times, their rigid embrace of Confucianism failed them as anticolonial revolutionaries.

Tản Đà is another case in point. Unlike Chiểu and Châu, Tản Đà did not speak against French colonialism in his writings. What is special about this poet, who also wrote narratives in verses and composed dramas, was his position in the interstices of indigenous tradition, Confucianism, and Western writings. Hượu contends that Tản Đà's works best represent the trajectory of premodern Vietnamese literature of the early twentieth century and describes him as "an author of the transitional period" (ibid.: 368), who is "no longer a Confucian scholar writing in literature but not yet a modern writer" (ibid.: 371). The "premodern" aspect in Tản Đà's works consisted in his innovative use of classical literary genres through a creative incorporation of folk traditions and the popular culture of urban areas. Tản Đà was able to move beyond the Confucian conception of literature as a communication of social mores and values. Indeed, his writings often spoke to the secular reality of the life and work of common people. Yet, for Hượu, such a vision of literature was not revolutionary enough to constitute political resistance or

effect radical change as it was at any rate only a "dream." The best that "the dreamlike, the secular" in Tản Đà's works could do was "revitalize the dry, didactic, and indifferent forms of classical literature, thus overflowing boundaries and destabilizing frameworks" (ibid.: 361). It is clear that Hượu conceptualizes the premodern as a blending of literary genres and thematic issues, a certain confusion that lacked revolutionary agency and resistance to colonial suppression. Also, the premodern here represents a condition for the coming of modernity in which revolutionary politics and the resistance to suppressive powers became possible and more clearly defined.

The coming of the Chinese and their rule and ideologies did not, on several accounts, pose a real threat of assimilation to the Vietnamese. In fact, the constant contact between China and Vietnam, albeit antagonistic and violent in nature, created a historical translation zone sustained through a divided cultural topography that kept alive intercultural transference, which was also of an intracultural character on account of the much received homelikeness of Confucianism in Vietnam. There are always limits to dominating a nation or culture, often revealed in the form of divisions and fragmentations. Just as the soul of a Confucian scholar who could be most devout but came from a different culture could never be totally conquered by Confucianism itself, a culture can never be totally assimilated and vanish without a trace. There is a part of the Self that escapes the reach of the suppressive Other, and resistance to suppression often exploits this part and reproduces it as a counter force, creating fragments in the imagination of the nation. Partha Chatterjee (1993: 3-13) has shown us with great subtlety this mechanism of resistance, in which anticolonial nationalists in the nineteenth-century Bengal retreated from the public domain of the colonial state and imagined for

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their cultural identity a private and spiritual realm untouched by colonialism. That fragment of the nation, while continually refashioned and modernized, served to preserve the distinctness of the colonized culture of Bengal.

A similar condition of fragmentation existed in Vietnam under the weight of Confucianism, which seems to be most heightened in the nineteenth century when "Nguyễn dynasts, in tandem with the scholar-gentry, were constructing a Confucian bureaucracy and physical superstructure that, once again, was going far beyond the needs of the society and, more important, beyond the abilities and desires of the peasantry to support it" (Marr 1971: 24). What is peculiar in the case of Vietnam, however, is the fact that rather than blocking mutual transference, fragmentation created channels of communication and translation between the cultural fragments themselves. Chatterjee mentions language in the case of Bengal as "a zone over which the nation first had to declare sovereignty and then had to transform in order to make it adequate for the modern world" (ibid.: 7). He is nevertheless utterly silent as to how the native language that kept at bay colonial statecraft and technologies could be transformed without the work of translation. In Chatterjee's theorization of Bengali nationalism, this zone is designated as "an essential difference between East and West" that features dissociation rather than transference, separation rather than communication.

In Vietnam, Confucianism divided the Vietnamese into the literati and the peasantry at the same time it related them to one another, creating a dynamic translation zone between indigenous traditions and the imported foreign culture, a zone of fluidity and resilience that has characterized the Vietnamese response to foreign powers. Reading into the diverse studies on Confucianism in Vietnam, its limits, constitutive power, and

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its transformations in local contexts has led me the conceptualization of this zone not just

as a contact zone where cultural encounters give rise to new forms of expression and new

modes of existence. I suggest that this zone constitutes a cultural identity effected through

the condition of perpetual translation between the home and foreign cultures, and

translation itself has become the very Vietnamese identity that has been built into the

Vietnamese patterns of responding to foreign domination. And by designating an identity

as translation, I mean to underscore a certain measure of conscious and subjective

strategizing and manipulation, an agency at work in the way the Vietnamese deal with

dominating foreign powers and their cultures.

2.4 The Linguistic Confusion

Linguistically, the history of Vietnam is for the large part divided around two

major axes: the elite versus the mass on the one hand, and spoken language versus

writing system on the other. The divide, unsurprisingly, is instituted by foreign

conquerors. The earliest records of the Vietnamese were written by Chinese conquerors,

and certainly, in Chinese. The history of the Vietnamese people prior to their

incorporation into to the Chinese empire in B.C. 111 is mostly known through semi-

legendary narratives of the Lac Lords and the Hung Kings that are still circulated in

contemporary Vietnam as memory of the birth of the Vietnamese people and nation.[8] The

speech spoken by the early inhabitants of what is now the northern part of Vietnam is a

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[8] Phạm Huy Thông (1975) suggests that Vietnam experienced three "births." The
first birth predated Chinese domination with the establishment of the Đông Sơn
civilization; the second birth took place in the tenth century when the country gained
independence after almost twelve centuries under Chinese rule; and the third birth in the
twentieth century at the dramatic transformation of the Vietnamese consciousness caused
by the presence of French colonialism.

matter of uncertainty. The French linguist Etienne Aymonier, adopting the general view that treats Vietnam as a legitimate, though troubling, southernmost extension of China, suggested that Vietnamese was only a dialect of Chinese (1890: 15; cited in DeFrancis 1977: 5). Aymonier was not the first to hold this view in regard to the genealogy of the Vietnamese language. In the early nineteenth century, Bishop Jean-Louis Taberd already considered the language as a regional variation of Chinese (Gage 1985; cited in Alves 2006: 105). However, this view was opposed by scholars who contended that Vietnamese had a Mon-Khmer origin and was thus more attached to its southern neighbors. Wilhelm Schmidt, for example, hypothesized the existence of a large linguistic family called the Austro-Asiatic family comprising of languages spoken in a wide area stretching from western India to the Indochinese peninsula (1908; cited in Vương Lộc 197-: 11 and Nguyễn Đình Hòa 1997: 2-3).

The genesis narrative of the Vietnamese language, however, is far from resolved with Schmidt's argument as another French scholar, Henri Maspéro (1912), pointed to yet another language group, the *Tai* group, of which he contended Vietnamese was a member. Another attempt to clear up the cloudy origin of the Vietnamese language was made by André Haudricourt (1954), who provided lexical and phonological data to prove the genetic connections of Vietnamese to Mon-Khmer. While Haudricourt's corpus of data seemed to settle the debate around the origin of Vietnamese (Alves 2006: 106), complications continued to arise, giving rise to the somewhat "compromising" view that Vietnamese has mixed origins. The earliest upholder of this view was probably Nguyễn Văn Huyên (1944: 247-48), Minister of Education in the Democratic Republic of Vietnam from 1945 to 1975, who also considered Vietnamese as a member of the

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Austroasiatic family. Huyên highlighted the language as an admixture of various tongues, including Chinese, Malay, and Aryan. It is in this light of linguistic and cultural fusion that George Cœdès conducts most of his research on Vietnam. In his book *The Making of South East Asia* (1967), Cœdès traces the mixed origin of Vietnamese culture to pre-Chinese period. According to him, the early inhabitants of the Red River delta practiced traditions and customs characteristic of Mon-Khmer and Indonesian peoples living in southern Indochina and speaking non-tonal languages, yet their feudal social organization was completely foreign to these peoples, and instead, identical to that of *Tai* and other ethno-linguistic groups to the south of China speaking tonal languages (ibid.: 42). The fact that Vietnamese is a tonal language has been used as a major argument by linguists who believe that Vietnamese originates from *Tai* languages to the north (south of China). Yet, such a view often has to ignore the lexical kinship of the language to southern linguistic groups.[9] Nguyễn Ngọc San, a prominent contemporary linguist, seems to resolve the uncertainty between phonological and lexical perspectives with a somewhat ambivalent statement that qualifies "an indigenous original foundation" (*cơ tầng bản địa ban đầu*) and at the same time acknowledges its multifaceted developments derived from outside sources ([1993] 2003: 200). This faith in an essence/foundation both retained and transformed through the appropriation of foreign elements, as shall be shown in this chapter, represents a universal philosophy embraced by various political groups for diverse political agendas during the French colonial rule in Vietnam. For the current

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[9] In contemporary Vietnamese, lexical affinity leans towards Chinese. It is estimated that Chinese words make up at least one third of Vietnamese vocabulary (Nguyễn Văn Huyên 1944: 250), or up to sixty percent (Nguyễn Đình Hòa 1961: 15). More controversially, Nguyễn Khánh Toàn et al. claim that words of Chinese origin account for two thirds of Vietnamese vocabulary ([1967] 1975: 112).

purpose, it is not entirely unreasonable to posit a pre-Chinese multicultural landscape in

the Red River delta. Rather than creating an original condition of hybridity, the arrival of

the Chinese only complicated a pre-existing fusion of tongues and cultures, a legacy that

the French and American powers continued two millennia later.

The hybrid nature of the Vietnamese language and culture even prior to its entry

into recorded history, which DeFrancis (1977: 3) rightly associates with the Chinese

conquest, I suggest, constitutes a posteriority, a potentiality that enables this nation to

appropriate and consume foreign elements for its own survival and growth. This hybrid

constitution thus structures the survival of the language, in the same vein as "*Überleben*,"

survival, is structured into the Benjaminian original text so as the task of the translator is

to respond to this survival-structure, rather than communicating the original (Benjamin

1969). For the Vietnamese people, survival (*sống còn*) is probably the one word that lives

on as a philosophy, a way of thinking, a way of life, a way of dealing with oppressive

foreigners throughout their history. It survives the many short-lived regimes throughout a

millennium of Chinese domination, the many independent dynasties in yet another

millennium, and the various political movements during the twentieth century. As the

twenty-first century approaches the Vietnamese with the powerful force of globalization,

the renewed military and political influence of the United States around the world, and

the rise of China as a new cultural and economic superpower, survival once again emerges as *the Way* prominently pronounced and figured in the Vietnamese voices.[10]

For the Vietnamese, survival has always been the problematic of translation, and not nationalism in the sense of nativist or indigenist essentialism. In other words, Vietnamese nationalism has always been the problematic of translation, in which language figures as the backbone of survival, as the often-quoted saying by Phạm Quỳnh daringly announces, "if *Kiều* lives on, so does our language; if our language lives on, so does our country" (1919: 500). If the nativist ideology often calls for a return to pristine cultural traits, a rediscovery of tradition that empowers the resistance against a colonizing power, this return in the Vietnamese case invariably culminates in the originary state of fusion, the constitutive moment of hybridity.

When the French colonists arrived in Vietnam in the nineteenth century, they not only saw an opportunity for exploiting the human and natural resources of this small country in Indochina, but also an opportunity for translation. This latter opportunity consisted in the fact that Vietnam at the time was neither a "blank page" ready for the inscription of the Western Book, nor was it a fixed and unified culture with established meanings. The arrival of the French only complicated the cultural and linguistic confusion characteristic of Vietnam in its constitution and its historical relation to China.

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[10] Carlyle Thayer, a professor at the Australian Defence Force Academy, predicts that the hottest topic at the Eleventh National Congress of the Communist Party, which is scheduled to take place in early 2011, will be issues in the diplomatic relations with China and the United States. These two powers seem to always pose a challenge for Vietnam's foreign policy. See Thayer's interview, "Việt Nam trước kỳ đại hội Đảng" (Vietnam before the National Congress), *BBC Tiếng Việt*, June 10, 2009, http://www.bbc.co.uk/vietnamese/vietnam/2009/10/091005_viet_congress.shtml.

The Vietnamese never spoke one language nor did they live in a single culture before the

French arrived on the scene, and what concerns me here is how this history of language

and culture defied any conception of a homogenous target and how in such a condition,

the colonizer emerged as major actor in the construction of the native identity. The

history of the Vietnamese people, interpolated by various foreign oppressors, was about

finding a language of their own as much as about expelling the intruders to regain

cultural and political independence, as Robert Welch has rightly noted, "in questions of

culture and tradition everything comes back to language" (1993: 32). In the case of

colonial Vietnam in the early twentieth century, language became the utmost important

issue that dominated all discourses on Vietnamese culture and identity as well as the

possible responses to French colonialism. For the Vietnamese elite of this time, to speak a

language would immediately mean to situate oneself in a certain cultural and political

position, and not just to communicate certain ideas. The choice of a language signified a

certain political attitude towards the present colonial condition of the speaking subject or

its own past. In language, there is not only the message of the utterance but also the deep

reverberation of desire, memory, and self-positioning. It is a novel dimension of language

derived from the linguistic and cultural confusion that subjects speaking individuals to

the complexity of social networks, cultural affiliations, and political institutions.

Speaking in this sense is an action of either reinforcing or subverting established canons,

values, and norms. In such a confusion, such undecidability, making a linguistic choice

cannot be but political.

In his book *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 1920-1945*, David Marr notes that "no

fewer than eight language options were theoretically available to Vietnamese of the early

twentieth century" (1981: 147). Indeed, these options revolved around three languages, including Vietnamese/Nôm, Chinese, and French. The number of options was multiplied as class and the writing system came into play. In Marr's scheme, each option consisted of two aspects of the language, including spoken language and writing system, with the spoken language being further divided into two categories, including the mass and the elite. Thus, in the first option, for example, the spoken language for the mass was Vietnamese, for the elite Vietnamese/Chinese, and the writing system was Chinese/Nôm. Therefore, rather than representing the choice of a particular language universally used for the entire society, each option involved a combination of different tongues distributed across sociopolitical and orthographical lines. The array of linguistic possibilities, I suggest, attested to a certain measure of plurality and fluidity condensed from Vietnam's historical encounters with other cultures and languages. Translation from multiple sources from the troubling position of the colonized constituted Vietnam as a site of perpetual hybridity at the very moment of its inception, if we could locate such a moment at all. Hybridity, therefore, is not the result of some extraction and combination of a target and a source into a "third space." How can we conceptualize a third space when the third itself is never third in the sense that it essentially inheres in cultures and languages? In *Monolingualism of the Other; or Prosthesis of Origin*, Jacques Derrida reminds us that "we never only speak one language" despite the monolingualism imposed on us as speaking subjects (1998: 10). The linguistic choices available to the Vietnamese as identified by Marr do not ultimately demand a definite decision to come down to one

among the many options. Rather, they represent a perpetual state of confusion, of undecidability in which decision is possible and demanded.[11]

In their account of the transformations of the Irish language and culture by the incursion of English-language traditions, Maria Tymoczko and Colin Ireland call Ireland "a translational island" where "asymmetries are acknowledged, exploited, transcended, remembered, assumed, and forgotten" (2003: 20). A decade before this description of Ireland, Welch already talked about the history of Ireland as marked by "the business of translating itself to itself and to the outside world" because "before the nineteenth century to speak of Irish culture is to speak of a different language and entirely different ways of seeing" (1993: xi). The incursion of foreign powers as both a colonizing force and a catalyst for change and transition into modernity as experienced by Ireland finds resonance in the case of Vietnam. For thousands of years before the arrival of French civilization on Vietnamese soil, Vietnam had been translating itself into itself and into the northern power for survival. Cultural and political independence for the Vietnamese did not mean an assertion of a differentiating identity vis-à-vis China or a wholesale rejection of the suppressive Other, but a selective and strategic incorporation of foreign elements into the self, or as Edwin Gentzler, using Fernando Ortiz's concept of *transculturación*, describes as a "process of selecting the best of another culture, adapting and consuming

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[11] Here, I borrow from Derrida's deconstruction of the binary opposition of decision and undecidability. Traditionally, it is often assumed that a decision is possible because of an underlying condition of decidability. For Derrida, however, "a decision can only come into being in a space that exceeds the calculable program that would destroy all responsibility by transforming it into a programmable effect of determinate causes" (Derrida 1988: 116). Understood in the order of ethical-political responsibility, a decision is thus "structured by this experience and *experiment of the undecidable*" (ibid.: 116; emphasis in the original).

it, and then making it one's own – in short, … a process of transculturalization" (2007: 106). For the Vietnamese, if the Other has the power to suppress, the best resistance strategy is to absorb that very power. Even during periods of independence, Vietnamese sovereignty constantly faced the threat of reinvasion from China. In such circumstances, adopting the Confucian social and political order while maintaining the traditional oral culture constituted a form of self-strengthening that could preclude acculturation and assimilation so desired by the colonizing power. It is within this dynamic of adoption and resistance that one can identify an ambivalence in the Vietnamese perception and reception of Chinese culture and language. Such an ambivalence renders problematic all the terms that presuppose homogeneity in language such as interlingual translation and intralingual translation. Historically, prior to the introduction of the Romanized script, was Chinese perceived as an entirely foreign language in Vietnam? Was Vietnam from the tenth to the nineteenth century a bilingual country? Prior to the nineteenth century, the Vietnamese literati wrote poetry in both *nôm* and Chinese and also translated classic works from Chinese into *nôm*, and is this type of translation interlingual or intralingual translation? Or was it really perceived as translation the way translation is understood in today's discourses? At issue here is a peculiar relation, resulted from the dynamic of adoption and resistance, which defies most categories and concepts as they are used today.

After centuries of presence in Vietnam, Confucianism and the Chinese language were no longer perceived as belonging to a completely foreign realm, and the interaction between Chinese and the indigenous Vietnamese no longer bore the proper characteristics of the so-called interlingual translation. Studying Vietnamese envoy poetry from the

sixteenth to the nineteenth century, Kelly reveals that for Vietnamese envoys, Chinese

culture "was simply all that there was" (2005: 3), and he is not hesitant in suggesting that

this perception was not uncommon among Vietnamese in general. Based on his insights

in envoy poetry, Kelly problematizes the notion that Vietnam constituted a distinct realm

vis-à-vis China. As the only language for writing in literature as well as in the imperial

bureaucracy until the early twentieth century, Chinese was not perceived by the

Vietnamese literati as a foreign language. It had become a language that defined who

they were in their own country, differentiating themselves from the peasants who spoke

Vietnamese and did not understand the literati's writings.[12] In this sense, the literati were

bilingual, and yet they did not speak two separate languages. Vietnamese and the Chinese

language as spoken in Vietnam, often called Sino-Vietnamese, were neither one nor two

languages. Such a state of neither one nor two can be represented in what I call a matrix

of transculturation.

This matrix of transculturation involves the splitting of the Chinese language and

the appropriation of the derived elements for the enrichment of the native language. The

Chinese language as used in Vietnam was split and refracted into the indigenous

language and culture. On the one hand, the Chinese sound system was deeply

Vietnamized in accordance with the Vietnamese phonological rules, so as a text written

in Chinese when read aloud, was no longer intelligible for speakers of Chinese living in

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[12] In relation to the Northern Kingdom, the ability to use Chinese, and together
with it, the mastery of Confucianism and classical forms of poetry, represented a mode of
self-affirmation, especially during periods of independence, as Taylor (1986), Whitmore
(1986), and Wolters (1988) have shown. Kelly (2005), however, suggests that English
language research on Vietnamese history is tainted with a postcolonial, or even
nationalist, sympathy.

China. To the Vietnamese ears, the sounds pronounced from a Chinese text were familiar, yet semantically incomprehensible for the large part. It is similar to listening to the speech of one's own language, yet being unable to understand the vocabulary used. In a way, such a complete rendition of the sound system of the foreign language turned that very language into merely a repertoire of lexicon and meaning within the home language. Unlike the sound system, the Chinese script was retained in its original form in the literati's compositions, so as a text written by a Vietnamese literati could hardly be distinguished from one written by a Chinese. For this reason, DeFrancis argues that the term Sino-Vietnamese only applies to the Vietnamese pronunciation of Chinese (1977: 15). I suggest that the term Sino-Vietnamese is no less legitimate as far as the content of the text is concerned, as it is impossible to posit a field of writing in classical Chinese that remained completely untouched by the everyday interaction between the bilingual literati and the peasants living close by. The bilingual ability itself could also be a force that permeated monolingual writing and even performed as a political and cultural subtext (see the next section on *diễn nôm*).

A classic example of the intermingling languages underwritten by the bilingual Hán-Việt environment are the names *Bố Cái Đại Vương* and *Đại Cồ Việt*. While these names present the first bits of evidence of *chữ nôm*, the obsolete writing system of Vietnamese,[13] they also indicate, I suggest, the linguistic dynamic inherent in any hybrid environment, that is the translation into one another of the languages involved. *Bố Cái Đại Vương*, meaning Great Bố Cái King, is a posthumous title given to Phùng Hưng, the

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[13] For a discussion of the different theories regarding the origin of this writing script, see Đào Duy Anh (1975) and sources cited.

leader of a popular uprising against Chinese rule in the eighth century. The title

comprises of both vernacular Vietnamese (Bố Cái) and Chinese (Đại Vương). According

to *Việt Điện U Linh Tập* (Compilation of the departed spirits in the realm of Việt), an

anthology of Vietnamese legends and folktales compiled by Lý Tế Xuyên in the early

fourteenth century with a preface dated 1329, *bố* in old Vietnamese means "father" and

cái is the word for "mother"; the title thus means "Great Father and Mother King." [14]

Such a combination of the indigenous tongue and the language of the oppressor inserts a

political subtext in the way a national hero is remembered. Keith Taylor views the hybrid

composition of the title as indicative of either the popularization of Mencius' teaching of

parental kingship among educated Vietnamese or the Vietnamese appropriation of

Mencius to confirm the legitimacy of their own cultural heritage (1983: 206). In either

case, it points to the dynamic of linguistic intermingling effected through the

simultaneous repetition and displacement of the oppressor's text and meaning. Another

example of the vernacular subtext in the native use of Chinese can be found in the poetic

tradition of the fourteenth century. Examining poems by Trần Minh Tông (1300-1357),

the fifth king of the Trần dynasty, Oliver Wolters (1988) uncovers the poet's engagement

with not only Chinese erudition for the purpose of self-affirmation, but also his

meditative vision of nature and of the country. It is this *dhyāna*, the Chinese term for

meditation, that marks the break from the Confucian orthodox. The use of Chinese

classical poetic forms as well as the conventional Confucian sensibilities, Wolters argues,

"does not mean, of course, that Vietnamese poets were incapable of originality. Far from

it. Resourcefully and elegantly, their poems more often than not tap and localize the

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[14] For a detailed discussion of the meaning, pronunciation, and transcription of *bố* and *cái*, also see DeFrancis (1977: 22).

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Chinese lexicon in order to utter their own poetic statements, whose force, they believed, would be intensified by erudite signs of literary meaning which their peers could recognize and respect" (ibid.: 56). Numerous instances of such fusion of linguistic and cultural material can be found throughout the historical period during which the Vietnamese Confucian literati composed prose and poetry in classical Chinese.

2.5 *Diễn Nôm* and Premodern Translingualism in Vietnam

Twenty years after his composition of *Ngục trung nhật ký* (The prison diary, 1942-1943), Hồ Chí Minh for the first and only time translated his own work into Vietnamese. The diary is a collection of more than one hundred poems composed in Chinese during Hồ's imprisonment in China under Chiang Kai-shek's government. Curiously, Hồ chose to translate only one piece in the entire collection, a one-stanza poem of four lines in T'ang poetic form about his hiking up a mountain upon discharge from prison. The poem was actually not included in the original diary. Hồ wrote it after he was released and sent it home to his comrades as an update about his condition. The piece was rendered by its own author into the Vietnamese traditional *lục-bát* (six-eight) verse form, contrasting previous versions by other translators who often retained the T'ang meter scheme. Indeed, Hồ translated this poem twice, on two separate occasions, using two different pen names. In the earlier translation, he rendered it into *song thất lục bát*, two lines of seven syllables followed by a six-eight couplet, another Vietnamese invention based on Chinese poetic traditions.[15] As is well known, Hồ trained himself to be fluent in several languages, and while his writings in languages other than his mother

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[15] For a detailed discussion of the *lục bát* and *song thất lục bát*, read Huỳnh Sanh Thông's introduction to his book *The Heritage of Vietnamese Poetry* (1979: xxv-xlv).

tongue have been widely circulated and translated, his own translations from Chinese,

Russian, and French are still understudied.[16] Not much can be speculated about Hồ's

translation strategies, yet it is apparent that in rendering the poem into *lục-bát* form, Hồ

reiterated an age-old Vietnamese tradition of using *lục bát* to translate Chinese texts

written in different genres by either Chinese or Vietnamese authors.

The scholar Lại Nguyên Ân calls this tradition of translation *diễn nôm*, or

expressing/rephrasing in the *nôm* script, a practice that he contends to be a precursor to

literary translation in Vietnam, *thượng nguồn của văn học dịch* (1998: 43). In his

definition of the practice of *diễn nôm*, Ân welds together formal, functional and aesthetic

aspects of the act of expressing or rephrasing. Accordingly, he defines *diễn nôm* as the

"expressing of a certain content in the indigenous language," which is the Vietnamese

language native to Vietnam in contrast to Chinese as used by the Vietnamese literati,

"using a definite structure that both facilitates dissemination and meets aesthetic

qualities" (ibid.: 36-37). *Lục-bát* verses, as a "versatile" form of poetry as Cao Huy Đỉnh

(1974) describes it, appear to be the most appropriate means that can help achieve the

functional and aesthetic ends of *diễn nôm*. *Lục bát* and *diễn nôm* constitute the

relationship of a means to an end in the translingual context of premodern Vietnam.

Although Ân's definition of *diễn nôm* does not seem to relate it to the problematic of

translation, it is indeed deeply imbricated in the relational matrix between the native

language and Chinese, the language of the foreign oppressor. In that matrix, *diễn nôm*

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[16] Lữ Huy Nguyên ([1983] 1996) talks briefly about Hồ Chí Minh and his
translation in an article in *Văn Nghệ* magazine, which was reprinted in Thúy Toàn (1996).
He points out Hồ's skillful renditions of the original in several instances, and also his
awareness of the political implications of translation. According to my research, this is
the only essay about this topic.

participated in cultural production through the translation of the foreign into the local and at the same time resisted the hegemonic translation of the local into the foreign, owing to the fact that the Vietnamese oral literature was never represented in writing prior to the invention of the *nôm* script. Ân points out that *diễn nôm* not only disseminated indigenous literature across time and space in the highly musical and memorably packed verses of the *lục-bát* form, but also served to preserve the "narrative repertoire existing in the cultural life of the [Vietnamese] people" (ibid.: 41). On the one hand, the absence of a writing script for the Vietnamese language would certainly invite the translation of the vernacular oral traditions into the Chinese writing system, leading to even deeper Sinicization and Confucianization. *Diễn nôm* in such a context would allow the indigenous culture to survive and thrive without being assimilated. On the other hand, the practice of *diễn nôm* itself translated the dominant language and culture into the vernacular, reviving and enriching the narrative repertoire that it preserved in the first place. In a sense, *diễn nôm* impeded cultural expropriation entailed in the hegemonic translation of the vernacular culture into the colonizing one while facilitating cultural appropriation for the reverse flow of translation. It is true that with or without *diễn nôm*, the local culture and language could not remain in a pristine state under colonialism, but *diễn nôm* allowed an active process, some sort of an upper hand, in which the colonized actively asserted its own meaning and signification. With *diễn nôm*, the Vietnamese translated themselves while resisting being translated by their oppressor. In what follows, I discuss some important figures in the evolution of the *nôm* script and trace the history of *diễn nôm* prior to its *lục-bát* form to show the multifaceted process of cultural translation taking place in the translingual condition of premodern Vietnam.

2.5.1 Hồ Quý Ly: Politics and the Chinese Classics in *Nôm*

Even today, when the *nôm* script was invented and by whom is still uncertain. Historical records indicate that Hàn Thuyên (1225-1257), a court mandarin of the Trần dynasty, was the first to compose poetry in this script and spurred a movement in indigenous poetry followed by several gentry-scholars, including Lê Quý Ly (1336-1407), who overthrew the Trần dynasty in 1400 and established the short-lived Hồ dynasty (1400-1407). Prior to Hàn Thuyên's compositions in *nôm*, the literary tradition of Vietnam had been mainly circulated in oral circles, with *ca dao* (folk poems) and *tục ngữ* (proverbs) as the dominant forms. However, poetry in *nôm* during this period, though given the proper name of *Hàn luật* (poetic rules used by Hàn), was indeed an appropriation of traditional T'ang poetic structures, now coated in the indigenous language (Dương Quảng Hàm [1941] 1986: 119). It is unfortunate that none of Hàn Thuyên's works are extant today, but it could be surmised at this point that with the invention of the *nôm* script, a new trend of appropriation emerged among the literati, even though this trend would remain at the margin of the official Confucian ideology and the Chinese language until the modern times, with two brief intervals during the reign of Hồ Quý Ly and the Tây Sơn dynasty (1788-1802).

The Hồ dynasty was established in 1400 after Lê Quý Ly seized the Trần throne during its social and political disintegration in the last thirty years of the fourteenth century (Wolters 1988: 3-53). The context in which Quý Ly rose to power within the declining Trần court was one marked by what John Whitmore identifies as "an amalgamation of indigenous and classical Chinese thought" (1985: 40). This blending was further facilitated now that the indigenous language could be represented by the new

script, and translation *proper*, that is at the textual level, emerged probably for the first

time in Vietnamese history as a political instrument. Among the many maneuvers and

measures that Quý Ly used for his consolidation of power was his deployment of the *nôm*

script and translation to gain more authority. Whitmore has pointed out that Quý Ly's

accession to power was not just backed by a network of supporters whom he successfully

placed in the central positions of the court. In order to legitimize his control over the

court at the face of the young Trần ruler, Quý Ly also resorted to the Chinese classic

Book of History (Shu-ching, or Thượng Thư in Vietnamese) to project an image of

himself as the famous Duke of Chou, regent of King Wu's son. What is most interesting

is the fact that Quý Ly translated only one chapter of the *Book of History* into *nôm* "to

teach the court officials," as told in Ngô Sĩ Liên's *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư* (The complete

books of Đại Việt's history). As Whitmore points out, this chapter contains the Duke of

Chou's teachings of diligence to the young King Cheng, and accordingly, "the young

ruler was to be 'grave, humble, reverential, and fearful,' a passive example for his people

to follow" (ibid.: 40). This particular chapter of the *Book of History* would thus serve to

legitimize Quý Ly's seizure of control over court affairs and to disempower the king.

    Quý Ly's translation is no longer extant, and therefore it is impossible to assess

his textual renditions. However, it could be stipulated that Quý Ly was quite aware of

translation as an opportunity to control and manipulate meaning, because he was

translating in a context where Chinese was still a dominant language and those officials

whom he wanted to indoctrinate certainly did not need translation to understand Chinese

texts. The use of a translated text rather than the original in such a condition indicates a

certain measure of meaning manipulation at work in Quý Ly's master plan, especially

when that text served to engrave a certain meaning of the past onto the present for

political purposes. Quý Ly's extensive use of the *nôm* script in translation as well as in

his own writing has been interpreted by most scholars as part of his nationalist maneuvers

to dislodge Đại Việt from Confucianism and the Chinese culture and model of

government.[17] While nationalism could be a plausible motivation for his attempt to

translate Chinese classics into the *nôm* script, such an indiscriminate conflation of

translation and nationalism could underestimate the extent to which Quý Ly understood

and used the power of meaning manipulation in translation for his personal political

agenda, which was ultimately to take over the Trần's throne. Nationalism, I suggest,

should not be simplistically understood as the mere refusal to use the other's language

and the return to one's mother tongue. Moreover, in the case of Quý Ly, it is apparent

that his political moves, as Nguyễn Kim Sơn (2010) has made clear, belong to a personal

scheme rather than embody a nationalist spirit that could be generalized into some sort of

typical Vietnamese nationalism.[18]

While most of his works are now lost, we learn that Quý Ly composed in *nôm* a

book called *Quốc ngữ Thi nghĩa* (The meaning of the *Book of Odes* in the national

language), in which he offered a preface which *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư* describes as

"following his own inclinations" rather than the collected writings of Chu Hsi (cited in

Whitmore 1985: 41). Quý Ly apparently took classical Chinese texts in his own hands

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[17] See Nguyễn Kim Sơn (2010) for a discussion of scholars who emphasize Quý Ly's nationalism.
    [18] For a discussion of Hồ Quý Ly's "nationalist" reforms, including the use of the *nôm* script, see Phan Đăng Thanh and Trương Thị Hòa (1996: 155-66) and works therein cited.

and used the *nôm* script to create a space for his own interpretation and manipulation.[19]

Quý Ly's politics here, as Nguyễn Kim Sơn has proven, did not involve a kind of

affirmative nationalism that aimed to construct a Vietnamese identity through the use of

national language. It was, I suggest, a politics of translation in which he used the inchoate

vernacular script to create meanings, often in a surreptitious manner, that would be

impossible if the texts were to be read in their original language. Reading in the original

language would necessarily carry with it an orthodox Confucian field of interpretation

whose moral would undermine what Quý Ly was trying to do in the Trần court. The *nôm*

script, and with it a renewed opportunity for translation, was deployed to displace

Confucian orthodoxy as the only foundation of meaning and signification and introduce a

new space for subversive re-reading and re-interpretation.[20] While any conclusion about

Quý Ly's translational maneuvers could not be but tenuous, I contend that this

controversial historical figure presents the earliest case in Vietnamese history in which

the politics of language was clearly manifest within the country's translingual and

transcultural condition. Contrary to the common belief that the *nôm* script was for

medieval Vietnamese literati merely a form of aesthetic experiment and entertainment,

belonging to a secondary order in the literary landscape vis-à-vis Chinese (see for

example Yeager 1987: 25), it could be said that the invention of a writing system was far

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[19] In his *Đại Việt sử ký toàn thư*, Ngô Sĩ Liên considered Quý Ly's discussion of Confucius a blasphemy. He wrote: "Without Confucius, there would be no guiding principles for future generations. Confucius' fame has been unsurpassable since the birth of mankind, and Quý Ly dared to arrogantly talk about him. What a blasphemy!" (Ngô Sĩ Liên ([1479] 1971: 185).

[20] Kiều Thanh Quế contends that Quý Ly was the first to subvert orthodox Confucianism. He writes: "Prior to Quý Ly, our ancestors learned the Chinese *Book of Odes*, *Book of History*, enslaved themselves with Chinese thoughts, and consistently adhered to Chu Hsi. Hồ was the first to escape from this self-enslavement of the mind. How admirable!" (1969: 110).

from apolitical, but offered a renewed opportunity of translation that lent itself to the kind of politics that we see in the case of Hồ Quý Ly.

2.5.2 Nguyễn Trãi's Translingualism: Nation, Language, and the Self

The institutional secondary place of the *nôm* script, I suggest, should not be equated with purely aesthetic, apolitical creativity in the vernacular language. Although it is true that Chinese remained to be the official language throughout premodern Vietnam, it was becoming more and more restricted within the sphere of government and diplomatic affairs (mainly with the powerful China in the north). In his *Beyond the Bronze Pillars* (2005), Liam Kelly discusses the Sino-Vietnamese relationship through envoy poetry. He concludes that for most Vietnamese envoys to China, the Chinese realm "was simply all that there was" (ibid.: 3). Kelly is actually examining politics exclusively within the realm of official government and diplomatic relations, rather than within the cultural life of those envoys back home as well as the Vietnamese literati and peasants in general. The Vietnamese perception of China as the ultimate realm to which Vietnam belonged could have been only a "diplomatic" perception assumed by a vassal state. His findings in the book, therefore, cannot fulfill his far-reaching claim to counter the entire body of scholarship on Vietnam that has a much wider scope covering the cultural life and works of Vietnamese rulers, court officials, Confucian literati, and peasants. While a part of writings in *nôm* could be "mere" aesthetic experiments – and the idea of experiment itself can hardly be completely separated from politics – it cannot be generalized that the whole body of vernacular writings since the inception of the script merely served that purpose if we take into account works of translation. The literati might be interested in experimenting with their newly invented poetic forms and language, but

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the very act of translating the foundational texts of Chinese culture and ideology into the vernacular, especially when translation itself would not serve practical dissemination purposes, implicates at least at the psychological level some sort of "heresy" that the Vietnamese literati were willing to assume.

The political implications of the *nôm* script have been discussed by two important literary scholars who have surveyed the history of Vietnamese literatures, Dương Quảng Hàm ([1941] 1986) and Thanh Lãng (1967). Hàm first published his two volumes of *Việt Nam văn học sử yếu* (A basic history of Vietnamese literature) in 1941. In this project, he reviewed in a somewhat chronological order the evolution of Vietnamese literatures. In several chapters on *nôm* literature from the Trần dynasty to the late nineteenth century, Hàm often offered subjective assessments of *nôm* writings, in which he conceptualized the notion of evolution as a movement from rudimentary to more refined forms of writing along the axis of the increasing distance from Chinese canons and conventions. For example, after a discussion of *nôm* writings in the sixteenth century, he concluded that "*nôm* literature, in embryo during the Trần dynasty, has made more and more achievements through the [Late] Lê and Mạc dynasties.... *Nôm* poetry in the sixteenth century shows more refinements in comparison with that of the fifteenth century. In the *Hồng Đức* collection [fifteenth century, by the Tao Đàn Society], the verses are heavy and laden with Chinese words and are still trapped in Chinese poetic frames; in the *Bạch Vân* collection [sixteenth century, by Nguyễn Bỉnh Khiêm (1491-1585)], however, the

verses have become more elegant and there are fewer Chinese words used, showing a purer and more fluent language" ([1941] 1986: 297).[21]

In a more explicit focus on the political implications in Vietnamese literature, Thanh Lãng, in the first volume (*quyển thượng*) of his monumental book *Bảng lược đồ văn học Việt Nam* (A map of Vietnamese literatures, 1967), located *nôm* writings in a larger context of the Vietnamese resistance against Chinese domination. In this book, Lãng conceived of *nôm* literature as a form of Vietnamese resistance among many others, including military struggles, the re-writing of Vietnamese history stressing the distinct historical and mythical origin of the Vietnamese people, and criticism of Chinese theories and teachings (ibid.: 12-14). The volume, which covers almost seven centuries of the literary history of Vietnam, was structured by Lãng around the axis of antagonism and resistance. In such a structure, Lãng underscored the venues in which Vietnamese writers of different historical junctures encountered and responded to the social, cultural, and political problems of their times. Thus Lãng's analysis and selection of the included poems and narratives often revolved around a dynamic of power at work in the cultural and literary production of premodern Vietnam. In a rather polemical tone, Thanh Lãng contended that writing in the *nôm* script must have been, since Hàn Thuyên, an officially instituted movement against Chinese influence. He even went as far as claiming that "it was in the anti-Chinese spirit that a new literature was born, that is, the literature of Vietnam" (ibid.: 14). According to Lãng, together with the oral literature transmitted

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[21] For a discussion in English of the evolution of the Vietnamese literature in *nôm*, with quite similar judgments of poetic and lexical forms, see Durand and Nguyen Tran Huan (1985).

among common people, writings in *nôm* constituted an organized effort to cultivate a national culture and identity and a political resistance to foreign domination.

Not unlike Dương Quảng Hàm before him, Thanh Lãng at some points in his book also noted the evolution of Vietnamese literatures, especially at the advent of the vernacular *nôm* script, and the same criterion seemed to be at work in his view: the increasing distance from Chinese language and conventions as a marker of higher and more refined art (ibid.: 111-12). But with Thanh Lãng's work, we see a glimpse of his perception of translation as the very process underlying the literary evolution from total borrowing from Chinese sources to an "elevated" form of art that uses both local and foreign materials. While translation had been taking place between the Confucian literati and his farming neighbors even before the coming of the *nôm* script, the invention of the new writing system reinvigorated this translation and proliferated a rich body of written literature. With the new script, the translation between the two cultural spheres, the local sphere of oral traditions and the imported sphere of Confucianism, was transformed from a spontaneous translation conditioned by spatial intimacy to somewhat more concerted writing movements bearing the mark of nationalism and political resistance. In this transformation, writing was no longer bound in the Confucian master text nor did it aim at the valorization and promotion of moral and social principles from the perspective of the literate elite. In *Quốc âm thi tập* (The collected poems in *nôm*, 1838) by Nguyễn Trãi (1380-1442), oral traditions already permeated writing through the mediation of the *nôm*

script, creating new forms of expression, sensibilities, and thematic issues that had never existed in the Vietnamese scene of writing.[22]

But nationalism or nationalist resistance to foreign oppression might be a modern analytical category that scholars of our times unwittingly impose on the consciousness of the Vietnamese living centuries ago. Even the narrower notion of cultural nationalism might appear too totalizing when applied to the case of premodern Vietnam. The Vietnamese intolerance of foreign invasions and their eventual successful expulsions of various intruders are historically evident, yet such a history should not serve as the only point of reference in the interpretation of the Vietnamese consciousness of nationhood in writing. Writing is a complex process that cuts across several realms, social, cultural, political, and psychological as well. As I have suggested earlier, the Vietnamese struggles for independence, particularly during the millennium of Chinese oppression, reflect more of a desire for economic and political autonomy and territorial sovereignty, and when it came to issues of culture and language, the Vietnamese often found themselves amid the various trajectories within a field of ambivalence and fluidity.[23] Nguyễn Trãi, a renowned

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[22] *Quốc âm thi tập* is one of the seven volumes of *Ức Trai di tập* (The remaining writings of Ức Trai), Ức Trai being Nguyễn Trãi's style name. This collection of multiple volumes was compiled in the twenty-first year of the Tự Đức reign, 1868.

[23] The emblem of the Vietnamese territorial consciousness is most clearly manifest in the poem "The Southern emperor rules the Southern land" by General Lý Thường Kiệt (1019-1105). According to popular accounts, he read this poem to his troops in 1076 and aroused their martial spirit to fight against Song aggressors. As the poem eloquently affirmed the Vietnamese territorial sovereignty vis-à-vis China, it is considered in the modern times as the first Vietnamese declaration of independence. The poem, as translated by Huỳnh Sanh Thông (1996: 27), reads as follows:
  The Southern emperor rules the Southern land.
  Our destiny is writ in Heaven's Book.
  How dare ye bandits trespass on our soil?
  Ye shall meet your undoing at our hands!

politician and military tactician, advisor to Lê Lợi (1385-1433) during his revolt against the Ming from 1418 to victory in 1427, was himself a remarkable writer whose works switched back and forth between Chinese and *nôm*. According to Thanh Lãng, although Nguyễn Trãi's Chinese texts are filled with political themes, there lurks in his *nôm* poetry a popular voice resonating the life of common people through his translation of elitist Chinese into the local language spoken by the Vietnamese in their daily life (ibid.:102-03).[24] His most famous work is "Đại cáo bình Ngô" (The great proclamation upon the pacification of China Wu, 1428), a text held in great veneration as the second Vietnamese declaration of independence.[25] After Lê Lợi expelled the Ming in 1427, he ordered Nguyễn Trãi to write a proclamation of victory for dissemination to the people. He opened the text, written in classical Chinese, as follows:

> Now think upon this Đại Việt land of ours;
> Truly is it a cultured nation.
> As mountain and river make for various lands,
> so our Southern ways must differ from the North.
> It was the Triệu, the Đinh, the Lý and Trần
> who in succession built this country.
> Even as the Han, the T'ang, and Sung and Yüan,
> Each was sovereign in its own domain. (Nguyễn Trãi [1428] 2001: 37)[26]

Eloquent as it was in terms of territorial independence and political assertion, the poem was written in classical Chinese, and it is hard to find throughout Vietnamese medieval history a proclamation in the cultural realm of equal grandeur and force.

[24] For a Marxist acclamation of the popularization of writing in the *nôm* script, see Cao Huy Đỉnh (1974).

[25] For an explanation of the use of "Wu" to refer to the Ming, see Nguyễn Nam (2005: 18).

[26] I use here the English translation suggested by Stephen O'Harrow (1979: 168-69); added diacritic marks are mine. In this article, O'Harrow also offers a discussion of the different Vietnamese, French, and English translations of Nguyễn Trãi's text.

Recent scholarship has shown that "Đại cáo bình Ngô" is more opaque in terms of its address than many scholars have assumed it to be. Stephen O'Harrow (1979), for example, assumes that the text was written to address China as a defeated oppressor and pronounce Vietnam as an autonomous civilized nation with distinct customs and traditions worthy of pride vis-à-vis the Chinese civilization. Liam Kelly, on the contrary, contends that the text enunciated a "stern warning to the Vietnamese who had collaborated with the occupying Ming forces," rather than an exultation of national sovereignty (2005: 19-20). While the Sino-Vietnamese political relationship in the premodern era is a complex issue, it is clear from "Đại cáo bình Ngô" that Nguyễn Trãi conceptualized a distinct cultural realm of "our Southern ways" in tandem with territorial sovereignty. In his other works, Nguyễn Trãi showed a deep concern about the sustenance and integrity of this distinct realm. He more than once warned of the "harmful" intermingling of customs and traditions brought about by the geographical closeness between Đại Việt and other nations. Nguyễn Trãi's *Dư địa chí* (Geographical records, 1435), for example, can be considered as a continuation of the author's engagement with the identification and differentiation of the Đại Việt borders and culture. In this text, Nguyễn Trãi delineated in great detail the geographical, social, cultural, and political characters of the different regions within Đại Việt borders, often in comparison with those in neighboring nations. At one point towards the end of the text, he warned his countrymen of the cultural harm of "imitating" foreign tongues and customs. He wrote, quite concerned: "Countrymen must not imitate the tongues and clothes of China, Champa, Laos, Siam, and Chenla to disturb the integrity of the customs of our kingdom" ([1435] 2001: 481). This warning, however, is historically ambivalent,

especially when he mentioned the need to preserve the purity of the Vietnamese language.

Nguyễn Trãi's ambivalence lies in the fact that he wrote *Dư địa chí*, like "Đại cáo bình Ngô," in classical Chinese, and not in the *nôm* script. There is no lack of stereotypical representation of other languages in Nguyễn Trãi's ideas. For him, "the Chinese speak with the tip of their tongues, and one needs translation for understanding; the Laotian language is guttural; the languages of Siam, Champa, and Chenla sound like suffocated birds; and one must not mimic them to disturb our speech" (ibid.). As the country was linguistically divided between the literati who were well versed in classical Chinese and the peasants who were mostly illiterate and spoke indigenous Vietnamese, Nguyễn Trãi's use of the term "countrymen" is largely ambiguous, and so is "our speech." It seems here that he only addressed common Vietnamese, and the literati fell outside of his vision of linguistic integrity, as after all, *Dư địa chí* was written in a "foreign" tongue. Regarding the use of classical Chinese in premodern East Asian countries such as Japan, Korea, and Vietnam, Nguyễn Nam argues that it was a "natural" phenomenon for the literati (2005: 17). Chinese in the fifteenth-century Vietnam was no longer viewed as a foreign language, and writing in Chinese did not conjure up the condition of cultural exile or displacement that the translingual subjects of modern colonialism often find themselves in. The Kenyan author Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o, for example, presents an interesting case of the linguistic and cultural antagonism implicated in colonial translingualism. In *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (1986), Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o denounces African writers' embracement of European languages, including renowned figures such as Chinua Achebe and Gabriel

Okara. Contending that European colonialism alienates colonized subjects in their own natural and cultural environment through exploitive politics and subjugating education, Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o calls for a return to one's native language. For him, "writing in Gĩkũyũ language, a Kenyan language, an African language, is part and parcel of the anti-imperialist struggles of Kenyan and African peoples" (ibid.: 28).

Such antagonistic translingualism in the colonial space did not exist as a prominent feature in the Vietnamese premodern society. What appears as a contradiction in Nguyễn Trãi's teachings of linguistic purity and his own translingual practice only appears as such within the framework of modern nationalism and identitarian politics. In this regard, Annie Brisset has made clear in the case of Québécois theatre translation that "within a nationalist perspective, language and territory are coextensive. Thus, neither language nor territory allows for any sharing" (1989: 11). There are several reasons for the naturalization of Chinese and translingual practices in premodern Vietnam and the exclusion of language from the Vietnamese conceptualization of autonomy. First, as Nguyễn Trãi noted, Chinese speech had become unintelligible and would require translation to achieve understanding. After the Vietnamese overthrew the Chinese protectorate system and established their independent kingdom in the tenth century, the country was linguistically separated from China, so that the Vietnamese literati continued to use T'ang Chinese, of course in its deeply Vietnamized phonological form, while mainland Chinese continued to grow in its own trajectories (Nguyễn Tài Cẩn 1979). And five centuries later, Nguyễn Trãi already saw translation as a differential marker between the "two" languages, a necessity if understanding was to be achieved. However, calling Chinese a home language for the majority of the Vietnamese would be misleading.

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Although it had grown to be a separate language from Chinese, at least phonologically, due to the divergent linguistic processes between China and Vietnam, classical Chinese was simply alien to the peasants and other illiterate segments of the population. But from the perspective of the literati, classical Chinese could hardly be designated as a foreign language.[27] Therefore, as long as literacy was restricted to the ability to read and write in classical Chinese, language was not called upon as an emblem of national identity and sovereignty. The issue of a national language as part and parcel of the nationalist cause did not come to prominence at least until literacy was spread to larger parts of the population and redefined in popular terms rather than from the perspective of the elite.[28] Another cause for the naturalization of Chinese among the Vietnamese elite was the sheer millennium of the Chinese colonial era itself, during which intensive domestication took place, resulting in a perceived homelikeness of Chinese language and culture in Vietnam. But it should be noted that perceived homelikeness is not synonymous to something ontologically fixed, as Chinese was eventually erased from use in Vietnam during French colonialism, together with the termination of the classical civil examination system in the early twentieth century.[29] Present-day Vietnamese cannot speak or write Chinese without

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[27] Phạm Quỳnh, for example, said in an essay in 1918, "In the past, our national writing language was classical Chinese, and classical Chinese was our national writing language. Nobody would bother distinguishing which one was our tongue and which one was the foreign tongue. As far as writing was concerned, there was only classical Chinese" (2006: 331).

[28] Note that the term "national language" (*quốc âm*) were already in use in the fifteenth century, as in the titles of such collections as Nguyễn Trãi's *Quốc âm thi tập* and the *Hồng Đức quốc âm thi tập* by the Tao Đàn Society. However, this use was rather for differentiating purposes in a bilingual context rather than as a political discourse of nationalism.

[29] Chinese was first expelled from official use during the Tây Sơn dynasty (1770-1802). Emperor Quang Trung issued most his court ordinances in the *nôm* script. However, after Nguyễn Ánh defeated the Tây Sơn in 1802, as if to break away from his

learning it as a foreign language. As a home language for two millennia, Chinese was

turned into a totally foreign tongue, in a matter of a few decades. There has even been a

concerted effort to excavate and eradicate it from the depths of the Vietnamese tongue

and psyche (see Chapter 4). The "mode of being a language," to borrow Antoine

Berman's phrase (1990: xiii), of being Chinese in premodern Vietnam, was one of

ambivalence and fluidity.

This ambivalence was further deepened as the literati started to take up writing in

the *nôm* script alongside classical Chinese. The new writing enterprise had significant

socio-psychological consequences. If writing in classical Chinese had been subsumed in

court life and mainly concerned with the didactic upholding of social and moral

principles, in *nôm*, it transgressed into the worldly, and often subversive, domains of self

and nature. The self became the center of poetic reflections, especially in its relation to

nature and society. These poetic tropes are ubiquitous in Nguyễn Trãi's *Quốc âm thi tập*.

In this collection, readers often encounter the poet in his retreat from political life,

pondering upon the self as it is situated in between the simplicity of nature and the

complexity of social life. In one poem, Nguyễn Trãi expressed his skeptical view of

human nature and a determined withdrawal from politics:

> One can fathom the depth of the sea,
> But not that of the human heart,
> If asked about current affairs,
> I'm a deaf man, I would reply.[30]

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foe's legacy, he reestablished the use of classical Chinese, which was continued up to the
twentieth century.
    [30] This is an extract from Poem 6 in Chapter 2, "Ngôn chí" (The verbal will) of

In another instance, Nguyễn Trãi found himself indulging in the tranquility of reading:

> A book and a lamp, my two old friends,
> An apricot window, a bamboo veranda, my tranquil heart.[31]

If in "Đại cáo bình Ngô" we hear the powerful voice of a politician and statesman of great stature, in Nguyễn Trãi's *nôm* poetry, the voice turns onto itself, reflecting a meditating poet who has found shelter in his native language. In this new linguistic home, Nguyễn Trãi expressed an intimate connection with nature, and nature appears in his poems not as *the* Law, but in its most mundane, pure, and even arbitrary appearances: a stream in the woods, a stone covered with moss, the turning of seasons, blooming flowers, singing birds, or mating butterflies.[32] Court affairs and Confucian ideals could hardly find a place in this new form of expression, and the Confucian scholar and politician turned into a hermit seeking solace in solitude and nature. For the politician/poet Nguyễn Trãi, writing in *nôm* became a form of traversing the translingual self to forge and experience a new identity free of politics and social corruption. The voice of his *nôm* poems reverberates in simplicity an alternative self, a second identity

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Quốc âm thi tập. I am grateful to my colleague Lê Nguyên Long for his thoughtful suggestions for my translations of these pieces. Translating these poems turned out to be more demanding than Nguyễn Trãi's poetic simplicity might suggest.

[31] An extract from Poem 7 in "Ngôn chí."

[32] In this regard, we sometimes see a Buddhist ethos in Nguyễn Trãi's poetry. "The hibiscus" for example depicts the pure and ephemeral quality of a flower called the "Buddha's flower" (*bông bụt*). The piece was translated by Huỳnh Sanh Thông as follows:
The water gleams and mirrors this red flower.
It bears no stain, for Buddha is its heart.
At break of day it blooms, by dusk it falls.
O wondrous law! A thing becomes no-thing. (Huỳnh Sanh Thông 1996: 61)

that is in no way secondary. Steven Kellman's characterization of "translingualism as a form of self-begetting, as the willed renovation of an individual's own identity" (2000: 21) finds interesting resonance in Nguyễn Trãi's works.

However, *Quốc âm thi tập* does not present a coherent attitude of a retreating politician, a man of deep Confucian learning and rectitude. There are instances where Nguyễn Trãi showed his deep engagement with what he perceived as the role of writing: fighting social and political malice. In an eloquent tone, he wrote:

> Writing upholds the teachings of ancient sages.
> Following the loyalty path, it is my work,
> Fighting malice, fighting greed, and fighting cruelty,
> Tending benevolence, tending the mind, and tending courage.[33]

The scholar Đinh Gia Khánh has seen in Nguyễn Trãi "the supplementarity between a man of action and a man of writing" (1982: 205). This supplementarity, I suggest, is of a translingual nature. Towards the end of Lê Lợi's reign, Nguyễn Trãi witnessed the disintegrating Lê court immersed in paranoia, political conspiracy, and perpetual fights for power from different segments of the royal family. He retreated from the capital to live the simple life of a hermit, and yet he was never totally detached from the realities of the court he had helped to establish.[34] Nguyễn Trãi continued to use writing to step in and out of the socio-political realm. Unlike his writings in Chinese, which often emanate his Confucian ideals blended with a national spirit, Nguyễn Trãi's *nôm* poetry combines the Confucian ethos of a self determined to engage in social and moral order and a self in

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[33] Extract from Poem 5 in Chapter 10, "Bảo kính cảnh giới" (The precious mirror for self-teaching).

[34] Indeed, three generations of his entire clan were executed in 1442 for a feud allegation of regicide.

search of personal delight, spiritual meditation, and artistic sublimation. Writing in *nôm*, as we see it in Nguyễn Trãi's works, did not split the writing subject into separate selves corresponding to the different realms of society and politics, but *supplemented* the existing faculty of Chinese writing, reinvigorating the process of appropriating Chinese materials and pushing the limits of expression and interpretation. Before Nguyễn Trãi, Lê Quý Ly had refused to read Chinese classics in their original language as a way to reject the orthodox Confucian field of interpretation. Here *nôm* writing introduced into the scene of writing a certain measure of ambivalence, of translingual supplementarity that would free the writer from the constraints of the rooted traditions of composing and interpreting texts. If writing in Chinese confined the literati within the Confucian system of principles and ideals, the *nôm* script enlarged writing into a field where social realities were represented and came alive in their beauty as well as malignancy. While this translingual supplementarity retained the rigor of the traditional Chinese writing, it also developed a novel view of society as lived, and not as ideally abstracted, by the writing subject as well as by the common people. Translingualism in premodern Vietnam in Nguyễn Trãi's time, I suggest, inaugurated a tradition of social engagement in writing that had never existed before the invention of the *nôm* script. As a man of translingual writing, Nguyễn Trãi's first action was expanding the scene of writing and engaging social critiques in his works, and thus creating a tradition of social criticism followed by men of "belles-lettres" in subsequent eras.

It could be concluded that up to the fifteenth century, as reflected in Nguyễn Trãi's works, the Confucian ideology began to be split and hybridized, but it was not a kind of spontaneous and haphazard hybridity conditioned by the shared social space of

the literati and the peasant (see 2.3). Here hybridity was effected through a conscious act of writing and translation. Of course, writing remained to be an elitist faculty of the Confucian literati, but writing in the vernacular script was ideologically and psychologically an entirely different experience, since composing in *nôm*, as Lại Nguyên Ân points out, was for the literati an "unusual, if not heretic, activity" (1998: 54).

2.5.3 The *lục-bát* verse narrative: from *The Song of a Soldier's Wife* to *The Tale of Kiều*

As the literati stepped outside of his Confucian home to find solace in harmony with nature and with life beyond the scholarly and political realm, they picked up the *nôm* script as a means of literary expression and crafted for themselves a new identity. Writing started to be open to realities and sensibilities in non-Confucian realms, including the native oral traditions. As the spoken word got represented, albeit by a Confucian, writing could not remain the same, but enriched by new forms, themes, and sensibilities. The T'ang form of poetry with its rigidly regulated prosody found its limits in the heterogeneous cultural life of common people with their rich traditions of storytelling and folk singing varied from one region to another.[35] Oral traditions provided the literati with the *lục-bát* verse form, which he would then use to compose original texts, and more importantly, translate Chinese writings into the vernacular script. Although Nguyễn Trãi did not use *lục bát* in his poetry, he inspired later generations of Confucian literati to search for writing material from their local culture. By the late eighteenth century, *lục-bát*

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[35] Huỳnh Sanh Thông characterizes the T'ang prosody as "bewildering intricacies and exigencies packed into a narrow compass" (1979: xxvii). He points out that the strict formal schematization of rhymes and parallelism epitomizes the Confucian ideal as "a cult of punctilios, a reverence for authority, an aversion to heterodoxy" (ibid.).

verse narrative had become the major form of composing and translating for the literati. The prominence of *lục bát* signifies the pervasive penetration of oral traditions into what Victor Mair calls "literary Sinitic" with regard to Chinese literary traditions (2001: 27-31). Mair distinguishes between literary Sinitic and vernacular Sinitic. The former refers the dominant writing style in ancient China that strived for literary concision and expressive density, and to that end, filtered out all the spoken elements of the Chinese language. Vernacular Sinitic, on the other hand, refers to the multiple vernaculars spoken by the illiterate peasants. Mair observes that "most of the vernacular languages of China have never been reduced to writing throughout their entire history. And even standard written Mandarin is usually peppered with [literary Sinitic] elements to such an extent that it can hardly be thought of grammatically, syntactically, or lexically as vernacular in the true sense of the word" (ibid.: 31). Mair mentions several reasons for this condition, but translation is not one of them. While I cannot make any conclusive judgments about the situation, I surmise that translation or non-translation played a central role in this historical non-development of the vernaculars in China.

The situation was different in Vietnam. The vernacular *nôm* script, through the practice of *diễn nôm*, survived and even prepared the way for the termination of the use of Chinese. It is not accidental that the best works in *nôm* are products of translation. Since literacy in Chinese was limited within the elite circles in premodern Vietnam, and the *nôm* script, interestingly enough, would require one a fair knowledge of Chinese to understand it, the multitude of peasants and other illiterate plebes still relied on the oral transmission of their literature. Nonetheless, orality and literacy were not distanced apart to the extent of complete isolation but found *diễn nôm*, with it the *lục-bát* verse narrative,

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as a perfect means of mediation. While the mass could not read, they could memorize the stories and poems rendered in the *lục-bát* form thanks to its highly musical and supple folk melodies.[36] Also, because of its symmetrical rhyme scheme, *lục-bát* verses can extend infinitely as far as the story goes, giving it not only richness in texture but also a capability of expressing diverse themes and subjects, a touchstone for its participation in the political discourse of the modern times, especially during the Đông Du movement. The *lục-bát* verse narrative, often called *truyện thơ nôm* in Vietnamese, represents the emblem of the subtle work of translation between the home oral culture and the imported culture of literacy and Confucian ideology. From the simple, memorable verses chanted by common people as lullabies or as inspirational songs performed in the collective space of labor and festivities, *lục-bát* was elevated by the literati into a rich and sophisticated form of art that blends classical artistic refinement and elegance with the intimate and highly transmittable texture of popular culture. The kind of translation that *lục bát* produced was a complete domestication of the foreign in a way that the home language was enriched and supplemented with a repertoire of narratives from Chinese, contributing to the maturation of the language and its readiness for the sweeping force of modern colonialism in the nineteenth century.

In what follows, I recount the rise to canonicity of two texts of translation as proof of the constitutive role of translation in the evolution of the Vietnamese language and culture. Translation is shown here as a mechanism underpinning linguistic and cultural

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[36] One can actually sing or chant the *lục-bát* verses. A popular practice in rural Vietnam is singing *ca dao*, folk poetry, a majority of which is expressed in the *lục-bát* form. See the introduction to John Balaban (2003). *Diễn nôm* is also called *diễn ca*, with *ca* meaning singing or chanting.

processes that render the Vietnamese identity extremely fluid. Stephen Roberts, a historian of French colonialism, has characterized the Vietnamese as "peaceful absorbers and conquerors, spreading their influence in the way a tropical forest inexorably creeps over a tract of cleared land" (1963: 434). Here Roberts alludes to the Vietnamese southwards expansion that culminated in the total annexation of the Champa Kingdom to Đại Việt in 1832. In Roberts' view, the peaceful, insidious absorption that the Vietnamese have shown throughout their history both as victims and perpetrators of oppression constitutes "an intangible force – the soul and religion of a people" that rendered futile French political and military superiority (ibid.: 436). The two texts under discussion in this section are vivid demonstrations of Roberts' notion of the Vietnamese "soul and religion," which is, I suggest, also the Vietnamese power of translation. The first text, *Chinh phụ ngâm*, translated into English by Huỳnh Sanh Thông as *The Song of a Soldier's Wife* (1986),[37] is a translation, in the most proper sense of the word, from a poem written in classical Chinese by Đặng Trần Côn (1710?-1745) around the time between 1737 and 1742. The second text, *Truyện Kiều*, translated by Huỳnh Sanh Thông as *The Tale of Kiều* (1983), was adapted by Nguyễn Du (1765-1820) in the period between 1814 and 1815 from a Chinese prose novel.[38] Both texts were written/translated by men during the social and political upheaval of the eighteenth century, and both are about women.

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[37] Huỳnh Sanh Thông based his translation on Phan Huy Ích's Vietnamese translation, but he also included the original text in Chinese at the end of the book. In a much more fluent, target-oriented language, Keith Bosley (1972) translated an extract of this poem, which he calls "Ode of the War Wife."

[38] The exact time when Nguyễn Du wrote *Truyện Kiều* is still a matter of controversy. There have been five different suggested dates, and I am using here the date proposed by Nguyễn Quảng Tuân (2009).

The Song of a Soldier's Wife tells about the emotions of a woman yearning for her husband to come back from the battlefield. It was written in classical Chinese and translated into Vietnamese in the *nôm* script by several of the author's contemporaries, including the renowned woman poet Đoàn Thị Điểm (1705-1748). Research has shown that there are some seven Vietnamese versions of the poem, the most popular of which has been for a long time credited to Đoàn Thị Điểm. However, a well-known scholar, Hoàng Xuân Hãn (1953), has proven that this translation is the work of Phan Huy Ích (1750-1822), a mandarin who first served the Late Lê dynasty and then the Tây Sơn before he retreated from politics when the Tây Sơn collapsed in 1802. Hãn's thesis has been widely accepted today, and the translation itself has been considered one of the few best works in Vietnamese literature. The extremely fluent and artistic rendition of Đặng Trần Côn's text in the *song-thất-lục-bát* form (double-seven six-eight) has been considered by many scholars as proof of the maturation of the Vietnamese language, and also of its status as a distinct language capable of translating great masterpieces in other languages, especially Chinese. Đặng Thai Mai, for example, lauds the translation for its emanation of "unique national characters" through a "fluent, faithful, and original" language of translation ([1950] 1992: 72). The sheer number of translations of the poem shows a genuine passion for the home language among the contemporary Vietnamese literati, especially in a context where translation would not serve any practical dissemination purposes.[39] Although writing in *nôm* was already quite popular at the time

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[39] It could be surmised that *nôm* translation, or *diễn nôm*, served the purpose of oral transmission, which was only available in the native language. But there has been very little evidence of *nôm* translators' association with a formal network of storytellers living among the people or moving from one village to another to tell stories as in other cultures. The existence of such a network in Vietnamese villages is in any case of great

Đặng Trần Côn wrote *The Song of a Soldier's Wife*, literacy was still defined as a privileged ability to read and write in Chinese. Moreover, as I have mentioned, to read or write in the *nôm* script required at least some basic knowledge of Chinese. Therefore, *nôm* translation in general was not carried out primarily for those illiterate in Chinese or for the larger public beyond the circles of Confucian literati. In this sense, *nôm* translation was quite narcissistic on the part of the translators, who were also learned Confucians.

What is most interesting about Phan Huy Ích's translation of *The Song of a Soldier's Wife* is that the translator left a trace of his thoughts on translation, something uncommon in medieval Vietnam. Upon completing his translation, Phan Huy Ích wrote a short poem in Chinese to commemorate the event:

> *The Song of a Soldier's Wife* by Nhân-mục master [Đặng Trần Côn],
> with sublime melody it resounds in the Garden of Letters.
> One has read and passed it on as a great song;
> A good many have strived to render it in our tongue.
> The rhyme of translation can't fully depict its essence,
> Only in music does its lyric rouse reverence.
> At leisure I created this new poem,
> believing I have expressed all thoughts in tandem.[40]

It is obvious that Phan Huy Ích was addressing other men of letters in this poem at a time when the original *The Song of a Soldier's Wife* had gained some popularity among the

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doubt, because Vietnamese folk literature is mainly poetry. Most translators were courtiers, who were quite detached from common people. Some Confucian scholars living in villages might have participated in *nôm* translation, but it is unlikely that they translated first of all for the people. As I will show later, *nôm* translation was quite narcissistic on the part of the Confucian literati. Yet, this does not negate the fact that their translations eventually reached common people who then passed them on among communities and villages.

[40] I based my translation on the Vietnamese version of the poem as found in Nguyễn Minh Tấn (1988: 90).

literati and had also been translated several times. The fact that he wrote the commemorating poem in Chinese rather than in *nôm* suggests that he considered his own translation as only part of an exchange among the literati, and not something that would ultimately benefit those who could not read it in Chinese. *Nôm* translation was only an activity taken up by the literati "at leisure," yet there was a sense of passion, or even competition, in translation among the men of letters. Even though he viewed translation as fundamentally deficient in comparison to the original text, Phan Huy Ích presented his version to his peers, believing that it was a faithful transference of the author's thoughts. In a sense, *nôm* translation formed a dialogue in which the literati expressed their response to what they read and to each other's interpretation through translation.

Đặng Trần Côn's poem inspired not only a proliferation of translations but also original writings that emulated his stylistic and thematic model. For many critics, through the voice of a lamenting woman, Đặng Trần Côn showed his own antiwar sentiment, and the woman's lament became a kind of "literary masquerade," to borrow Anne Robinson Taylor's notion (1981: 3), with which the Confucian literati expressed their social criticism in times of war and political upheaval. In a world of Confucian culture where men were bound up in norms of righteousness and loyalty to the imperial throne, an outward cry against the Emperor's appeal for war could be considered a coward abandonment of compulsory services to the state and a failure to uphold the strong will and mind of a learned man. The antiwar sentiment in the sense of humanitarianism was simply an alien ideal in Confucianism. One must serve and respond to the imperial throne, and men were supposed to be able to repress the fleeting sentiment of humanistic

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compassion or personal yearnings and emotions. Only women were deemed as prone to sentimental expressivity.

Born and growing up in the political turmoil of the eighteenth-century Vietnam – the partition of the country and the devastating political rivalry between the Nguyễn and the Trịnh clans – Đặng Trần Côn witnessed the uncertain condition of life and the disintegration of the family at the hands of constant warfare. Yet, he himself was a Confucian scholar and served in the imperial system as a mandarin. For him, speaking against the war deemed as righteous and legitimate was impossible within his Confucian background. The woman's voice that Đặng Trần Côn used in his poem thus served to represent the poet's own cry, which was ideologically transposed into that of a woman. Speaking from the point of view of a woman constituted for the Confucian poet a "liberating disguise," and as Taylor points out, the narrative pose of the woman releases the male artist from the male power structure (ibid.: 4-5). Disguising as a woman, the male poet was able to express his true feelings and emotions without violating the Confucian constraints of loyalty and masculinity. Yet unlike the male novelists under Taylor's discussion, whose personal experiences – exposure to dangers, illness, family history – often resemble the womanly situation of powerlessness and physical vulnerability, here Đặng Trần Côn used the woman's condition to depict his ideological ambivalence towards the imperial system that he saw himself as a vehicle of. The poem opens with a question:

> When all through earth and heaven rise dust storms,
> how hard and rough, the road a woman walks!
> O thou that rulest in yonder blue above,
> who is the cause and maker of this woe? (1986: 3)

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This primary question disguises a political maneuver on the part of the poet. First, he posits a cosmic realm beyond human determination and knowledge by metaphorically alluding to war as "dust storms" in the realm of "earth and heaven." The woman's suffering as a consequence of war is thus displaced into this cosmic world, and the poet poses his question as one that cannot be answered in the existential world. Although the poem appears at first as a story told by the poet himself from the third-person point of view, the narrator very often assumes the woman's voice in the first person, and the poem turns into an address of a lamenting wife to her absent husband. Đặng Trần Côn is in a sense writing himself into the woman's voice, creating an enunciatory position, a discursive space disguised in the cosmic from within which he laments on the politics of war and suffering in his immediate world. The male character, the noble-ranked man on duty to serve his Emperor, thus only appears in the poem through the woman's perspective as the second-person interlocutor. From outside of the male power structure, the woman speaks of her husband as uneasily situated between the personal and the mandatory:

> My heart pursues you like the moon on high.
> Your heart leaps space, bound for the Thousand Peaks. (ibid.: 9)

And the I/you address continues throughout the poem:

> A hundred hardships strew the path of fame-
> you toil and struggle, never taking rest.
> To whom can you confide what moves your heart?
> I'm here at home, you're there at heaven's edge.
>
> Inside this door I live my fated life,
> but were you born to roam at heaven's edge?
> We hoped to join like the fish and water once:
> instead, we've split apart, a stream, a cloud. (ibid.: 27)

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As if under the weight of such an address, the two English translators of the poem, Huỳnh

Sanh Thông, whose translation I am using here, and Keith Bosley (1972), freely insert the

first and second-person pronouns of "I" and "you" even where the narrative returns to the

third-person point of view in the Vietnamese version. Transposing his own voice and the

politics in his immediate world into the cosmic realm, the poet, feeling more secured,

reflects upon men's own mandatory submission in a Confucian society, with subversive

hindsight and regret:

> When I gaze back at willows, how I wish
> I'd counseled you to spurn a noble's rank.
> I wonder, while you're traveling your long road,
> Does it, your heart, feels what my own heart feels? (ibid.: 59)

Another question, and this time, the woman's question of the man's noble and mandatory

service to the state, a question that cannot be asked from the male perspective. *The Song

of a Soldier's Wife* is a story about a woman, yet tells a man's inner thoughts and

emotions that were deemed unspeakable under the constraints of the Confucian male

authority. As a guardian of the power that constitutes him as a speaking and writing

subject, the Confucian poet is compelled to use literary masquerading to transpose his

voice into one that lies outside of the power structure and express his desire for a peaceful

family life: to feel in his heart what a woman feels. The woman becomes the man's

liberating disguise, an outside that makes possible his speaking of the unspeakable: the

conflict between personal desire and the noble, mandatory mission.

The fact that Đặng Trần Côn wrote this poem in classical Chinese was itself a

rather subversive act, because writing in classical Chinese invariably supposed a Hán

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world of Confucianism that would constrain the speaking subject within its ideologically

determined place of enunciation and field of expression. This is particularly true when

classical Chinese started to assume a rather localized position in the Vietnamese life. At

the time Đặng Trần Côn wrote the poem, it had been eight centuries since Vietnam

linguistically broke away from the Chinese realm, and instead of evolving and expanding

its use, Chinese was increasingly localized exclusively in the spheres of state

administration, scholarly compositions, and moral enunciations. Similarly, poetry in

classical Chinese, with highly regulated genres and meters, was localized into solemn and

serious topics. Writing about a woman deep in sentimental thoughts, nostalgia, and

womanly desire in this "elite" and highly functionalized language would seem quite a

heresy. This "antagonistic" relationship between the woman subject and the language of

the text is most discernible in the fact that thematically speaking, Đặng Trần Côn's poem

was a rare creation in classical Chinese.[41] Moreover, as Phan Huy Ích noted, the poem

triggered a series of Vietnamese versions by several of the readers, as if they could

perceive the misplacement of the woman subject in language. Translating the woman

from Chinese into Vietnamese signifies here a relocation of the subject, as it were, into a

more domestic environment. Interestingly enough, the woman as a literary figure of male

disguise did make a flourishing home in the tradition of *lục-bát* verse narrative in

premodern Vietnamese literature.

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[41] Regarding Đặng Trần Côn's rare work, Phạm Thế Ngũ comments: "Đặng Trần Côn's voice represents one of a young poet in his thirties, of low noble rank and merits, who was prone to sentimental indulgence and lacked statesmanship…. The theme of a lamenting war wife or husband did exist in poetry, but only in short verses, and the emotions of a soldier's wife were normally mentioned only in passing. Đặng on the contrary filled his long poem with emotions and romance, making it an epic heavily dripped with sentimentalism" (1965, 2: 167).

This homelikeness in the Vietnamese language for the woman is probably best reflected in the reception of the translation, especially Phan Huy Ích's version, which researchers prior to Hoàng Xuân Hãn's study (1953) assumed to be a work of Đoàn Thị Điểm. Commenting on this translation version, Phạm Thế Ngũ points out that first and foremost, the "success" of the translation lies in the translator's choice of the target genre. The double-seven six-eight (*song thất lục bát*) rhyme scheme works well with the mood of the narrative, rendering the text into a skillful weaving of smooth continuity and musicality that perfectly depicts the woman's emotions (1965, 2: 167). Yet, he cautions, the choice of genre alone could not have created such a wonderful text in Vietnamese without the "translator's talent of a genius writer" (ibid.). Ngũ apparently views the task of the translator as one of a writer, and it seems he suggests that this is particularly true for poetry translation. Repeating Hoàng Xuân Hãn's idea, Ngũ contends that the translator's genius lies in his ability to erase the trace of the original text in the translation, rendering it as a fluent original creation. In his commentary on the translation, Hãn himself uses an interesting notion of *consultation* to refer to the translator's free rendition of the text. Accordingly, "the translator only *consulted* the Chinese text, and then *wrote directly* in the target language, being faithful to the original only where it is *naturally* possible, and thus no self-imposition involved" (cited in Phạm Thế Ngũ 1965, 2: 168; italics added).

For Phạm Thế Ngũ, the translation of *The Song of a Soldier's Wife* represents an act of "re-creation and renewal" in which the translator feels free to assert his/her own poetic sensibilities (ibid.). In re-creating Đặng Trần Côn's poem, the translator created a new home for the woman subject. Analyzing some examples of the translator's

renditions, Ngũ notes that "nowhere in classical Chinese can one find such elegant and subtle lamentations" (ibid.: 169). He even criticized the original writer for his "straightforward and shallow" style, which was compensated by the supple and creative translation. Another aspect of the translation that Ngũ mentions is the translator's complete identification, not with the original author, but with the protagonist of the narrative, the suffering woman lamenting on her husband's on-duty absence. Ngũ points out how a factual, indifferent statement in the original text can be rendered into a deeply engaged sensibility on the part of the translator. Whereas the Chinese original indifferently talks about a classical stereotype in marriage and love, "I put on makeup and perfume for you," the translator not only faithfully rendered in *nôm* the wife's stereotypically loyal act of self-beautification but also skillfully added a feeling of tremendous sadness with the use of "não nùng" (ibid.). All in all, Phạm Thế Ngũ, like scholars before and after him, praises the translation for its skillful and elegant use of the Vietnamese language in recreating classical stereotypes of womanhood. Indeed, most scholars often consider Đoàn Thị Điểm/Phan Huy Ích as an original author, and *The Song* hardly appears to them as a translation at all. I read the radical domesticating translation of the woman subject from classical Chinese into Vietnamese and the perceived originality of the translation as an emblem of the effort to bring home a woman in exile. Domestication here represents repatriation. From a constrained language laden with classical references and conventions, the woman subject is translated into the liberating space of a home language through the creative and free strategies of domestication. The repatriated woman subject is now ready for her being used as a literary disguise for the male voice.

Following Đặng Trần Côn's lead, Nguyễn Gia Thiều (1741-1798) wrote *Cung oán ngâm khúc* (The song of a resentful courtesan). The exact year when *Cung oán* was written is still unknown today, and Thanh Lãng surmises that it was written around the time when the Tây Sơn mounted offenses against the Trịnh lords in the capital of Thăng Long in 1786. According to Lãng, Thiều wrote this poem of 356 verses while witnessing the political atmosphere of the Late Lê dynasty immersed in rivalry and execution (1967: 520). Nguyễn Gia Thiều is known to have written poems in both classical Chinese and *nôm*. Most of his Chinese writings, however, have been lost, and *Cung oán* stands out until today as the most valuable work among his *nôm* poetry. The poem was written in the same genre as the translation of Đặng Trần Côn's *The Song of a Soldier's Wife*, the double-seven six-eight verses. Stylistically, the poem shows a great impact that the *nôm* version of *The Song* had on Nguyễn Gia Thiều. Thiều's poem tells the sad story of a beautiful and talented woman who has to break up with her lover and move to court to serve as the Emperor's concubine. However, she soon experiences the bitterness and loneliness of court life when she falls into disfavor by the Emperor. The large part of the poem revolves around the woman's changing moods and emotions. If the woman in *The Song of a Soldier's Wife* is monotonously sorrowful, the woman in *Cung oán* shows an array of different attitudes and emotions, varying from sadness to despair, bitterness, and hopefulness. She laments her own fate and suffering, recalls the happy time of her past before being abandoned by the Emperor, and all is intertwined with her sporadic rebukes of the Emperor for his mistreatment of her. Her attitude often fluctuates between a complete retreat to herself and an outward projection of her crisis onto the world and her surroundings. Compared to the woman in *The Song*, the courtesan in Nguyễn Gia Thiều's

characterization is portrayed with a deeper psychological dimension and more complex emotions.

Too little is known about the author's personal background to make any definite conclusion regarding why Thiều wrote about a courtesan. Nonetheless, many scholars often interpret it, like in the case of Đặng Trần Côn's poem, as a literary disguise for the poet to lament on his immediate world of political turmoil, war, human suffering, and even the Confucian system of values and social practices (Thanh Lãng 1967: 521-29; Phạm Thế Ngũ 1965, 2: 174-75). A prominent feature in the character of the courtesan, as Phạm Thế Ngũ points out, is her contemplation, which was rendered by the author as deep and highly philosophical to an unrealistic extent (1965: 176). A peasant woman serving as a courtesan could not have entertained such deep thoughts. The narrative, therefore, appears to clearly mark the author's transposition of his own voice into the woman's voice, and from that disguised position, he mounted his criticism of what was going on behind the scene in the Lê court. If this thesis is true, we then once again see how the suffering woman was used in premodern Vietnamese literature to voice the male authors' perceptions and criticisms of their immediate social realities. In this regard, Đặng Trần Côn's poem, or rather, its popular *nôm* translation, played a central role. The woman in translation, couched in a domesticating language, became an embodiment of social unrest and political upheaval. Using the woman's voice became a discursive trope for learned men in premodern Vietnam to criticize the social and political realities of their times, a tradition that was continued up to the colonial period in the twentieth century. Most important of all, this tradition was created and developed through translation. From Đặng Trần Côn to Nguyễn Gia Thiều, we have had a glimpse of how translation

established a discourse of social criticism through literary masquerading. The *nôm* translation of the *Song of a Soldier's Wife* created within the home language a welcoming space for the woman subject to be firmly situated as a literary figure to voice male concerns.

The translation of Đặng Trần Côn's poem, however, presents a rather ambivalent case, because the poem itself was neither a foreign nor a home creation. Côn was a Vietnamese Confucian scholar who wrote in Chinese, a language that had a rather ambivalent status in the Vietnamese identity and culture. And *nôm* translation did not just take place within the repertoire of writings by Vietnamese authors. As far as *nôm* translation was concerned, the huge Chinese repertoire of stories, historical and fictional, presented for the Vietnamese translators a rich and almost inexhaustible source of inspiration and material. Many verse narratives are products of translation from Chinese sources. According to Lại Nguyên Ân's estimation, among the more than one hundred *nôm* verse narratives extant today, which Kiều Thu Hoạch puts together in a comprehensive list (1992: 257-62), at least twenty of them originate from Chinese stories. But this number only reflects what has been studied so far, and Ân contends that much more comparative research needs to be done to obtain a comprehensive understanding of this versatile narrative genre in Vietnamese literature (1998: 46). Although the ratio of one fifth may not prove the constitutive role of translation in the creation of a new genre, it is noticeable that the most popular *nôm* narratives are translations from Chinese sources. *Phan Trần truyện* (The tale of Phan Trần, unknown "author"), Nguyễn Huy Tự's *Hoa Tiên*, Lý Văn Phức's *Ngọc Kiều Lê tân truyện* (A new tale of Ngọc Kiều Lê), Kiều Ánh Mậu's *Tỳ bà quốc âm tân truyện* (The new tale of Tỳ bà in *nôm*), and most

celebrated of all, Nguyễn Du's *Truyện Kiều* (*The Tale of Kiều*) are all products of free translations from Chinese stories of different genres.

Considered the greatest masterpiece of Vietnamese literature of all times, Nguyễn Du's *The Tale of Kiều* was actually a translation from a Chinese prose novel entitled *Chin Yün Chi'iao chuan* (The tale of Chin, Yün, and Ch'iao). The novel was written at some point in the seventeenth century by a neglected author in China, known only by his pen name as Ch'ing-hsin Ts'ai-jen (Thanh Tâm tài nhân). Nguyễn Du must have obtained a copy of this novel during his envoy journey to China from 1813 to 1814. The original text, like its author, was almost forgotten in its own home country. Belonging to the Chinese tradition of "scholar-beauty" prose novels (*tiểu thuyết tài tử giai nhân*), it tells the story of a young woman, Kiều, who embarks on an eventful journey filled with hope and fear, love and cruelty, happiness and suffering, identity and self-transformation. Born into a mediocre family of literati, Kiều shines other women of her age with her beauty, grace, and talents. However, as the opening line tells us, "talent and destiny are apt to feud," Kiều soon has to betray her lover Kim Trọng and leave her cozy home in a marriage arranged as a way to pay off her family debt. Her "husband," known as Scholar Mã, however, turns out to be a villain and he puts her in a brothel owned by Tú Bà. At that point on, Kiều falls into the hands of several men, transforming from one identity to another. An imposter, Sở Khanh, prostitutes her once again, and then a client, Thúc Sinh, falls in love with her and proposes to marry her as his second wife. But his legitimate wife Hoạn Thư, who is well known for her dominating nature and jealousy, soon learns the truth through rumors. She kidnaps Kiều and forces her to work as a servant in the house, making her suffer in that role and at the same time torturing the adulterous and

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fearful Thúc right at home with Kiều around as a maid. Kiều then runs away to find

shelter in a pagoda where she becomes a nun and is tricked back to prostitution. This

time, she is also rescued by a client of the brothel, Từ Hải, who is a powerful rebel of

several triumphant warring campaigns. Từ Hải marries Kiều, but the marriage is short-

lived as he is assassinated soon afterwards, and Kiều is married off to a mandarin. Kiều

attempts suicide again by throwing herself into the river and is rescued by a nun who

takes her in at her temple. After fifteen years of her journey, at the temple, Kiều reunites

with her entire family and Kim Trọng, now married to her younger sister Thúy Vân. Kim

Trọng proposes to marry Kiều as his legitimate first wife, but she refuses on grounds that

her life has been tainted by the "secular dusts" and is unworthy of Kim Trọng's love.

As far as the plot is concerned, Nguyễn Du's *The Tale of Kiều* is quite faithful to

the original Chinese story. The literary critic Phạm Xuân Nguyên observes that Nguyễn

Du "faithfully copied Kim Vân Kiều [Chinese original] without adding or erasing a

single character, event, or action" (cited in Hà Quảng 2008: 205). As "unoriginal" as the

plot might be – itself belonging to the genre of scholar-beauty novel whose plot is

structurally predictable – Nguyễn Du's epic poem of more than three thousand lines has

captured the hearts and minds of generations and generations of Vietnamese. In his

preface to an early edition of *The Tale of Kiều* published in 1830, Nguyễn Văn Thắng

commented that "as the tale reached our country, it was translated by [Nguyễn Du] into

our language and was widely disseminated. Men of belles-lettres and learned scholars

have read them with great delight, and even the illiterate plebes have passed it on orally

with interest and delightful gesticulations" (cited in Lã Nguyên 2008: 189). From the

time of Nguyễn Văn Thắng's comment to the present, it has been almost two centuries

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and Vietnam has undergone significant ideological transformations through different political trajectories, yet the position of *The Tale of Kiều* in the national literature remains quite unchallenged. For a country perpetually fragmented by successive colonial systems and civil wars like Vietnam, *Kiều* emerged as a symbolic order that united the nation where it was torn apart by cultural and political antagonisms. Culturally, *Kiều* bridged the gap between the literati and his illiterate neighbors as both read and cited *Kiều* in their daily life. From urban spaces to rural areas, learned scholars and literary men enjoyed *Kiều* as an inspiring masterpiece of artistic creation, whereas common people recited it as a popular song. Verses from the tale even became part of the people's daily expression. An array of cultural and artistic activities were born out of the reading and interpretation of *Kiều*: *ngâm Kiều, vịnh Kiều, bói Kiều, tập Kiều, lẩy Kiều, bình Kiều*.[42] *Vịnh Kiều* is the most popular activity among the Confucian literati. Several of influential figures in Vietnamese history engaged in *vịnh Kiều*, writing poems that use a situation or character in *Kiều* to allude to their thoughts and feelings about their contemporary conditions.

Politically, *Kiều* has been appropriated by all political segments, particularly during French colonialism and the Vietnam War. Phạm Quỳnh, for example, considered *Kiều* as the emblem of the survival of the Vietnamese people and nation under the

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[42] *Ngâm Kiều* is a melodic recitation of the verses of *Kiều*, which can be done solitarily for personal entertainment or in a performance at a common gathering. *Vịnh Kiều* refers to the composing of poetry that uses a situation or character in *Kiều* as an allusion to one's thoughts and feelings, often concerning one's present condition. *Vịnh Kiều* was a popular activity among the Confucian literati in premodern Vietnam. *Bói Kiều* is the telling of someone's fortune by having the person randomly point at a verse line whose meaning would then indicate the person's future. *Tập Kiều* is the scrambling of *Kiều* verses to create a new story. *Lẩy Kiều* is the changing of a word or phrase in the verses to adapt to one's personal purposes. *Bình Kiều* is the writing of commentaries on *Kiều*.

powerful weight of French culture and civilization (see 2.4). Even Marxist writers, who were often hostile to Phạm Quỳnh's culturalism, were inspired by *Kiều* and used *Kiều* as a source of inspiration and material in their works. According to Phan Mậu Cảnh (2008), within the first three decades of the twentieth century, there had been over a hundred poems that used *Kiều* as an inspiration or an allusion to contemporary realities, and this tradition of *vịnh Kiều* continued up to through the war against American invasion. The Marxist poet Tố Hữu, a leading literary and political figure during the Vietnamese wars against French colonialism and the American intervention, also incorporated *Kiều* into his poetic sensibilities. On a mission trip to central Vietnam in 1965, Tố Hữu passed by Nguyễn Du's hometown and wrote the poem "Kính gửi cụ Nguyễn Du" (To Nguyễn Du).[43] As a tribute to the master of the *lục-bát* verse narrative, Tố Hữu used the *lục-bát* form and incorporated many words, phrases, and even entire verse lines from *The Tale of Kiều* in his own poem, creating a seamless fabric of intertextuality that connects the poet's memory of Nguyễn Du to his current political mission. The large part of the poem of thirty-four lines praises Nguyễn Du for his talents and shows the author's deep sympathy with Kiều's suffering. The poem opens with a feeling of nostalgia that occasions the writing of the poem:

> Passing by Nghi Xuân at midnight,
> I was dazed with the memory of Nguyễn Du and compassion for Kiều.

The poet's nostalgia, however, often returns him to his present:

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[43] The poem was originally published in Tố Hữu's collection *Ra trận* (Going to the battlefield, 1972). A copy of this collection can be found online at, http://tohuu.wordpress.com/2008/03/01/cac-tập-thơ-tố-hữu-ra-trận/

Tomorrow, or however far the future,
The poem of the past surprises the present!
The broken music melody of Kiều
seduces the heart of two hundred years later.
…
Pondering upon our life today,
I envision half of the happiness.
Yet much animosity still lies ahead.
I abhor the Ưng Khuyển and Sở Khanh villains.[44]

Traversing between past and present, the poet connects Kiều's suffering to his vision of

the divided Vietnam during the war against the American invasion. The villain characters

in Nguyễn Du's narrative are here abstracted into allusions to contemporary oppressors,

Vietnamese traitors as well as American imperialists, who inflicted war and suffering

upon the Vietnamese people. Kiều's life of suffering is projected onto the condition of

Vietnam, being divided between north and south, with the south still under foreign

control. The poet Chế Lan Viên is also well known for his *Kiều*-inspired poems. In

"Reading *Kiều*," Chế Lan Viên connects Kiều's life to the life of the nation:

Feeling compassion for Kiều's life, the nation's life,
Beautiful and talented, yet full of suffering.

Like Tố Hữu, Chế Lan Viên also translated Nguyễn Du's characters and language into

metaphorical allusions to the reality of war. The book of *Kiều* represents an indispensable

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[44] In this stanza, Tố Hữu alludes to the north-south divide of Vietnam during the Vietnam War. "Half of the happiness" refers to the "happy" independent north. Ưng Khuyển (eagles and dogs) is often used to refer to villains, and Sở Khanh is a character in Nguyễn Du's *The Tale of Kiều*. The proper name of this character has entered the Vietnamese vocabulary to mean wicked men, especially those who lure women into love and prostitution traps. In this poem, Tố Hữu uses these popular nouns to allude to the enemies of the Communist North.

piece of luggage accompanying the common people who were displaced out of their

homes by American bombings:

> The enemies bomb our scenic villages,
> *Kiều* rolls up in our evacuation packages.

In another poem, Chế Lan Viên even views Nguyễn Du's poem as capable of

participating in the struggle against American invaders:

> Nguyễn's verses join us in fighting Americans.

And for the woman warriors, *Kiều* becomes one of "the things we carried" on their

journey to the battlefield.

> However heavy the weaponry,
> On the long road, you carry the *Tale*.

If *Kiều* accompanies the common people on their journey away from American bombings

or the woman soldiers as a source of spiritual strength at the battlefield, *Kiều* takes on a

psychological significance for the Vietnamese diaspora, especially women. For them,

Kiều figures as a collective memory of their own experience of suffering in a male

dominant society. From a propagandist interpretation of Kiều in mainland Vietnam as a

figure of passion, sacrifice, and endurance, Vietnamese diasporic women re-appropriate

Kiều as a common voice that binds them together as victims of discursive subjugation. In

Trinh Minh-ha documentary *Surname Viet, Given Name Nam* (1989), exiled women

consider Kiều as an embodiment of misfortunes created by a male authority that

constantly calls women into their "saintly" sacrifices. Rejecting the signification of *Kiều*

as a demand for women's sacrifices and endurance, Trinh Minh-ha lets her performing

interviewees speak against their essentialist subjecthood as it is regulated by men through the figure of Kiều. In yet another work, *A Tale of Love* (1995), considered her first narrative film, Trinh Minh-ha constructs intertextual dialogues between a young Vietnamese woman writer living in the United States and Nguyễn Du's poem, through which Trinh explores the possibility of re-signification embodied in the epic tale. In this film, the protagonist character, also named Kiều, seeks to use Nguyễn Du's Kiều as a site of resistance, for the latter's eventful life of passion and love embodies a journey of border crossing and self-transformation. In Kiều, there is a sharp contrast to the lamenting women found in Đặng Trần Côn's and Nguyễn Gia Thiều's poems. There are moments when Kiều laments her own fate, yet her journey is one of action, albeit her victimization. Traveling outside of her home and going through several relationships with men, Kiều never gives in to her own fate of misfortunes, but ceaselessly seeks to transform it.

In a sense, *The Tale of Kiều* as a work of translation is received in the target language and culture through numerous further translations, creating a Benjaminian afterlife of the text. With Nguyễn Du's *The Tale of Kiều*, *diễn nôm* has shown its most powerful absorption of foreign material to create not only a single text in the target language, but a kind of inspiring and productive intertextuality that continually opens up the field of meaning and signification for writing. The meaning of *Kiều* has never been exhausted, as it embodies a hybrid work bearing the hallmark of cultural translation. Huỳnh Sanh Thông names the poem "a treasure-trove of classical Chinese learning" (1983: xxii). Indeed, some studies have identified in *Kiều* hundreds of quotations, references, translations, and adaptations from the Confucian classics, numerous Chinese

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poems and works of fiction, Buddhist and Taoist scriptures, as well as a rich use of

Vietnamese folk literature. In the work of *Kiều* as well as in its life as a text, there can be

seen all kinds of traits of translation: refraction, rewriting, re-creation, appropriation, and

certainly, manipulation. Also with *The Tale of Kiều*, the woman transforms from a

concrete technique of literary masquerading into a field of representation in which

womanhood becomes some sort of an "empty signifier" with which different political

affiliations make their own meanings and enunciate their specific agendas. Kiều through

Nguyễn Du's translation and further translations in the diverse political situations is no

longer a concrete suffering woman. Her life, her journey, and her identity have all been

divested of specificity and abstracted into a fluid field of signification susceptible to

political appropriations. As a translated text that marks the pinnacle of intertextuality,

Nguyễn Du's *The Tale of Kiều* has come to represent the very fluidity of cultural

meanings that the Vietnamese have been able to entertain throughout their dealings with

colonial and imperial powers, as well as their diasporic experience. In my view, *Kiều*

embodies the very meaning of cultural translation, which is not just a kind of Bhabhaian

cultural hybridity and ambivalence, but a site of contested and contesting meanings and

interpretations.

The practice of *diễn nôm* as I have discussed thus far provides us with a glimpse

into the premodern Vietnamese conception of translation. Trần Nghĩa (1982) has

summarized the Vietnamese tradition of translating Chinese texts into *nôm* into two main

strategies: *trực dịch* (direct or literal translation) and *nghĩa dịch* (meaning-for-meaning

translation). According to his research, the former was mainly used in translating

Buddhist texts from the second to the fifth century, and this technique soon gave way to

the more dominant strategy of *nghĩa dịch*, especially during the independent period from the tenth century onwards (ibid.: 13-28). However, the term *dịch* was not used in the Vietnamese language until at least the modern time with the arrival of the French language and culture. Instead, *diễn* (explaining, rephrasing, paraphrasing) as in *diễn nôm* was used to refer to the act of transferring a text from one language, which almost exclusively meant Chinese, into Vietnamese. Such a way of understanding the act of translating shows that the Vietnamese viewed translation exclusively as domestication, or in a less radical sense, target-oriented transference of meaning.

2.6 Cultural Translation: Redefining Ambivalence and Hybridity

Heading northwest from Hồ Chí Minh City for about three hundred kilometers, through rubber plantations and winding roads, one will reach Đà Lạt City, once a center of colonial luxury and desire. Located in the Lang Bian plateau at an elevation of 1,500 meters, Đà Lạt offers a cool temperature all year round, separating it from the rest of the tropical country. The history of the city begins with the construction of a colonial hotel in 1922, first named the Lang Bian Hotel and renamed the Dalat Palace Hotel. Initially, the hotel was designed to provide what Gwendolyn Wright calls "an urbane retreat for the French elite" for its location "far from the heat, the bickering, and the industrial pollution of Saigon, far from the violence, the rivalries, and the crowded streets of Hanoi" (1991: 230). The monumental structure stands out against the background of the indigenous landscape inhabited by scattered ethnic minorities, marking the height of French domination. An examination of the process of construction and maintenance of the hotel throughout the French colonial regime, however, reveals that the hotel itself embodied not only the colonial desire of creating a separate "French" space right in the colony but

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also the various contestations and negotiations within the colonial social and cultural engineering. Rejecting the monolithic portrayal of colonialism as *the* colonial project in the singular, in "From *Indochine* to *Indochic*: The Lang Bian/Dalat Palace Hotel and French Colonial Pleasure, Power and Culture" (2003), Eric Jennings examines the Lang Bian Hotel project and reveals it as a site of discord, rivalry, discontinuities, shifts, and gaps among different colonial agencies and institutions.

Jennings' work is particularly relevant here in my critique of Bhabha's notion of colonial ambivalence and cultural translation. First of all, Jennings shows a multivalent colonial ambition underlying the Lang Bian Hotel project. Built as a "French town" to satisfy the desire to be re-immersed in the metropole for French functionaries and soldiers, the hotel also reflected colonial French exoticism and fantasy of ethnic minorities in Indochina. But most importantly, it served the colonialists' attempt to be more connected with non-Vietnamese minorities as a way to curb the power of the dominant Vietnamese group, which clearly manifests the colonial mediation of power within the dynamic of what Jennings delineates as "the triangulations of power between French, highland minorities, and Vietnamese" (ibid.: 163). Performing "the curious dual function of mediating between the exotic and the familiar: an exotic, 'primitive' minority setting, and a familiar home base featuring French food and European luxury," (ibid.: 168), the Lang Bian Palace reflects the uneasy ambivalence experienced by colonialism. On the one hand, colonialism seeks to translate the other into the Self, and on the other hand, it is forced to acknowledge that there is no one single homogenous Other for an easy wholesale translation. The ethnic diversity inherent in the colonized forces colonialism to navigate through the different ethnic identities to formulate for itself a

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"target" language for its translation. The Palace, in its proximity to ethnic communities in the highlands, with its design, construction and maintenance processes, clearly reveals the colonial site of contestation and mediation. Like the English Book in Bhabha's theory, the Palace presents colonial authority and authenticity through a repressed process of translation that creates within the presentation of power an ambivalent split with itself. Frenchness is here invariably implicated in the "wilderness" of the indigenous landscape. But it is this split that makes possible political maneuvers on the part of the French. The colonial context compels the colonizer to break away from its original identity and re-articulate it anew as difference in its relation to the colonized. This process of simultaneous repetition and displacement in the colonial utterances of power provides the colonizer with a differential space that necessitates strategizing. In the case of French colonialism under the supervision of Governor Paul Doumer, the Lang Bian Palace represented the colonial desire for original Frenchness, and also, the French strategic alignment with ethnic minorities to mitigate the social and political power of the dominant Vietnamese in the lowlands.

Jennings' narrative of the haphazard life of the Lang Bian Palace in the trajectories of economic, cultural, and political contestations and negotiations reminds us of the general history of French colonialism, which Raymond Betts describes as a curious history torn between domestic politics and international capitalist rivalry in the late nineteenth century (1961: 1-9). Early on, France never put her heart in colonial expansion, and as Betts tells us, "France's overseas empire was largely acquired without a plan or purpose, at least in so far as many Frenchmen could see" (ibid.: 4). Overseas activities up to the Third Republic had often faced with internal antagonism, and "the

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handful of partisans of colonial expansion was constrained from doing any more than trying to justify this expansion to an often hostile parliament and to a disinterested populace" (ibid.: 3). However, as the nineteenth century drew to a close, anticolonial spirit subsided within the domestic political sphere, partly because France started to look beyond its border to the increasingly powerful Great Britain with her ever-expansive overseas empire. By the 1890s, the realities of French dealings with colonial subjects around the world began to raise a deep concern among colonial theorists about the applicability of the traditional colonial doctrine of assimilation, which by definition aimed to turn the colony, to the largest extent possible, into an integral part of French culture and civilization.[45] At the turn of the century, French colonialism witnessed a sudden wave of comparative scholarship on colonial methods and techniques that draws extensively on the Dutch and British colonial experiences. These theoretical enunciations were often colored by the French scholars' admiration for their rival empires, which for the large part applied a system of colonial governance that respected native customs and institutions. Looking at Dutch colonialism, for example, French theorists often credited its success to the Dutch endeavor "to reconcile native interests with European ones in a manner quite unlike that characteristic of assimilation" (ibid.: 38). In a similar vein, British colonial methods, characterized by aloofness and business-like orientations

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[45] Betts traces the origins of the practices of assimilation among cultures to the Roman Empire. In regard to French theory of colonial assimilation, Betts elaborates its philosophic origins in the Age of Reason as expressed in the thoughts of philosophers such as Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, Claude Adrien Helvétius among others. Betts sums up the spirit of the age: "Reason is the virtue of the world; man is universally equal; law is everywhere applicable; societies are subject to rational alteration" (1961: 15). For the persistent life of the assimilation theory in French colonial politics up to the last decade of the nineteenth century despite oppositions and emerging scientific thoughts in the social sciences, see Betts (1961: 21-32).

without the pretension of love and fraternity, also offered French thinkers insights that eventually led them to question the French obsession with the ideal of assimilation.

Alongside comparative studies of colonialism that populated the political sphere of metropolitan France, new developments in scientific studies also inspired the rethinking of the policy of assimilation. The main scientific attitude of the time was derived from Darwinism with its doctrine of evolution and natural selection. The ideal of the fundamental equality among peoples underlying assimilation thus began to be questioned, and eventually, French colonial theorists adopted a belief in fundamental differences among races, cultural incompatibility, and social variation. A new wave of criticism was directed at assimilation on scientific grounds, confirming results from comparative colonial studies and making way for an alternative colonial policy, association, within the first two decades of the twentieth century. The essential tenet of association lies in the realization of a strong colonial-native collaboration which seeks to improve the native's condition without altering the fundamental organization of native societies with their local customs and institutions. "The great virtue of this policy," as Betts puts it, "was proclaimed to lie in its simplicity, flexibility, and practicality" (ibid.: 106). Association, rather than assimilation, was soon to be perceived as more suited for French colonialism, which unlike other empires, did not have to face the problem of the search for outlets for emigration due to the French "traditional love of their native soil" (ibid.: 110). However, the term association could be misleading, because it in no ways implies equal participation and rights between the native and the colonizer. Jules Harmand, in his *Domination et colonisation* (1910), makes clear that "far from letting the domination weaken, this policy wants to reinforce it by making it less offensive and

repugnant" (cited in Betts 1961: 122). In a sense, association policy is but a form of domination disguised in the discourse of collaboration and mutual development. In what follows, I look at the development of this policy as it was adopted in the colonial context of Vietnam and suggest that for association to take place, the colonizer had to resort to a regime of truth mediated through translation. And as far as translation is concerned, it is necessary to look at the different apparatuses that the colonizer used to form a desired target language as a way to mediate its own condition of cultural translation in a colonial context.

By the time when the debates on assimilation and association policies dominated the political life of metropolitan France, the French had established a firm grip in Southeast Asia with the establishment of Indochina as part of the French empire. Yet this strong hold of colonial power in Indochina came with the painful realization that the traditional assimilation policy was impossible in this Far Eastern region. Two main local factors informed this insight shared among the different French governors in Indochina. First, the successive Vietnamese anticolonial campaigns and rebellions, though successfully decimated by the colonial authority with its superior military and economic power, forced the French to acknowledge that the Vietnamese were not a submissive people ready for easy assimilation. Facing violent insurgencies such as the Cần Vương Movement (Aid the King, 1885-1889) and the Yên Thế Rebellion (1885-1913) as well as more peaceful movements such as the Đông Du (Eastern study, 1904-1909) and the Đông Kinh Nghĩa Thục (Tonkin free school, 1907-1908), the French were increasingly aware of the Vietnamese national spirit that significantly impeded the advancement of the

colonial system in the direction of complete assimilation.[46] French colonialism in

Vietnam never manifested systematic governance with consistent policies. Instead, it

often vacillated between assimilation and association. Even the distinction between these

two overarching philosophical assumptions was blurred when they were put into practice.

Also, colonial policies varied across the different areas of Indochina due to their different

histories and demographic features, adding more complexities to governance and policy-

making (Duiker 1976: 106). Second, on the cultural plane, the French colonialists found

themselves estranged by a native tradition that was for the large part incomprehensible to

them because of its deep imbrication in the Chinese realm. This second insight sparked

the several translation projects that supported the colonial process of forging out of the

native culture and tradition a new colonized subject desired by colonial power for better

subjugation and subjection. As the French colonialists subjected the Vietnamese to their

rule, they were themselves subjected to the local conditions that they sought to govern,

effecting an inconsistent and sporadic implementation of colonial policies among the

different governors appointed to the region.

However, there was still a sense of continuity as the colony was handed down

from one governor to the next, as they all in a sense isolated themselves from the

discourse of assimilation and association and continued the modernizing project that

sought to transform many aspects of Vietnamese society. To a certain extent, the

successive governors upheld a belief that did not fall squarely within the theories

discussed in Paris. While preaching the ideal of collaboration, the colonial administration

would implement measures of social, cultural, and political change. Education came to

[46] For a detailed study of these movements, see Marr (1971: 44-184).

the fore as the central instrument in this modernizing project, because only through education could the colonizer inculcate their ideals and knowledge in the minds of the colonized. As the colonial government began to establish a Franco-Vietnamese education system, a problem arose: the traditional written language, the *nôm* script, posed a hindrance to the project of colonizing the native minds in many respects. First of all, the daily management of business and tax records written in Chinese or *nôm* posed a real problem to the French administrators as they found it impossible to recognize taxpayers' names in the hieroglyphic characters. As the attempt to impose French on the entire native population had proven impossible, the more feasible solution to the language problem was conceived as using the Romanized writing system that the Jesuit missionaries had created for proselytizing purposes in the sixteenth century. While this inchoate script had been used only within Christian communities before the coming of French colonialism, it was now to be refined and promoted by all means to substitute *nôm* and Chinese. The aim was to transplant Vietnam into what David Damrosch (2007) would call a Roman "scriptworld" to create a sense of affinity between the colonizer and colonized for better governance and domination.

In fact, the Romanization of the writing system was not in itself a creation of a new language, but a re-transliteration of Vietnamese using Roman characters. But this re-transliteration would soon carry with it significant social, cultural, and political effects, both desired and undesired by the French. The most desired effect of all was the uprooting of Vietnam from the Chinese realm, which was envisioned by the French as a form of mediation in bringing the native closer to the colonizer, mitigating hostility, and enhancing collaboration. This uprooting, it was believed, would impede the flow of

Chinese texts to Vietnam, especially those by the two influential Chinese political thinkers Kang Youwei (1858-1927) and Liang Qichao (1873-1929). Liang Qichao was a prolific writer and translator who firmly advocated social and cultural reform for late Qing China. He translated Western political texts by such authors as Hobbes, Rousseau, Locke, Hume, and Bentham, mainly through Japanese translations, all the while vehemently calling for more Chinese translation of Western books in order to strengthen the Chinese language and form new bases for social reforms. Regarding his translation techniques, Lou Xuanmin points out that "Liang Qichao tended to alter or abridge the texts he translated so as to increase the likelihood of their influencing societal reform," and in this way, he marked himself as "an ideology-oriented rather than artistry-oriented translator" (2009: 130). As an influential nationalist and reformist thinker in China, Liang Qichao appeared to be a threat to colonial authority in Vietnam as his thoughts began to permeate the minds and hearts of the Vietnamese scholar-patriots like Phan Bội Châu and Phan Chu Trinh (1872-1926). Phan Bội Châu indeed was able to establish direct contact with Liang Qichao in Japan and received practical and ideological support from the Chinese mentor in his effort to establish the Đông Du Movement, which for some time infused fear and anxiety in the French administration.

Another effect of the Romanization of the Vietnamese writing system was an installation of a severe cultural discontinuity in the history of the Vietnamese people. What many Vietnamese today tend to ignore, or are taught to forget, is the fact that their knowledge of their own past is mainly mediated through translation. While the French attempted to sever the connection of Vietnamese people to their own past as a step towards coercive amnesia and taming, the Vietnamese used the installed discontinuity as

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a means of resistance to the very power that sought to colonize them. If the *nôm* script

could be said to aspire to a nationalist ambition because the Vietnamese themselves

invented it, no such thing could be said of the Roman writing system, or what is

ambiguously called *quốc ngữ* (national language). From the very start, *quốc ngữ* was the

work of European missionaries, and for a long time, it was used exclusively in Christian

texts that served proselytizing purposes. Later on, the French were the first to bring *quốc*

ngữ to its national status, as the main then only writing system in Vietnam.[47] Up to the

twentieth century, the Vietnamese had no voice in the determination of their own tongue.

As far as the birth and evolution of *quốc ngữ* is concerned, the Vietnamese appeared

merely as passive followers of the work of their own suppressors. Interestingly enough,

they chose to embrace the choice made by their oppressor. From anticolonial reformists

like Phan Bội Châu and Phan Chu Trinh, to collaborationists like Phạm Quỳnh and

Marxist revolutionaries like Hồ Chí Minh and his followers, *quốc ngữ* was perceived as

the only way for the Vietnamese integration into the modern epoch.[48] This fact once

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[47] Governor Lafont signed the ordinance that required the use of *quốc ngữ* as the official writing system on April 6, 1878. See (Nguyễn Nam 2002: 27).

[48] In *Quốc văn tập độc* [Readings in national literature], a textbook published by the Tonkin Free School in 1907, for example, there is a poem entitled "Bài hát khuyên học chữ quốc ngữ" (A song to encourage the learning of *quốc ngữ*). In this poem, *quốc ngữ* is called "the soul of the nation" that helps disseminate knowledge to the people for the cause of national reform and independence.

> *Quốc ngữ* is the soul of the nation,
> Thus it must be discussed for the people.
> Books from other countries, books from China
> Every meaning, every word must be translated clearly. (Cited in Nguyễn Nam 2002: 31-32)

Phan Chu Trinh, founder of the Tonkin Free School, gave a lecture at the school on the subject "Vietnam cannot be saved without getting rid of Chinese characters" (Marr 1971: 169). Another supporter of *quốc ngữ* was Nguyễn Văn Vĩnh, a French-educated scholar and translator. He even blamed the national humiliation in the face of French

again reminds us that Vietnamese nationalism, as far as language and culture are concerned, is not so much about the protection of some national identity against foreign assimilation. Instead, Vietnamese nationalism is deeply imbricated in the problematic of translation, of appropriating foreign elements and the very oppressive institutions and policies imposed on them as a way of resistance.

As the Vietnamese were defamiliarized with their own past in language, they quickly grasped the opportunity of translation to construct different versions of their national history as inflected by different political agendas. Historiography is a site where this opportunity of translation has been employed to the fullest extent to create a nationalist history of the Vietnamese people. Classic works written in Chinese by authors such as Nguyễn Trãi, Lê Quý Đôn, and more recent figures such as Phan Bội Châu, have all been translated into modern Vietnamese by Hanoi official historians. In her book *Postcolonial Vietnam: New Histories of the National Past*, Patricia Pelley has rightly said, "the act of translating the classics into modern Vietnamese also provided postcolonial historians with the chance to control the meaning of the past" (2002: 20). Narrated through translation, which invariably induces a differing selection of what gets translated and what not, Vietnamese history has never been monolithic, but inflected by various ideologies.[49] While an opportunity of translation for the Vietnamese, from the

civilization on the historical subservience to Chinese and called for its immediate erasure (DeFrancis 1977: 167).

[49] For example, *An Nam chí lược* (Abbreviated records of the Pacified South, 1335) by Lê Tắc was never translated into Vietnamese and published in Hanoi as part of the official national history. The first Vietnamese version of this book was published in 1961 by Huế University, which was at that point under the control of the Saigon government. Lê Tắc wrote this book during his exile in China in the early fourteenth century, and according to mainstream Hanoi critics, his version of Vietnamese history is

French perspective, *quốc ngữ* was conceived of as a useful colonizing instrument, and the colonial authority carried out several policies to institute *quốc ngữ* as the official language in Vietnam.[50] Within this context of constructing for the native a new identity prone to assimilation, colonialism shows its most calculative and manipulative power in its own ambivalence.

The name *quốc ngữ* itself, meaning national language, reflects a measure of ambivalence in colonial authority. DeFrancis has enumerated opinions about this name, pointing how scholars at the time, both French and Vietnamese, were skeptical of its appropriateness (1977: 85). Dumoutier, a functionary in the educational administration, for example, was uncertain as to why the transcription of the Annamite language into Roman characters was called "national language"; other French scholars considered the name "improper," "barbarous," "misused," "pretentious," and "senseless." If naming is complicit in the inscription of power upon the named, then power itself, as reflected in the case of the name of *quốc ngữ*, is invariably ambivalent in the sense that it cannot entirely erase the trait of the native land, language, or culture in its imposition of a name. Here the colonizer imposed a new writing system to uproot the native from their history and tradition, a kind of naming, yet they chose to call it "national language," as if to give

biased towards the Chinese perspective. Even the editors and translators of the 1961 version called Lê Tắc a traitor and in the preface distanced themselves from the author's political position. Unlike South Vietnam, North Vietnam only translated nationalist authors and systematically ignored works by those deemed inimical to the mainstream ideology. The oldest historical records compiled by a Vietnamese still preserved today, yet *An Nam chí lược* remained in the margin of official historiography through non-translation.

[50] Marr, however, contends that the French did not really abandon the the long-term objective of complete Vietnamese assimilation to the French language. The institution of *quốc ngữ* as the official language was in fact concieved of as the middle step towards linguistic assimilation. See Marr (1981: 148).

the colonized an awareness of their own unified national voice. In fact, the name of *quốc ngữ* shows some continuity with the way the Vietnamese literati referred to their own writings in *nôm* in previous centuries. Nguyễn Trãi's collection of poems in *nôm*, for example, was entitled "Collected poems in national language" (Quốc âm thi tập); similarly, Nguyễn Bỉnh Khiêm's collection is called "Bạch Vân's collected poems in national language" (Bạch Vân quốc ngữ thi tập). *Quốc âm* and *quốc ngữ* had been used to refer to *nôm* in contrast to classical Chinese before it was appropriated to refer to the Roman transcription. Probably the same contrast of Vietnamese versus Chinese was meant when *quốc ngữ* was chosen as the official name for the Romanized script, but as the anticolonial patriots took the language as well as the name in their own hands for the promotion of national independence, the nationalist connotation embedded in the name was turned against the French themselves rather than the Chinese.

Another site of ambivalence that colonial power shows with clarity is the printed word. To promote *quốc ngữ* as the official writing system and to indoctrinate the native with colonial ideals, colonial authority had to resort to the printed word as a means. Periodical journals and newspapers were the first forms of media instituted by the French for these aims. Although publishing did exist in one form or another in premodern Vietnam, journalism did not come into existence until the arrival of the French and their institutions. Upon closing down the Tonkin Free School for its fervent anticolonial nationalism, the French authority soon recognized the need to fill the ideological gap with their own words. They started to turn to collaborationist natives for the tasks of preaching the ideal of association and spreading the use of *quốc ngữ*, and the printed word in newspapers and other periodicals was conceived of as the main instrument. The first

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public newspaper created by the French in Vietnam dates back to 1861 during the first French raids and occupation of three provinces in Southern Vietnam (Đỗ Quang Hưng, Nguyễn Thành, and Dương Trung Quốc 2000: 19). It was a series publication in the French language called *Bulletin officiel de l' Expédition de Cochinchine*, which was rebaptized to *Bulletin officiel de la Cochinchine Française* in 1865, marking the completion of the "expedition" period and the beginning of French anchoring in the region. However, this publication and subsequent ones in the French language would mainly serve the information needs among the French functionaries and a limited number of French-literate Vietnamese. The direct participation of the printed word in the indoctrination of the native was not seen at least until the first newspaper in *quốc ngữ*, the *Gia Định Báo*, was published in 1869. This weekly publication served as the main instrument to spread the use of *quốc ngữ* in the next forty years when it was closed in 1910. According to Đỗ Quang Hưng, Nguyễn Thành, and Dương Trung Quốc, *Gia Định Báo* played a central role in the shaping and evolution of *quốc ngữ*, so that by the time the patriotic Confucians became more receptive to the new script and discovered it as an important means of anticolonial resistance, the language had developed into a mature structure capable of expressing modern concepts and ideas (ibid.: 28). In 1907, Nguyễn Văn Vĩnh, before he served as editor-in-chief of the newspaper, said that "what becomes of our country in the future all depends on *quốc ngữ*" (cited in Kiều Thanh Quế 1969: 126). During his service at *Gia Định Báo*, he ardently continued this conviction of the primary role of *quốc ngữ* in national construction and realized it through translation. He translated French literature of all genres into Vietnamese, including works by such

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authors as La Fontaine, Charles Perrault, Abbé Prévost, Alexander Dumas, Victor Hugo, Honoré de Balzac, among several others. He also translated *The Tale of Kiều* into French.

Gia Định Báo built up a colonial path that sought its way into the minds of the Vietnamese through the manipulation of language and even the native perception of the foreign. During its life of more than four decades, the newspaper left a tremendous legacy which was to be continued by later institutions, including the much discussed *Nam Phong Tạp Chí* (the Southern Wind Journal), which Governor Albert Sarraut approved on paper in late 1916 and launched its first issue in August 1917. Sponsored and monitored by the colonial government, *Nam Phong* was designed to perform pretty much the same function as the *Gia Định Báo*, to promote *quốc ngữ* and persuade the neo-traditionalists of the inevitable French domination in Vietnam. However, the moment when *Nam Phong* came into existence was marked by the mother country's deep involvement in the First World War, from 1914 to 1918. This historical context can be clearly seen on the cover page of every *Nam Phong* issue bearing the distinct title "L'information française: La France devant le monde, son role dans la guerre des nations." While *Nam Phong* was based in the north under the supervision of the editor-in-chief Phạm Quỳnh, Sarraut also launched the *Tribune Indigène* in the south around the same time, and the French-educated elite Bùi Quang Chiêu (1872-1945) was appointed editor-in-chief. This latter newspaper was published in French and aimed at mobilizing the opinion of southern, French-educated Vietnamese intellectuals as well as French settlers in Cochinchina (Tai 1992: 39). Although the two journals were launched in the same year by the same governor, with the consistent conviction of mobilizing more force from the different sectors of the population on the side of colonial authority, the men running the

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newspapers turned what was supposed to be a unified colonial project into a site of perpetual navigation and negotiation on the part of the colonizer.

The fact that different newspapers using different languages were instituted in different regions of the same colony suffices to show that colonialism did not blindly throw itself into apriori ambivalence and hybridity. To promote *quốc ngữ* as a means towards the presentation of French civilization and culture in the colonial context certainly reveals within colonialism a fundamental slippage in its enunciation of power, as Bhabha has rightly pointed out. Yet, in the process the colonizer continuously negotiated this slippage, because the different players within the colonial mechanism, including the collaborationist natives, diverged significantly on the terms of their very collaboration with the colonizer. The two Vietnamese elites, Bùi Quang Chiêu and Phạm Quỳnh, were chosen by the French authorities at the forefront to mediate between the Vietnamese and their colonizer through journalistic institutions. However, their different backgrounds and perceptions of colonialism itself constantly put the French under the pressure of mediating their own supporters.

Bùi Quang Chiêu was born in a scholarly family at a time when the French had completed the occupation of the entire southern Vietnam, 1872. Chiêu went to French school in Cochinchina and then in Algeria before he went to France and attended the École Coloniale in 1893. He returned to Vietnam in 1897. Unlike Phạm Quỳnh, who was also extensively exposed to French culture yet retained his nationality and served in the imperial court in Huế later in his life, Chiêu enjoyed French citizenship, and as Hue-tam Ho Tai puts it, "his efforts to rise above the herd paid off in 1917 when Sarraut, casting for Vietnamese allies, selected him to be the editor of *Tribune Indigène*" (ibid.: 40).

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Taking the position of editor-in-chief, Chiêu started to bring into colonial politics his

personal ambition and the worldview of a man belonging to the emerging class of native

bourgoisie. Typical of the Vietnamese bourgoise thinking at the time, Chiêu believed that

the enlightened bourgoisie should take charge of the task of social progress. In this light,

Chiêu was not hesitant in enhancing his class interests as a way to do good to the country.

Comprised of diverse groups of people, including businessmen, landowners, and civil

servants, this class of prospering Vietnamese was "united in their pride in their Western

education and contemptuous of old-style village officials and mandarins" (ibid.).

Appointing Chiêu to the management of the *Tribune Indigène* was thus a way the French

tried to engage with this sector of the native population as a leading force in carrying out

association policies. Creating a class of native elites devoted to French culture, ideals,

and interests, and ultimately, capable of colonizing their own countrymen with their

intellectual and economic power, the colonial regime was hoping to mediate between

itself and the native at large. However, in this production of its own image in the native,

colonial power is split with itself, just as Lang Bian Palace Hotel instilled with

Frenchness amid the indigenous wilderness.

Specifically, Bùi Quang Chiêu, Francophile in education and interest, serving as

an ideal local product of colonialism ready to assume the global *mission civilisatrice*,

upheld a kind of politics that in many ways diverged from Sarraut's vision. The

economically burgeoning Vietnamese soon demanded a stronger voice in colonial

politics. In this regard, Chiêu turned the *Tribune Indigène* into a forum for the

Vietnamese Constitutionalists, who demanded, among other things, a larger Vietnamese

representation in the *Conseil Colonial* and a reform in the naturalization law to make it

easier for the qualified Vietnamese to become French citizens (Smith 1969: 135). These

demands alone appeared to be in conflict with Sarraut's intended reforms. While Sarraut

attempted to apply association policies, the Constitutionalists aspired too much for a strict

assimilation. And whereas education reforms were Sarraut's priority, Chiêu and his

associates were more engaged in other objectives, including asserting class interests in

the political sphere. For these reasons, Chiêu and his newspaper were soon perceived "as

such a thorn in the side of the colonial regime" (Tai 1992: 45). In response to this

unexpected deviation, acting Governor-General Georges Maspéro diverted the support to

another newspaper, the *Echo Annamite*, in the hope of silencing Chiêu. Interestingly

enough, constructed as a native advocate of colonial policies, Chiêu was later cast as "an

opposition," a kind of a "tame heretic," in counterbalance to another opposition, which

was the pressure from the French settlers. Tame heretics were necessary for the

emergence of a "democratic government." A message from the head of the

Cochinchinese Sûreté to the governor of Cochinchina reveals the twists and turns in the

colonial response to the local condition of politics:

> In a certain sense, an opposition is a desirable thing. It is good for a democratic
> government to face an opposition in order to balance it, stimulate it, and control it.
> The Apostle has already uttered these profound words: "there is a need for
> heretics." The devil does not lie in the existence of an opposition; it lies in the
> absence of a counterweight to this opposition so that it is allowed to become
> strong enough to impede, paralyze or distort the actions of the government. We
> need heretics, but not too many. (cited in Tai 1992: 45)

As Bùi Quang Chiêu turned Sarraut's scheme to deal with the native into a kind

of internal politics within colonial authority itself, in the north, Phạm Quỳnh was leading

the *Nam Phong* journal in a direction that further complicated the French colonial project

of Franco-Annamite collaboration. In the early period of his service to the colonial

goverment as editor-in-chief of the *Nam Phong*, Phạm Quỳnh appeared to be an ardent,

and somewhat naïve, advocate of French rule in Vietnam. His discourse often revolved

around the image of France as *the* teacher to the Vietnamese people for her superior

culture and civilization. With many other Vietnamese scholars of the time, including

Nguyễn Văn Vĩnh and Bùi Quang Chiêu, he shared the belief that Vietnam was a

backward country, with barbaric cultural traditions and customs, an underdeveloped

material life, and an immature language incapable of expressing modern ideas and

concepts.[51] In his view, social progress or national independence could only be possible if

the Vietnamese, led by the members of the elite class like himself, could build for

themselves a strong Western learning. Many postcolonial theorists today would call this a

form of auto-colonization on the part of the colonized. Colonial subjects are seen as

conditioned through discourse and representation to think of themselves as inferior in

front of the great protective Mother, or as an indigenous child begging for the Western

Book. The colonial history of Vietnam was no exception to this phenomenon of self-

colonizing. However, in the Vietnamese dealings with the great empire of China for

thousands of years, the same "complex of inferiority" was often invoked in the

premodern Vietnamese literati's writings. But for the Vietnamese, admiration for the

colonizer, even if conditioned by the colonizer itself, is not synonymous to accepting its

rule, which the Vietnamese-Chinese historical relationship suffices to prove. Auto-

colonization could be too reactionary a concept instituted by contemporary postcolonial

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[51] This "complex of inferiority" was not just a phenomenon among
collaborationist Vietnamese, but reformist and activist gentry-scholars such as Phan Chu
Trinh and Phan Bội Châu shared the same perception of their own culture and
civilization, hence their movements of the Tonkin Free School and the Eastern Study.

theories.[52] Dwelling into the minds of those Vietnamese whom contemporary postcolonial theorists would claim to succumb to auto-colonization may suggest that auto-colonization itself could turn out to be the most subtle form of resistance. Through invoking Phạm Quỳnh's politics in the following pages, I argue that for a fluid culture that has historically formed through the appropriation of foreign elements like that of Vietnam, the perception of the inferior self among the Vietnamese intellectuals during French colonialism served as a psychological drive for the ardent translation of the foreign into the self. In a sense, all translation starts with the perception of a worthy foreign other. The act of translation implies a drive for learning something worthy, something that serves the narcissistic purpose of the self.[53] And Phạm Quỳnh's politics of translation reflected this mode of thinking about the self and the other. Throughout his life as a writer of social critical essays and a translator, Phạm Quỳnh sincerely believed in the superiority of French culture and devoted his career to translating it into Vietnamese

[52] This criticism of auto-colonizing is indeed popular among Marxist critics as well. For example, Đặng Thai Mai, in his criticism of the patriotic yet irresolute (non-revolutionary) politics practiced by the Vietnamese reformists and activists of the early twentieth century, asserts that "the thing most feared was not ignorance or illiteracy per se. The real worry was that under the French educational and political system the 'Annamites' would become self-serving, self-demeaning, would suffer from complex of inferiority and a sense of rootlessness, and would have no comprehension of their country and their fellow countrymen" (cited in Marr 1971: 184).

[53] Đặng Thai Mai, the most ardent critic of Phạm Quỳnh (see section 1.5), wrote in 1978: "As the writers of a nation are thrown into the condition of subordination by a foreign power …, they naturally develop a resistant instinct that rejects foreign control. And in this resistance, if we are to build for ourselves an adequate and durable national literature, we must appropriate [*thâu thái*] the best of world's literatures, of all mankind. Is it not the rich soil up on the highlands of the continent of Asia that breeds the burgeoning crops on the Nhị-hà and Cửu-long deltas?" (cited in Thúy Toàn 1996: 25). This fervent call for translation from foreign literatures can also be seen in numerous speeches and essays of prominent Communist leaders such as Trường Chinh and Phạm Văn Đồng; see Thúy Toàn (1999). Marr points out that the discourse of modernization or "cultural progress" as developed during the course of reformism in the first decade of the twentieth century was serving even opposing political leaders (1971: 184).

culture. While such a translation project was encouraged and sponsored by colonial authority as part of the association ideal, Phạm Quỳnh's translation politics often mitigated colonial power in ways that were not visible to the French at the time, or even to himself.

Phạm Quỳnh was born in 1892 to an elite family of prestigious lineage. Losing both of his parents before the age of ten, he was raised by his paternal grandmother, who sent him to the School of Interpreters at the age of twelve. There, he obtained a good knowledge of French, Chinese, and was well-versed in the Romanized script. Indeed, his strong advocacy for the use of *quốc ngữ* instead of French or Chinese in Vietnam was widely acknowledged as his most creditable legacy. He is also considered one of the first scholars to introduce the novel genre in Vietnam. He wrote extensively on almost every topic: French literature, philosophy, politics, issues in culture and civilization, history, religion, Confucianism, as well as personal travel journals. Probably because of the wide-ranging issues he dealt with, Phạm Quỳnh did not really produce any consistent theory or line of thought, except for his unfaltering devotion to critical aspects of Vietnamese culture at the crossroads of East-West encounters.[54] Phạm Quỳnh has been "re-discovered" in recent scholarship on the Vietnamese colonial history for this line of cultural thinking, which shows a critical movement from a totally faithful upholding of French rule to a more sombre position of a cultural translator. As the French began to lose faith in the prospect of complete assimilation of the Vietnamese and preach the ideal

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[54] Ethics, morality, women, the role of Confucianism, language, new literary sensibilities, new Western learnings were among Phạm Quỳnh concerns. Discussion of Phạm Quỳnh's cultural and political thoughts is scattered throughout Marr (1981) and Tai (1992).

of Franco-Annamite collaboration, Phạm Quỳnh, in the course of his support of the French policies, took the notion of collaboration and association in his own hands, turning it into a kind of cultural translation that reverberated the domesticating disposition seen in the age-old tradition of *diễn nôm*.

Early on, Phạm Quỳnh appeared to be a rather faithful follower of Albert Sarraut's program. As a reporter back home, it did not take Sarraut long to recognize the importance of the printed word in the colony. In a speech given at the opening of the Syndicat de la Presse Cochinchinoise, of which Sarraut was elected Honorary President, two months after the launching of the *Nam Phong* journal, Sarraut stated succinctly, "A journal! A pen! What could be more powerful?" (cited in Đỗ Quang Hưng, Nguyễn Thành, and Dương Trung Quốc 2000: 58). At the same event, Phạm Quỳnh talked of the role of the journalist, in complete alignment with Sarraut's speech, as one who mediates between the colonial government and the native people. Accordingly, a journalist must on the one hand "explain and disseminate to the people the government's plans and policies that serve the common good. And on the other hand, he represents the people to voice their true concerns and wishes to the government" (ibid.: 59). But this task of voicing the people's concerns and wishes immediately lost its democratic tone as Phạm Quỳnh added, "at this juncture when the people are still indecisive as to which way to go, we should think carefully and decide to choose the right direction. If we persevere in the same direction in our language and thought, we should win the people's attention, and

eventually, their support" (ibid.). At this stage in Phạm Quỳnh's thoughts, mediation was synonymous to propagandizing for colonial authority.[55]

In his early engagement in politics Phạm Quỳnh also appeared as a conservative thinker when it came to issues in ethics and social morality. For him, social order and stability must be maintained at all cost if a nation was to survive. As an intellectual of the elite class, Phạm Quỳnh certainly thought of himself as responsible for this task of maintaining order. But his concept of order was not restricted in a timeless essence withstanding the sweeping force of cultural encounters in the colonial context. In several of his essays, mediation appears as the way for the perseverance of order and stability, or even national survival. Phạm Quỳnh often connected the Vietnamese past with the present of contemporary Vietnam in the face of the extensive penetration of French colonialism. In a speech he gave at the Marseilles Colonial Exhibition in 1922, Phạm Quỳnh candidly addressed his French audience and reminded them of the Vietnamese history and culture:

> The Vietnamese could not be seen as a blank page. We are a thick book filled with words written in an indelible ink tens of centuries ago. That ancient book can be binded in a new cover, but cannot be overwritten with a new script. We need an education that can provide the Vietnamese with today's advanced knowledge but will not uproot us from our race and national character or turn us into a people without a soul or spiritual essence as in the older French colonies. (1992: 11)

The hallmark of Phạm Quỳnh's thinking later in his life is this mediation between traditional culture and modernity. For him, the Vietnamese past, including the history of

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[55] Indeed, much criticism of Phạm Quỳnh from Marxist scholars such as Đặng Thai Mai and Trần Văn Giàu (see 1.5 and works therein cited) was based extensively on his earlier writings during the period between 1917 and 1925.

Confucianism in Vietnam, was one of glory and worthy of pride. What bothered him and led him to the position of appreciating French culture was contemporary Vietnam rather than her past. He saw the country in his time as morally degrading and culturally disintegrating. In an essay in 1931, he expressed a deep nostalgia for the glorious past and lamented on the present loss of national spirit, on the delibitating weakness of the nation: "The present is as feeble as our past was indomitable; the present is as corrupting as our past was glorious" (1992: 26). With such a vision of the country, he contended that learning from French culture and civilization was the only remedy for the Vietnamese to not only recover their historical strength and value but also cultivate newness from outside sources.

In this light, Phạm Quỳnh read critically French literary and philosophical works by authors such as Descartes, Rouseau, Emile Zola, Voltaire, Baudelaire, Victor Hugo, and Guy de Maupassant. In his reading, he often turned to Vietnam as a site upon which he posed his critical views of the foreign texts. While appreciating these works, he cautioned against mechanically applying their thoughts in the context of Vietnam as they might destroy social order and popular discipline (Marr 1981: 110-12). Placing texts and cultures in an intertextual continuity, Phạm Quỳnh attempted to negotiate a middle way for his country with the conviction that French domination was inevitable, at least in the cultural and scientific realms. In a sense, Phạm Quỳnh advocated a process of transculturation, accepting change through rational mediation and selective

appropriation.[56] With such a view, Phạm Quỳnh posed a challenge to the colonial project of association. Employing a class of native intellectuals as advocates of colonial rule, the colonizer invariably undertakes an ambivalent position. The colonizing culture can only reach the colonized through the mediating work of these native figures, and the cases of Bùi Quang Chiêu and Phạm Quỳnh have shown, they often develop their own politics, which in many ways complicates colonialism and forces the colonizer into a dynamic of power that cannot be simplistically configured in the colonizer-versus-colonized formulation. In the same vein, the representation of colonialism as the singular monolithic colonial project becomes unsettled, as Eric Jennings has shown with his case study of the Lang Bian Palace.

To further complicate Homi Bhabha's view of colonial ambivalence, I now look at Phạm Quỳnh's work as a translator. A prolific translator, an enthusiastic writer of all subjects, Phạm Quỳnh wrote very little about his own work as a translator. However, we have a glimpse of his views of translation through his discourse on language and culture as well as his specific translation practice. Although he was an ardent promoter of *quốc ngữ*, he was never obsessed with nationalistic essentialism. For him, love for one's mother tongue does not mean a rejection of other tongues. He intoned, "love for our language means that we skilfully use foreign tongues to enrich it. It is therefore unwise to eliminate classical Chinese on grounds of love for one's mother tongue" (2006: 352). While acknowledging the Confucian wisdom as the foundation of all greatness in Vietnamese history, he blamed the stagnant contemporary Vietnam on the ubiquity of

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[56] Phạm Quỳnh concluded an essay published in *Nam Phong* in 1931 with a statement in French, "appliquer la forme de la science occidentale au contenu de la connaissance orientale" (1992: 46).

Confucianism and the lack of transcultural exchanges. In a highly metaphorical tone, he wrote:

> Thinking through, I can find no other ways but the way handed down to us from our ancestors. Looking around, I can only see a thick and immense jungle of "grapes" [meaning Confucianism; the two words are homonyms in Vietnamese], inescapable and interminable. Now I am enlightened to the fact that our people have been brought up in this corner of the jungle for generations, sheltering ourselves here through storms and gales. And one cannot have the heart to leave it and throw oneself into the immense ocean. Why don't we just keep sheltering in here while exploring and expanding it, building roads and paths for better communication, welcoming European winds and American rains, trying our best to enrich this age-old soil for a brightened and burgeoning future? (2006: 353)

The ultimate goal of such exchanges, as Phạm Quỳnh said time and again throughout his writings, was to cultivate a national language and literature, without which, he maintained, Vietnam would forever be a small and weak nation. In an essay, Phạm Quỳnh compared contemporary Vietnamese literature to sixteenth-century French literature during its formative period of breaking away from Latin influence (2006: 1025-64). He lauded Madame De Staël for her great contribution to the evolution of French literature through her appropriation of German and Italian literary models and sensibilities (ibid.: 1059). All in all, Phạm Quỳnh advocated strong cultural reforms by learning from Western literatures, particularly French literature. With such an agenda in mind, Phạm Quỳnh took up translation as one of the ways to spread the French Word to the Vietnamese public. He translated both fiction and non-fiction works from French. The most interesting aspect of his work as a translator is the fact that he would render all the

texts extremely fluent in the Vietnamese language, and like Liang Qichao, he even translated characters' names into Vietnamese.[57]

Such domestication seems to contradict the cultural reforms that he aspired to, especially if the value of domesticating translation is to be understood within today's translation theory. Lawrence Venuti has shown us in his *The Translator's Invisibility* (1995) how domesticating effaces the cultural traits of the Other to serve imperialistic purposes. In such an understanding, domesticating does not seem to have any power of creating newness, which was not quite the case in the Vietnamese history of translation. If repetition invariably intails, in a Derridian sense, a break from historicity, then domesticating translation, as a form of repetition or reproduction, carries with it a certain power of disrupting an established order, a power that Venuti only ascribes to foreignizing strategies. From the time of *diễn nôm* to the generations of Vietnamese scholars caught between the East-West encounter of the early twentieth century, domesticating was the only way the Vietnamese dealt with foreign powers. They appropriated the foreign and re-created themselves while maintaining their sovereignty. Throughout the process, the Vietnamese not only dispelled the economic and political control of their suppressors, but also created for themselves new forms of linguistic and cultural expression, enriched their repertoire of traditional literature, and crafted new and fluid identities. Domesticating translation is the very "soul and religion," to quote Stephen Roberts again, of the Vietnamese people, a pattern of the Vietnamese response to foreign oppression.

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[57] Vũ Ngọc Phan praises Phạm Quỳnh for his fluent, elegant, yet highly faithful translation techniques ([1942] 1960: 93-111).

If domesticating is the power of the colonized, then the colonizer does not simply throw itself into an apriori condition of ambivalence in the sense that it has no option but hybridity, indeterminacy, or a split identity in the colonial context. The case of French colonialism in Vietnam has shown that it is in ambivalence that the colonizer manipulates and negotiates not only its own colonial identity but its very vision of what is right for the people they seek to control. Starting from a vision of assimilation, the French attempted to uproot the Vietnamese from their Chinese imbrications as a steppingstone. They initiated and sponsored different programs and institutions to achieve this objective, including developing for the native a Romanized language. The native collaborationists, though sharing with their French masters the same colonial vision, often deflected wittingly or unwittingly the French colonial path and turned colonialism into a complex situation. It was certainly an ambivalent situation where every actor underwent identitarian splitting and transformation. But what escapes the notice of much of postcolonial discourse nowadays is that ambivalence itself is not the end of colonialism, the end of postcolonial enunciations, but only a condition for a complex dynamic of power relations in which political actors play out their roles, contestations, manipulations, and negotiations. In this sense, if resistance is only configured as an *effect* of ambivalence, as Bhabha has suggested, postcolonialism will miss insights into a critical site of cultural translation in the colonial context that needs further interpretation on the part of the postcolonial researcher. And by translation, I suggest that one needs to always look past ambivalence – for ambivalence inheres in translation – and examine how the different actors navigate in ambivalence itself. In a colonial context, there are not just the

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colonizer and the colonized, but a whole complex set of characters with an array of

political agendas that reflect and deflect one another's ambitions.

CHAPTER 3

WOMEN AND THE REVOLUTION: THE POLITICS OF RESIGNIFICATION,

OR CULTURAL TRANSLATION

> Only the fire can know the age of the gold.
> We men respect the bravery of the Vietnamese women.
> Although you were put in jail, you did not withdraw.
> Although you lived under the rain of beatings,
> you did not betray the country. You look like the
> white flower blossoms in the dirty lake.
> Just to show your bravery and strength,
> your spirit is strong like steel.
> Although you are very soft and gentle
> And honest and sincere,
> the rain of blows cannot break your spirit.
> You have overcome many difficulties to come to victory.
> Only the fire can tell exactly the quality of gold.

This poem was recited by Luong Thi Trang, a Ben Tre woman who served in the

National Liberation Front of the Communist Party, in an interview with Sandra Taylor

(Taylor 1999: 15-16). Although she admitted to the American scholar that she could not

remember all the events that had happened to her during the war, Trang cited the poem

by heart. The poem, as Trang recalled, was written by some male prisoners at Côn Đảo, a

colonial prison, as a tribute to the female prisoners for their courage and ability to

withstand the merciless torture and abuse inflicted upon them. Personally inspired as it is,

the poem lies deep at the heart of the popular representations of women in the various

cultural discourses in Vietnam during and after the war.

The poem does not name any particular woman like many other narratives in the

literary tradition of socialist realism, and for that matter, it approximates the kind of

grand narrative that this paper aims to explore. Witnessing the suffering that some

woman prisoners had to endure, the composers of the poem did not seem to have much

difficulty in naming these concrete subjects "Vietnamese women." After the authorial act

of naming, of placing particular subjects under the rubric of woman-plus-nationality,

these male composers address them more personally in the form of the second-person

pronoun "you" through to the last line of the poem.[1] Here, we are presented with an

address to women by men, a kind of address that articulates the being of feminine

subjects as perpetually bound to nationality. The possibility of the address is predicated

on the gender division of man versus woman, and also, as seen in this case, on the

nationality associated with the addressed women. What makes the utterance "we men"

possible is the integrity and unity of the category of man. The utterance reiterates the

category, and in so doing, consolidates these necessary qualities of the category. But

integrity and unity are not self-containing qualities; rather, they are produced through an

exclusionary mechanism. The possibility of the utterance "we men" presupposes the

integrity and unity of "you women." However, the "you women," unlike its counterpart

"we men," is possible, as it were, not on the basis of the integrity and unity of the other

gender, but on the basis of a detour through nationality. Within this form of address, the

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[1] It is unfortunate that I do not have access to the Vietnamese original of the poem. The pronoun "you" in the English version may be a rendition of a number of possible Vietnamese personal pronouns with various levels of formality, intimacy, and generality. The Vietnamese addressing system uses nouns of kinship, so as women will be addressed in the second and third person as *cô* (aunt), *chị* (older sister), or *em* (younger sister), depending on the social context in which the address is made. At issue here is that in writing, where the immediate context of a speaker and a hearer is removed, it is hard to distinguish between the second and third person address. However, the poem is translated by a Vietnamese woman, Nguyen Thi Sau, who settles the ambiguity by rendering the address as "you" in English, instead of "they."

"you" emerges only after being recognized as "Vietnamese," as if one could not be a woman, and thus could not be addressed, without first of all being a Vietnamese, as if it was this attribute of being Vietnamese, and not a biological sex, that would make womanhood possible. For a Vietnamese woman, being Vietnamese miraculously becomes a biological trait, so as being Vietnamese supersedes female anatomy. If the female sex is seen in traditional gender theories as the biological ground for gender oppression, we see here a quite different scenario: women are reconfigured through nationality. In other words, the traditional category of biological sex seems to be displaced, and nationality serves as a totalizing rubric that coherently subsumes all women and, at times, Vietnamese men, into a unifying category, the category of Vietnamese woman. Sex and nationality are welded together to form a structure of gender configuration that is both traditional and modern.

From another angle, if the naming of "Vietnamese women" in the poem can be understood as an illocutionary performative in the Austinian sense, as a doing by saying what it does, there is implied a convention outside of the act that provides the act with the force necessary for its performance (Austin 1975). From this perspective of performativity, the poem embodies a citation of that force external to the poem itself, and through this citation, subjects are produced as an effect. In uttering "We men respect the bravery of Vietnamese women," the speaking subject not only makes a constative claim of admiration but also (re-)inaugurates the category of Vietnamese women, producing the feminine subjectivity. However, the production of subjectivity is not the end of the mechanism; the entire scenario culminates in a process in which the effected subjects become the means through which the force is sustained. In the Foucaultian sense, the

force is both juridical and productive. On the one hand, it acts on the subject, regulates it, and through regulation produces the subject. On the other hand, the regulated subject facilitates the reproduction of the force itself as the subject performs its existence under the regulation of the force.

In this chapter, I attempt to examine the operations of this force that makes possible the We Men/Vietnamese Women address. In so doing, I delineate the evolution of gender construction from the pre-revolutionary past of Vietnam to the contemporary period of the country's drastic socio-political transformations under the pressure of globalization. Along the way, issues relating to the construction and governing of femininity are illuminated as I undertake to analyze the way revolutionary politics calls women into nationalist services and produces a feminine subjectivity that both retains and breaks away from historical gender configurations. Contrary to what is commonly seen in nationalist traditions in other parts of the world, in which nation is often imagined as a brotherhood, typically a domain of men, Vietnamese nationalism has been historically conditioned to identify itself with the feminine subject. I argue that the structure of We Men/Vietnamese Women has cast the woman as an embodiment of the nation so as the history of the nation becomes solely the woman's history and men blissfully remain transcendental subjects outside of that history. This is certainly not to diminish men's services in the wars against foreign invasions, yet the reality of their fight seems to be absent from the imagination of the nation. The chapter ends with a discussion of Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity. Through this theory, Butler argues that gender performatives contain within themselves possibilities for re-signification that can be appropriated for feminist purposes. I suggest that while re-significability is inherent in the

structural as well as social dimensions of the performative as shown in Butler's analyses,

it can be preemptively appropriated by the very power that sustains the performative in a

way that precludes feminist appropriations. The workings of gender tend to be more fluid

than the theory of performativity seems to suggest. In this light, I also connect

resignification to the notion of cultural translation as elaborated in Chapter 2, suggesting

new directions in research on translation studies and gender studies, particularly in the

case of Vietnam.

3.1 Women and their Home in Revolutionary Politics

It might seem a paradox that the image of the modern Vietnamese woman is often

represented by the Trưng Sisters, historical figures of almost two millennia ago. Such a

representation that traverses into antiquity in search of woman figures, however, does not

signify a nostalgia for lost values or the heyday of feminine heroism. In fact, a

rediscovery of history serves to narrativize what has been perceived as the essence of

femininity in modern Vietnam since the rise of communist nationalism. This is not to

suggest that the Trưng Sisters and their rebellion against the Chinese invasion in the first

century had never been narrated before the emergence of communist ideologies in

Vietnam in the 1930s. It had been indeed translated into different forms of art, yet the

story was then conceived of as an epitome of the people's patriotic spirit rather free of

gender consciousness. The communist revolutionary politics reinvents the story and

charges it with gender significations.[2]

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[2] Phan Bội Châu, an anticolonial patriot most influential in the first quarter of the twentieth century, wrote in 1911 a drama, or *tuồng*, about the Trưng Sisters. For the text

Figures like the Trưng Sisters are not many in Vietnam's history, and probably for

that reason, memory of their virtues is preserved and strategically intensified as a ground

for the discursive formation of the kind of femininity desired by the communist

revolution. This historical scarcity of fighting women, who fought as men yet died as

women, sets into motion a discourse that, in the Foucaultian formulation, *acts* upon

women and *produces* revolutionary feminine subjectivity. Before the revolution took its

more formal shape with the establishment of the Vietnam Communist Party in 1930,

fighting women had never been a popular phenomenon in Vietnam history; once they did,

they came to constitute the so-called tradition of "long-haired" warriors, a term used by

the communist revolution to refer to women who served in the army.[3] The Trưng Sisters'

successful expulsion of the Chinese oppressors and their consequent establishment of

autonomous rule are but a happy accident of history. Nevertheless, they provided the

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of the play, see Phan Bội Châu ([1911] 1967). Although Phan was one of the pioneers in
bringing up issues regarding the status of women and conceived them as part of the
forthcoming anticolonial struggle, he contended that the story should underscore
patriotism rather than sisterhood and personal revenge. Phan's drama is considered the
first attempt to connect feminism to the cause of the nation. As I shall discuss at greater
length later, the alliance between feminism and nationalism reaches its fullest
development with the rise of communist revolutionary politics. For interpretations of
Phan's works, see Marr (1971: 153-154), and Tai (1992: 95-96).
  [3] Statistics of women participating in the wars in Vietnam have never been
complete because of the size and scope of "The People's War" that the communist
revolution waged against invaders. An estimation of one million women joined the Việt
Minh to fight against the French (Eisen 1984: 99). For example, one-third of the original
armed self-defence unit of the Nghệ Tĩnh Soviet Movement was comprised of women.
During the Điện Biên Phủ Campaign (1954), two-thirds of the *dân công*, people who
carried supplies to the battlefield, were women (ibid.: 97, 101). Eisen even goes so far as
to suggest that "people's war is women's war" (ibid.: 94-97). Women also played a
tremendously important role during the war against the American intervention in
Vietnam. For example, about 40% of the regimental commanders of the People's
Liberation Armed Forces were women (ibid.: 105).

communist wars against the strongest powers of the world with preexisting signs that would be appropriated and transformed into myth, a myth that continues to exert its power upon women in the postwar era. Stories about the Trưng Sisters are stripped of their original context, history, and meaning and re-signified for contemporary political use. This re-signification bears a close resemblance to what Roland Barthes observes in the task of myth, which is "giving an historical intention a natural justification, and making contingency appear eternal" (1957: 142-43). The myth of the Trưng Sisters presents a purified, depoliticized, realm of meaning, an effect of "passing from history to nature" with "a blissful clarity" in which "things appear to mean something by themselves" (ibid.).

The myth of the Trưng Sisters is consumed in the modern era as an emanation of the natural essence of femininity.[4] It facilitates an uncritical internalization of the popular saying "when the enemy comes, even women fight," culminating in a people's war against American intervention, and people here denotes both men and women. In *Even the Women Must Fight: Memories of War from North Vietnam*, Karen Turner rightly reminds us that "any accounting of the American war in Vietnam that leaves out Vietnamese women tells only half of the story" (1998: 19). Turner is also very keen in her remark that, in contrast to American women's service in World War II, Vietnamese women war service sprang from their first-hand experience of the war. The war, she observes, "came to them, to their homes, cities, and villages" (ibid.: 22). However, Turner seems to miss an important aspect of war experience, and that is the discursive

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[4] Much scholarship has been devoted to the role of myth in the life of the nation. Further discussion can be found in Gellner (1983), Hobsbawm (1990).

formation of experience that the revolution effectively fostered as a means to guide

women's understanding of their worldly experiences, and thereupon, urge them to act.

Any historical account that takes experience as self-evident and authorial in the

production of knowledge will preclude insights into how experience itself is discursively

constituted. Joan Scott refuses to view experience as a primary source of knowledge and

argues that "experience is at once always already an interpretation *and* is in need of

interpretation," and as such, it is "not the origin of our explanation, but that which we

want to explain" (1992: 37-8). Vietnamese women's experience of the wars, I suggest,

should be understood within this intersection between the constitutive discursivity and

worldly experiences, the seen and felt experiences of losses and deaths.

In her autobiographical novel *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places*, Le Ly

Hayslip highlights the discursivity of experience when she recounts in the prologue how

she "loved, labored, and fought steadfastly for the Viet Cong against American and South

Vietnamese soldiers" because "everything [she] knew about the war [she] learned as a

teenaged girl from the North Vietnamese cadre leaders," and more importantly, because

"we peasants assumed everything we heard was true because what the Viet Cong said

matched, in one way or another, the beliefs we already had" (1989: ix-x). For all the

unfortunate happenings and transformations of her identity, from an innocent peasant girl

to a secret Vietcong agent, a servant in Vietnam to a mother and widow in the United

States, a prisoner of the Ngô Đình Diệm government to an object of sexual abuse by a

fellow communist cadre, Hayslip was fortunate to be able to see this matching between

what she heard and what she believed. Released from the enemy's prison, she was then

distrusted by the Vietcong on the grounds that she must have traded secret information

for her freedom. Instead of her execution, the cadre in-charge raped her and spared her life. In this moment of male penetration, the discursively fabricated "matching" between her personal belief and ideological indoctrination was revealed to her, a revelation that exposed the workings of discourse upon reality, upon her experience as a teenaged girl. As the cadre entered her, depriving her of virginity as said in the Vietnamese language, she entered the world of knowing and became both an outsider to the Vietcong organization and an outsider to the collective of Vietnamese woman. I suggest that this outside position makes possible her autobiography and her perception of the matching, the working of ideological discourses on the personal. Premarital loss of virginity, even as a result of coercion, is considered by tradition as a shame not only for the woman herself but also for her entire family. As an expression of sexual regulation, virginity is never at the woman's disposal, or as Judith Butler puts it in *Precarious Life*, "neither gender nor sexuality is precisely a possession, but, rather, is a mode of being dispossessed, a way of being *for* another or *by virtue of* another" (2004a: 24). Her duty of keeping virginity until marriage represents a conditioned submission to an order beyond herself.[5] For that matter, the rape cast Hayslip as a deviant from the accepted category of "good" Vietnamese girlhood and, as it was done by a communist cadre, also expelled her from Vietcong circles. The simultaneous loss of her membership in the communist

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[5] For an account of the Confucian ideals of chastity and virginity, see David Marr, "The Question of Women," in *Vietnamese Tradition on Trial, 1920-1945* (1981: 90-251).

organization and of her status of proper Vietnamese womanhood underscores a point I made earlier: one becomes a woman only through being Vietnamese.[6]

Le Ly Hayslip after the rape represents an outsider to proper Vietnamese womanhood, and her story makes visible the demarcation of inside versus outside when placed in contrast to the ideological myth of the Trưng Sisters. As a myth created by ideology, it constitutes part of the grand narrative in which role models of the feminine subject are established and essentialized to the extent that history is transformed into nature. Thi Sách, Trưng Trắc's husband, was executed by the Chinese ruler for his open stand against the Chinese imposition of assimilation policies. The execution at once incited Trưng Trắc to take up violent actions against the ruling power. Here lies an ambivalence in the motivation for the Trưng Sisters' revolt. Trưng Trắc's eventual killing of the Chinese governor might be driven by either her desire for personal revenge or her patriotism, or both. Interestingly, this ambivalence offers an opportunity for the kind of

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[6] This becoming of womanhood within the overarching schema of nationalism is not a phenomenon peculiar to Vietnam only. In his book, *Nationalism and Sexuality: Respectability and Abnormal Sexuality in Modern Europe* (1985), George Mosse offers a thorough account of the complimentary relationship between nationalism and sexuality. He argues that respectability, originally a bourgeois ideal representing their unity and distinction from the aristocrat and lower classes, was appropriated by nationalism and spread to all social classes. As such, respectability, with its articulations of proper masculinity and femininity, becomes an expression of unity and cohesion needed for nationalist ideologies. In chapter 5, "What Kind of Woman?", Mosse points out how womanhood was restored back into the domestic sphere in the nineteenth century, making the active life outside the home exclusively men's. The woman then lost her slight emancipation gained in the Enlightenment. What is peculiar in Vietnam, as I shall show later in this chapter, is that gender configurations develop in quite an opposite direction, in which women step out of the Confucian confines and go to battles like men, yet remain to be women as the Other of men. Another difference is that only femininity embodies the nation, and thus is marked under the rubric of "Vietnamese women." Such a notion as "Vietnamese men" seems to be a redundancy, or even an anomaly in gender construction.

signification needed by the modern communist revolution. The story is told in the modern era with the heroine as an embodiment of both traditional virtues and revolutionary agency. With her action interpreted as an amalgamation of personal revenge and patriotic resistance, Trưng Trắc signifies a kind of patriotism that is closely attached to the domestic sphere traditionally designated as that of the woman. The new meaning of Trưng Trắc's resistance cultivates a fusion of the woman's traditional passivity in the private sphere of the household and activity in the public realm. In this new configuration, the woman, despite her possible physical strength, strong will, patriotic aspiration, or even her success in expelling intruders, is not entirely divorced from her traditional role as a good wife and mother.

The attachment of patriotism to the woman's domestic sphere, or in other words, the re-signification of the domestic sphere as a site for revolutionary action, is best manifested in the allegory of the Trưng Sisters' legendary suicide after three years of independent rule. Understanding the "essential" women's task of upholding feminine virtues, the Chinese launched a cunning attack against the Trưng Sisters' army, which was comprised mainly of women, by having their male soldiers strip naked to the skin. The sisters lost the battle against the Chinese naked army, not because of the enemy's might, but because of the humiliation inflicted upon the ideals of chastity and propriety. The Trưng Sisters chose to commit suicide to uphold women's values, as told today, even though they had fought and defeated an apparently stronger army.[7] The story presents an

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[7] There are many overlapping details in the stories of the Trưng Sisters and Triệu Thị Trinh, another woman warrior in the third century. In her documentary, *Surname Việt, Given Name Nam* (1989), Trịnh Minh-hà connects this confusion between the two

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image of women who fight as brave men yet die as virtuous women. Within this grand

narrative of the conflation of proper womanhood and nationalism, Le Ly Hayslip's

autobiography offers a sharp contrast. In a way, her loss of virginity precipitates a

nullification of her reasons for fighting for the Vietcong before her imprisonment by the

Southern government. Here, I do not suggest that virginity was a criterion literally

applied by the Vietcong in their recruitment of members. As an autobiographical

narrative, Hayslip's *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places* tells the experiences of a

young woman cast outside of the grand narrative, resulting in a personal narrative to

which she contributed her part. The rape itself is done in place of a sanctioned execution,

which foregrounds the symbolic significance of virginity, and ultimately, the

identification of the woman's sex with the revolution.[8]

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allegorical figures with several other ambiguities in narratives about women and their identities, including the multiple names of Triệu Thị Trinh, the existence of Hồ Xuân Hương as a subversive woman poet, as well as the multiple significations of *The Tale of Kiều*, a national epic by Nguyễn Du. The confusing stories about these figures, as suggested by Trịnh, constitute a controversy that places feminine subjectivity under perpetual contestation, and thus dissolution. The film scripts of the documentary can be found in her book, *Framer Framed* (1992: 49-94). Also for an account of the Trưng Sisters and Triệu Thị Trinh, see Marr (1981: 190-251). In Marr's account, it is Triệu Thị Trinh, and not the Trưng Sisters, who committed suicide over her disgust at fighting naked Chinese soldiers.

[8] Purity and chastity are common themes in national narratives in which the nation is often feminized so as the woman becomes the nation itself, and it is men's task to protect this embodiment of nation as woman. Further analyses on this trope in nationalist discourses can be found in Tamar Mayer (2000). In this volume, the contributors offer insights into issues of feminized nations in various regions of the world. However, as shall be seen later, this is not quite the case in Vietnamese nationalism. Here, the identification of the woman's sex with the revolution does not merely render the woman a passive and inferior subject in need of men's protection. The woman *is* the nation, yet in this being, she becomes a subject of agency, capable of protecting herself and making her own history.

Returning to Karen Turner, although her comment that the war "came to them, to their homes, cities, and villages" misses the discursive element of experience, it accurately captures the translation of the home as a private sphere in which women perform traditional roles into a site where they become active revolutionary agents. The comment also compensates for a loss in the English translation of the Vietnamese proverb *giặc đến nhà đàn bà cũng đánh*, part of which Turner uses as the title of her book *Even the Women Must Fight*. Literally, the proverb says "when the enemy comes to the home, even women must fight," and the word *nhà* (home) is often left out in the translation as the English verb "come" seems adequate to denote the presence of the enemy. Interestingly enough, *nhà* in Vietnamese also means wife, and Vietnamese men commonly refer to their wives as "my home." As in many other Asian cultures, the Vietnamese home represents an inner world of spirituality, a private sphere where the "true essence" of one's identity is formed, a place where happy birth and death are to take place. Returning home is a return to one's ancestors, to origin, to the source of happiness and nurture equaled nowhere else, as said in the proverb *ta về ta tắm ao ta, dù trong dù đục ao nhà vẫn hơn*.[9] In relation to the social sphere, the home signifies order, stability, as well as the intimate space upon which society is based. While most Western philosophical traditions center around the notion of being that tends to overlook the boundaries of the home, the home in Vietnamese minds has an ontological significance, as one's relations to others in the social sphere begin in the home itself.

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[9] Let me return to swim in my own pond; clear or muddy, it is my home pond (translation mine).

Examining Bengali nationalist discourse, Partha Chatterjee (1993) notes that

Bengali nationalism is articulated on the basis of the distinction between home and world

which corresponds to the spiritual/material dichotomy. The world constitutes the site of

colonial domination – by virtue of European superior material culture, namely science,

technology, rational forms of economic organization, modern statecraft, whereas the

home is designated as the untouchable spirituality of the people. The nationalist project of

overthrowing the colonizer comprises two complementary tasks: learning the material

advantages of the West to catch up with it in the world, and at the same time preserving

the spiritual home. "In the world, imitation of and adaptation to Western norms was a

necessity; at home, they were tantamount to annihilation of one's very identity"

(Chatterjee 1993: 121). This dichotomy, according to Chatterjee, provides insights into

the ideological framework in which nationalist discourse tackles the issue of gender. The

home is ascribed to women, whose role in it is to protect and nurture the spiritual essence

of national culture. What remains a question in Chatterjee's analysis is what this home

actually means in the cultural life of the Bengali people before the emergence of anti-

colonial nationalism as an ideology. Does nationalist discourse itself produce and

naturalize the world/home dichotomy?

My contention is that the consciousness of such a dichotomy could hardly be

possible without the presence of an enemy whose material superiority threatens the

stability of existing indigenous way of life. The home as such represents a domain free

from foreign domination, a retreat from the world to avoid direct confrontation with

superior material powers. The dichotomy defines nationalist politics as circumscribing a

certain sphere, the so-called home in this case, ascribing it to subjects along gender lines,

and claiming it as invulnerable. Such politics operates as if the circumscription could be completed before damage is done to that which is circumscribed, as if the home could remain intact and authentic to itself before and after the coming of politics. Is the home produced or merely appropriated by politics as a site of decolonization? If it is produced by politics, then there is no such notion as authenticity, simply because there is no original home prior to its own production. If appropriated by politics, which implies that the home exists prior to the appropriation, it changes the moment it is appropriated. There is simply no politics before damage is done. Politics arises, as it were, after the damage is done, to stop it, undo it, fix it, and/or prevent further damage. While Chatterjee's examination of the world/home dichotomy illuminates critical issues in the relationship between nationalism and gender, it does not account for the representation of the home being disrupted and destroyed by colonialism in many parts of the world, including Vietnam, where the home also signifies the people's way of life and spirituality. The image of the home broken by turmoil often causes fear and incites a sense of insecurity and loss, and probably for that reason, it is used in many ways as a rhetorical device to inspire people and call them into action. In this representation the woman emerges not merely as a passive embodiment of the values of the home, but also as its persevering protector.

The broken home in the nationalist discourses of Vietnam refuses to harbor passive melancholy and unproductive nostalgia for the pristine pre-colonial past as often seen in pre-revolutionary writings in the early twentieth century. Instead, it is transformed into a site of revolutionary action against the power that destroys it. A comparative look into the representation of the broken home before and after the rise of communist

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nationalism in Vietnam shows how feminine subjectivity undergoes radical change, and yet maintains a continuity between traditional and modern gender conceptions. More importantly, it reveals how the broken home is translated into an opportunity for the re-signification of the home itself, and thus the re-signification of femininity. A disparity between Bengali and Vietnamese nationalist politics is that in Vietnam, the project of decolonization involves the re-signification of the home rather than the protection of it.

Much of the revolutionary re-articulation of gender norms begins in the home, and paradoxically, never leaves the home. Revolutionary politics does not liberate women from the confines of the Confucian home. Rather, it is the home that is altered, re-signified, and translated into a location of revolutionary action. Within this mechanism of re-signification, war is depicted as a lifestyle, and the home is no longer a location of solace, but of suffering and chaos under the destructive power of war. The woman's identity in the home is also transformed to suit the new condition. It is not, however, a substantive transformation in the content of gender regulations, but a transformation in the re-significability of the category of woman itself. In other words, what matters is not how femininity is redefined, once and for all to serve revolutionary purposes, but how gender oppression is engendered and perpetuated through this new quality of re-significability bestowed on the category of woman. This new quality of femininity often eludes feminist views. In the sweeping flux of feminist politics across the globe, gender politics learns how to hide itself from view through constant change facilitated by re-significability. Change itself becomes the new form of oppression, an elusive and preemptive oppression under the disguise of change. Change becomes the politics of the oppressor. If feminism seeks changes in gender norms as a path towards emancipation,

here changes are given before hand; silenced and satisfied, feminism is rendered inactive and unproductive, and feminist agency is absorbed into empty contentment. Given change is taken as gain, and more dangerously, as emancipation itself.

In what follows, I examine some texts from different genres to demonstrate how communist revolutionary politics in Vietnam, which in many ways relies on the politics of gender oppression, endows women with the capacity for perpetual re-signification and how this newly given quality of re-significability, the avant-garde, subtly disguised as a form of oppression, is manifested through times of war and peace. I suggest that without adequate theorization of the politics of re-significability, feminism would be in an invariable state of confronting the oppressor, and emancipation therefore perpetually in the hands of the oppressor, to be handed out at its own will.

Before the communist revolutionary ideals predominated anticolonial aspirations, the home had been depicted fundamentally as a disturbed and fragmented locality. Nguyễn Đình Chiểu (1822-1888) could be said to best represent pre-revolutionary anticolonial authors. His poetry and prose often articulate a candid anticolonial stance. For the blind poet, writing is a powerful weapon as eloquently expressed in his famous motto: "*Chở bao nhiêu đạo thuyền không khẳm/ Đâm mấy thằng gian bút chẳng tà*."[10] Although Nguyễn Đình Chiểu recognized the power of the pen and actually used it in his writings, the poet has been criticized by communist critics because, as with other pre-

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[10] However much teachings it carries, the boat is never full/ However many French it stabs, the pen is never blunt (translation mine). I have known these lines by heart since I was a school child. The two lines make a very nice parallel grammatical and semantic structure in Vietnamese, and thus are easy to remember, even to school children who may not fully understand their anticolonial implications.

communist authors, he lacked revolutionary agency or individual resistance that would

contribute to the overthrow of the colonial regime. In his poem "Chạy Tây" (Fleeing

from the French), which is taught at secondary school and which I remember by heart,

the poet presents the image of a broken way of life under the French invasion:

> Western guns heard late one market day,
> A chess game lost by a wrong move.
> Away from home, children scurry here and there,
> Abandoning their nests, startled birds fly to and fro.
> Bến Nghé river, blown away froth,
> Đồng Nai houses, tainted tiles.
> Where have turmoil quellers gone
> To leave people in this scourge?[11]

The turmoil, as Nguyễn Đình Chiểu sees it, concerns the collapse of the boundary

between the private home and the public place. Whereas the public place comprises a site

of competition and excellence, the home offers shelter, solace, intimacy, and rest; and

within the unceasing flowing into each other of these two spheres, one's life becomes

livable and recognizable. A life attached to one sphere and completely divorced from the

other cannot be recognized as human life. In the Vietnamese mind, one's life is

fundamentally constituted by the cyclical movement of to and from home. One departs

from home to participate in the public life where one competes, excels, learns, and earns;

yet what one achieves in the public life is only meaningful back in the home, where one

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[11] This is my translation. Huỳnh Sanh Thông also translated this poem in his *An Anthology of Vietnamese Poems: From the Eleventh through the Twentieth Centuries* (1996: 84-85). I find Huỳnh's translation too explanatory and prefer my own. However, both translations capture the image of the broken home that I am analyzing in what follows.

knows and realizes the ends of one's activities in the public sphere.[12] The end of public

life is the home, and returning home signifies a personal longing for belonging, stability,

and meaning. It is the cultural hallmark of the Vietnamese society, a society essentially

comprised of the unceasing flow between the private and the public. In Nguyễn's short

poem, the flow is suddenly disrupted and dispersed into disorientation right at the end of

a market day when one is about to return home, an important moment in the flow of

life.[13] The normal movement of a way of life is violently disturbed. In this "lost game,"

which Nguyễn identifies as resulting from the mysterious absence of action on the part of

the Court, the two spheres seem to be merged into one another, creating a total chaos in

which the movement of life, the flow between the private and the public, is displaced and

substituted by disoriented movements of fright and meaninglessness. The boundary

between the private and the public, which makes the flow possible, is destroyed in a way

that sees both spheres immersed in pervasive violence; any movement becomes a

movement into a realm of meaningless violence. Such movements, unlike the flow across

spheres, do not constitute life, but destroy it and render it unlivable.

 While Nguyễn questions the absence of "turmoil quellers" at the end of the poem,

his own poem is often read within nationalist discourses as a pool of absences: absence of

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[12] In her book, *The Human Condition* (1958), Hannah Arendt offers an account of the Greek conception of the public/private distinction, in which participation in the public sphere is only possible when one is free from the labor of the private sphere. In a way, the Greek public sphere is a departure from the private without an essential return. In the Vietnamese conception, such a departure is meaningless as the end of the departure is only realized in the return.

[13] In Huỳnh Sanh Thông's translation, the first line reads "The market breaks at sound of Western guns," which makes the "sound of Western guns" the cause of the dissolution of the market place. The original actually says Western gunshots are heard at the end of a market day. See Huỳnh Sanh Thông (1996: 84).

agency, of revolutionary subjects, of transforming power, of personal accountability for social problems, and all in all, of a revolutionary ethic.[14] Those absences are, however, well redressed through the translation of the pre-revolutionary rhetoric of patriotism into the rhetoric of revolutionary socialism, which employs a rather direct martial lexis. Nguyễn Đình Chiểu's ethical stance of using writing for anticolonial purposes is later translated by Hồ Chí Minh into a more modern and revolutionary language in one of his poems, with the Confucian touch in Nguyễn's lines removed: "Today we should make poems including iron and steel/ And the poet also should know how to lead an attack" (Hồ Chí Minh 1965: 99). While the image of iron and steel connotes an unwavering stand also found in Nguyễn Đình Chiểu's politics, the words "xung phong" (lead an attack, as translated by Aileen Palmer) implies a strong sense of militarism and collectivism in the act of fighting that is absent from most pre-revolutionary writings. More central to Hồ's appeal is the rhetoric that blurs the boundaries between writing as politics and actual fighting in the battlefield and culminates in universal warfare. In Nguyễn Đình Chiểu's rhetoric, the Confucian differentiation between martiality and literarity that underlies the organization of the court and the state is still clear, so writers of literature are not responsible for victory in the battlefield as that is the job of martial men. If involved, their

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[14] Textbooks for literature courses are chronologically structured in a way which tends to feature the absences characteristic of pre-revolutionary writings. Authors like Nguyễn Đình Chiểu are often glorified for their patriotism within their own historical period, yet when it comes to literature of the revolutionary period, students are taught the critique of these writings in terms of lacking the necessary revolutionary agency and ideology. The structure of literary curriculum represents a kind of historical evolution of writings, in which what comes later is invariably perceived as "more progressive" than what comes before. And of course, as history would eventually stop at communism, the evolutionary process of writings would stop, in these textbooks, at communist writings, thus valorizing them as the supreme form of art.

task would be at the level of writing, and not of fighting in the literal sense of the word. In Hồ's reworking of the ideal, revolutionary responsibilities are universalized, not only across the venerable line between martiality and literarity, but also across other categories such as gender, socio-cultural background, age, and profession. Within this universalization of the war, which culminates in the so-called People's War, writers become fighters, and the original distinct spheres of these subjects, the writer and the fighter, merge into one another.

The translation of the Confucian literati ideals, as represented in Nguyễn Đình Chiểu's life and works, into militarized revolutionary ideals, as seen in Hồ Chí Minh's poetry, represents only an evocation of the larger fabric of the metonymics of translation, to invoke Maria Tymoczko's concept (Tymoczko 1999: 41-1), the massive transformation of subjectivities into one totalizing revolutionary subjectivity. The transformation in the representation of the home is another example that metonymically reflects this powerful mechanism successfully established by communist revolutionary politics. The home in the revolutionary imaginary no longer undergoes the poignant dissolution of life-constitutive movements, and the subject under colonial violence is no longer a passive subject questioning "where have turmoil quellers gone?", and thus externalizing agency and responsibility. Instead, the home is reconstructed into a locale that resists dissolution through action. If movements are dissolved in violence, life is now sustained through action; action becomes the new mode of survival, a new way of life. Subjects of the home no longer have to rely on a somewhat transcendental subject – the poet with his power of the pen who witnesses and calls for action – to speak for them, to request action from an external power. Through action, the revolutionary home produces

its own power. The disappearance of the distinction between the home and the public, together with the dissolution of the life-constitutive movements between the two spheres as we have seen in "Chạy Tây," is translated into an opportunity for the re-signification of the home in revolutionary politics. As I have suggested earlier, this re-signification does not take place once and for all to serve a certain contingent condition, but at issue here is the new quality of re-significability that the home as well as its associated category – femininity – would assume throughout the modern history of Vietnam. The new home, the Hồ Chí Minh revolutionary home, is abundantly thematized in arts and literature. In the next section, I show how the home, and together with it, femininity, emerges from the remnants of violence, is re-signified and rendered perpetually re-signifiable. Further, I show how re-significability itself is appropriated in the postwar era. For these purposes, I examine three films produced three decades apart, *Cánh đồng hoang* (The Abandoned Field, 1979), directed by Hồng Sến, and *Áo lụa Hà Đông* (The White Silk Dress, 2006), directed by Lưu Huỳnh, and *Surname Viet, Given Name Nam* (1989) directed by Trinh Minh-ha.

3.2 The Resignified Woman: from *Cánh đồng hoang* to *Áo lụa Hà Đông*, to *Surname Viet, Given Name Nam*

Hồng Sến's *Cánh đồng hoang* (The Abandoned Field, 1979) has been known for several decades as the earliest classic of Vietnamese cinema. The film centers around Ba Đô's family, including his wife and a little son, in their everyday activities as a common family in the Mekong Delta, in the role of a secret liaison for the Vietcong. The main setting of the film is the abandoned field, where Ba Đô's house is located. The field is a

free-fire zone flooded by the Southern government to impede the movement of the Vietcong soldiers of the North. It nevertheless has a strategic location for the Vietcong because it connects several different regions and major troops ferries have to cross it. Knowing the strategic importance of the field for the Vietcong, the Southern government, supported by the United States, has removed the entire population of the region and relocated them elsewhere, turning it into an empty field in the hope of eradicating all possible shelter of the Vietcong guerrillas. Ba Đô and his wife are assigned to live right in the middle of the abandoned field, amid shallow waters, to act as a liaison to provide geographical guidance, information, and other kinds of support for the Vietcong troops passing by. Their little house, and also their frugal and precarious life, is hidden in the density of the flooded jungles from the random American helicopter raids. A large part of the film engages the switching between the gazes of the two opposing perspectives: the downward gaze from the helicopters of government soldiers and the upward gaze to the helicopters of Ba Đô and his wife. However, the gaze of the apparently stronger power is often depicted in the film as blind, and consequently, its actions are inefficient. Helicopters equipped with infantry, machine guns, as well as propaganda leaflets, hover over the entire vast field day and night to track down this "one life," which the American officer contends makes no difference, yet whose sole persistent existence in the field stands as a humiliation to American power and will.

The film features a sort of hide-and-seek game between two asymmetrical powers. The weaker are able to withstand the technological power of the stronger thanks to their covered identity in the dark recesses of the jungles. Under the raids of the enemy, the life of the family becomes precarious and vulnerable; yet for that reason, it is also

fluid in the sense that the boundaries of their home are never fixed, shrinking at times to the physical boundaries of their simple house or tactically expanding to embrace the immense abandoned field. The family's activities are largely mundane, and their home is ordinary, depicted with the traditional image of husband and wife at a rice meal, with their child playing. It is a traditional family with distinct gender roles: the wife cooks and takes care of the child while the husband engages in his role as a house-maker and agent for the Vietcong. Nevertheless, this home is peculiar in the sense that in its relation to the hovering helicopters, it seems to be no longer a private entity connected to a public, but dispersed and dissolved into the immensity of its tropical environment. It appears as a private home in its relation to the Vietcong, especially when Ba Đô comes home from his military engagements, with subsistence and goods for the family's daily consumption, and also information about what is going on outside the home. These departures and returns connect Ba Đô's family to the different Vietcong groups, to a public, and at the same time separate it as a distinct entity, a private sphere on its own.

The fluidity of the home is manifest in those moments of reunion after each raid that separates the members of the family momentarily in a way that each reunion afterward only ties them together ever more strongly. In this sense, the raids completely fail as they cannot break the will of three little people, including the crying child, and more importantly, the bond among them, even though they are constantly exposed to the whim of powerful weaponry. Most of the raids are carried out, miraculously, when either Ba Đô or his wife leaves home on an errand in the field, which tacitly facilitates the immersion of their home into the immensity of the field. While the raids are depicted in highly realistic filmic pictures, their representation is embedded in the tacit cinematic

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technique that renders it instrumental in the re-signification of the home. After the

aggressive helicopters go away in vain, the separated couple would call each other's

name as if to fill the distance between them with their voices, find each other, and reunite

amid the calm waters; all of their reunions happily take place in the field rather than at

home, including the final reunion when Ba Đô is shot dead. After each deadly turbulence

that separates them, the couple reunites in the tranquility of the field and their laughter of

happiness reverberates through the immense landscape. Moments of hiding from the

blindly extravagant machine guns are often followed by moments of rejoicing, and the

couple emerges and re-emerges as unfaltering, legitimate owners of the entire field, their

extended home.

Not only are the boundaries of the home but also the meaning of activities in it

rendered fluid. The re-signification of the home, through which the home embodies an

extended geographical landscape and becomes a perpetually contingent entity, reaches a

pivotal phase with the scene of the couple's labor in the rice field at night, under the

persistent scourge of American helicopters. Here, the Arendtian differentiation of labor,

work, and action in a hierarchical model of *vita activa* seems to show its limits. Labor, in

Arendt's conception, belongs to the private sphere of the home and serves to sustain the

biological life process. As such, labor merely provides human beings with necessary

subsistence for the reproduction of the subsistence itself, culminating in a biological life

cycle. It is work that produces the world, the human artifice of durability which extends

beyond the life of the individual. Action assumes the highest position in the *vita activa*,

which comes about as a result of human plurality and togetherness (Arendt 1958). In a

situation where the mere existence of life seems to stand as a challenge to American

power, the cultivation of the rice field not only provides subsistence for Ba Đô' family but also constitutes resistance in itself. Labor is elevated above the biological life process and assumes political significance; labor represents political action. It is in this first scene of resisting action that we find most prominent the "new" division of labor along gender lines. While Ba Đô works hard to finish the harvest before day breaks, his wife helps do the same job and at the same time attends to the child sleeping in a shawl in the open air of the rice field. The presence of the little child throughout the film posits a retention of the woman's traditional role, in such a way that she is still fundamentally a traditional woman, with her essential virtues, despite her wise tactics and bravery in dealing with the enemy. As a human being living and acting through war, the young woman experiences the same indifferent raids inflicted upon her husband, yet she needs not his protection and manages to develop for herself a strong will and survival tactics that can equal those of men. As if not to let the woman grow into complete masculinity, which would eventually destroy gender difference, the film accentuates her attachment to her little son, presenting her as a virtuous mother and wife. In one scene, the child falls into the water, and she is to blame; Ba Đô slaps her in the face out of anger for her inattentive performance of domestic duty. Holding the boy, barely rescued from drowning, in her lap, she turns away from him and bursts into tears. The scene reiterates the image of a traditional woman who silently submits to domestic violence, obediently accepts her role, and whose most radical reaction cannot be anything more than tears and sobs. The film presents us with a woman alternating seamlessly between traditional and modern feminine identities in a fluid home to the extent that fluid alternation itself is figured as her new identity.

Another feature in the characterization of the woman figure that effectively sustains gender difference while allowing the woman to cast upon herself masculine attributes lies in the representation of her appearance. Ba Đô's wife is a beautiful woman whose refined look stands out against the background of the flooded jungles. For a farmer who lives in frugality and constant turbulence, her polished complexion is unusually prominent even in the black-and-white pictures of the film. Ba Đô's appearance is, on the contrary, depicted as more of a commoner. There are practical reasons for such a shameless contrast in the representation of the male and female characters, such as the popular expectation of viewers or the selection of beautiful actresses to appeal to cinematic viewers. At the core of this practice is an aesthetic conception in the representation of the woman figure in cinematography that originates from what Sandra Lee Bartky calls "the modernization of patriarchal power" (1997: 93-111). Responding to Foucault's blindness towards the differing experience of gendered bodies as subjects of power, Bartky engages in an investigation of how the female body is produced and made recognizable as feminine through disciplinary practices. Bartky probes into the many categories that serve to regulate the female body within restrictive standardizations, including general configurations such as the woman's size, gestures, movements, as well as seemingly minute details such as her skin and body hair. All these standardized parameters imposed upon the female body, particularly those projected in cosmetic advertising through models' perfect bodies and skin, Barkty argues, doom the ordinary woman into a certain sense of self-shame and failure. With the advent of visual media, the modernization of patriarchal power as delineated in Barkty's analysis reaches an even more complete and solidified state, especially in a country like Vietnam where the

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construction of socialist role models dominates art and literature. Orthodox films of the

socialist tradition, which are financially sponsored and strictly censored by the state,

often present dogmatic models of perfect characters as a way to educate the masses. The

perfect woman character in *Cánh đồng hoang*, whose beauty rises above the frugality of

her condition, is produced in the intersection of the modernization of patriarchal power

and the socialist role-modeling.[15] Apart from the patriarchal domination implicated in

such language of role-modeling, also at stake is the preservation of the image of a

typically traditional woman through perfectionist representation. Her beauty is the means

through which her traditional feminine qualities are brought into harmony with her new

masculine attributes. This preservation is necessary in forging a revolutionary femininity

that relies on fluidity and contingency rather than unchanging essences.

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[15] The patriarchal role-modeling is also structured into language. In Vietnamese, a role model is metaphorically referred to as *gương*, literally a mirror. In its literal sense, *gương* is often used with the verb *soi* (to look at oneself), so *soi gương* means to look at oneself in the mirror, an act that culminates in an image of the subject in the mirror that looks the same as the subject itself. In its metaphorical sense, *gương*, or a role model, is used with the verb *noi* – there is a substitution of one phoneme, and *noi gương*, and not *soi gương*, means to follow a good example, a model. The differentiation of the verbs to use with the different meanings of *gương*, literal and metaphorical, posits a difference between the subject that is supposed to follow a model and the model itself. If the act of *noi gương* could culminate in an exact same image of the subject in the mirror, *noi* would no longer differentiate itself from *soi*. In other words, if the image in the mirror is exactly the same as the subject in front of the mirror, *noi* becomes *soi*, which is impossible because the two verbs are never used synonymously in Vietnamese. *Noi gương* therefore invariably presupposes a difference between the subject that follows a model and the model itself. This presupposition in *noi gương* can be seen only in its differing relation to the act of *soi gương*. In a way, *noi gương* in the role-modeling structure requests the subject to be the same as the model, yet never allows it to reach that state of sameness. This is the structural suppression in the language of role-modeling which invariably dooms the subject into a perpetual state of self-shame and failure.

The end of the film brings us back to the myth of the Trưng Sisters. When Ba Đô is shot dead in the middle of the field, his wife takes the rifle and shoots down the helicopter that killed her husband, making complete the transference of responsibility across the gender line which resonates with the Trưng Sisters's assumption of responsibility for the uprising after her husband is executed by the Chinese. The woman in both narratives kills the enemy for personal revenge and love for the nation. If the Trưng Sisters' respectable womanhood is reconsolidated by their post-victory death – committing suicide out of gender-related humiliation, respectability in *Cánh đồng hoang* is constructed throughout the film as a background upon which rest the woman's new attributes, those that are traditionally conceptualized as masculine. Whether it is a return to pristine womanhood before the woman participates in the male world as in the myth of the Trưng Sisters, or a traditional femininity upon which the woman performs male activities as in *Cánh đồng hoang*, each narrative invokes in its own way the fluidity of the feminine gender, the ability of femininity to accept new qualities while maintaining old ones. Here lies the preemptive politics of patriarchal power: de-essentializing femininity through appropriating fluidity only to reassert oppression in the final stage. The modern narratives of gender abandon the reification of feminine essences to embrace the one common essence of every human matter in this world, be it concepts, values, constructs, or meanings: re-significability.

To complete the picture of the kind of gender politics that we have had a glimpse of in my analyses of home and femininity as represented differently before and after the rise of revolutionary politics, I now look at, through the same lens, a recent film produced in Vietnam by a private film-maker, *Áo Lụa Hà Đông* (*The White Silk Dress*, 2006)

directed by Lưu Huỳnh. The film tells the poignant story of an impoverished wife and mother, Dần, who has tried in every possible way, yet to no avail, to earn enough money to buy her daughter an *áo dài*, the Vietnamese traditional dress, for her to attend school. The story is set in turmoil-stricken northern Vietnam during late French colonialism and early American intervention. Both Dần and Gù, her humpbacked lover, were poor civilians who worked as servants for Vietnamese bourgeois families. As French rule was on the verge of collapse under the increasing pressure of peasant uprisings, the bourgeois families they worked for were executed by local rebellious peasants. Dần and Gù ran away amid the chaos and arranged for themselves a wedding ceremony at an abandoned temple one night in the pouring rain. The ceremony was a frugal one, with no guests or relatives to witness and acknowledge their marriage, yet it is depicted in a culturally rich scene in which the man and the woman perform the necessary rituals to become husband and wife. At this private ceremony, Gù bequeathes his love through a white silk *áo dài*, the most precious and only property that he had dearly kept with him since childhood. Dần accepts the gift and puts it right on when the dark night sky is suddenly torn apart by lightning and thunder. After marriage, the couple move to Hội An, an ancient town in central Vietnam, to build their home. The entire film shows meticulous attention to the tailoring of symbolic images, such as the lightning and thunder, the white silk dress, or the new house, to express the cultural traditions in married life. For instance, Gù is shown scrupulously sowing an areca in the front yard, which later will grow into a strong and tall tree, representing love and faithfulness. The course of their marriage has given them five girls, and no boys at all. They suffer under extreme poverty, and a major part of the story focuses on Dần's struggle until her death to earn subsistence for the entire family,

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and most importantly, enough money to buy an *áo dài* required for her daughters to attend school. Determined to give her children an opportunity for education, she even has to sell the fresh milk from her breast to a sick old man in a Chinese family, leaving her hungry little daughter crying for milk at home. However, all her effort comes to no avail, and she finally decides to have her wedding *áo dài* tailored for the two oldest daughters, who would take turns wearing it to school.

I wish to make a couple of important points about the making of the film before my analysis. First, the film was made by a private company and therefore the producers did not receive state financial assistance. This has several implications that are crucial to my subsequent analysis. On the one hand, for a private film, the director enjoyed more freedom in terms of thematic issues, political messages, and even the selection of actors and actresses. The making of private films is relatively independent of state control, as long as the films do not touch upon current politically sensitive issues. Censorship still constrains the business of both private and state film producers even though the process is somewhat different for the two. For a private film, the process of script writing is relatively free, and censorship only intervenes as a final step; it is thus similar to an editing process in which modification, adjustment, tailoring, expurgation, and negotiation are normal activities. A state film is, on the contrary, controlled from the beginning of script writing; it is from the start written within sanctioned ideologies. On the other hand, as a private film, *Áo lụa Hà Đông* is bound by the market rules of supply and demand, which means that it has to be tailored to the prominent public taste if it is to bring profits for the producer. Phước Sang Films, one of the well-to-do producers in Việt Nam, is famous for popular films that appeal to the public. Yet, although *Áo lụa Hà Đông* quickly

became a phenomenon in the entertainment industry of the country and was chosen in

2007 to represent Vietnam for the Oscar and considered one of the few "serious" films

that the country has ever produced, it has not been a financial success. I had the chance to

attend the screening of the film at Brown University in November 2007 and had an

interesting informal conversation with the Vice Director of Production. He shared with us

that the film cost over one million dollars, and the financial return was only one third of

the investment, resulting in a big deficit. Interestingly, that was an expectable outcome

for the producer because the film market of Vietnam had never been profitable for big

investments. What I learned from the conversation was that the film was made for

purposes other than profit. The company wanted to leave a respectable legacy in the film

industry and build up a prestigious image of itself in the public mind, beyond the

common assumption that it produces only popular art. The post-production marketing

strategies also showed that the aim was not for profit: news about the film being

nominated for national and international prizes occupied the front pages of daily

newspapers for quite a while. Also, through this "serious" film, the company wanted to

extend its reach to more discriminating audiences, such as the intelligentsia, in an effort

to erase the preconditioned prejudice of this group against its products. All in all, the

film's reception by the public, critics, as well as cultural authorities has shown that the

goals set up for the film have been fulfilled, despite its disappointing receipts.

The second interesting thing about *Áo lụa Hà Đông*, which has important social

and political implications, is that despite the war setting of the film, its protagonists, Dần

and Gù, do not belong to either Us or Them. Most war films produced in Vietnam follow

the pattern commonly found in socialist art and literature and exemplified in *Cánh đồng*

hoang: characters invariably and neatly fall into binary oppositions of good and bad, us and them. While this deviation in *Áo lụa Hà Đông* could be interpreted as the state loosening control over art, the implications, I think, are far richer than state leniency. Staying politically neutral by depicting the war from the point of view of common non-partisan civilians without glorifying it, the film eloquently reiterates the narrative of Vietnamese womanhood sanctioned by the state and naturalized by social institutions and cultural practices. If this deviation from the binary opposition in *Áo lụa Hà Đông* could be seen as a manifestation of the re-significability of regulatory power, the kind of power expressed through state cultural policies, *Áo lụa Hà Đông* exemplifies the preemptive patriarchal appropriation of this re-significability, turning upon the woman as it uses femininity as an expression of change. The film reflects the recognition that cultural politics have to be realigned to take into account the dramatic socio-political changes in the post-*doi moi* era, and that monolithic glorification of the war suppresses multiple voices and alternative histories. The global pressure of democracy channeled through international economic and political interactions necessitates changes that signify democratic multiplicity and openness in representation. A cultural reform is in place to liberate art and literature from state politics, to project this necessary change in representational politics, only to shift the regulatory grasp to femininity in the final analysis. The woman in *Áo lụa Hà Đông* is "liberated" from the us-versus-them division only to be oppressed in a new femininity constructed through a mechanism that I have attempted to analyze so far in this chapter. *Áo lụa Hà Đông* presents a double re-signification. On one level, the film itself exercises a re-signification in the state politics of heroic memory that we have seen in the contemporary narratives of the Trưng Sisters

and *Cánh đồng hoang* in which the us-versus-them boundary channels the plot and characterization. This re-signification projects an image of democracy, marking the beginning of an era of openness and change. On another level, it contains within itself a re-signification of femininity that I elaborate in what follows.

Much literature has been devoted to theorizing the relationship between nationalism and sexuality even if it might seem strange to talk about nationalism at a time when it is often heard that nationalism is dead, or at best, is rendered obsolete by globalization. The sweeping power of globalization is probably felt most by the so-called third-world countries, whose national cultures are forced into uneven relationships with the West. As early as the 1960s, when colonialism was on the verge of collapse on an international scale, Paul Ricoeur already spoke of the tension between "national culture" and "universal civilization":

> Everywhere throughout the world one finds the same bad movies, the same slot machines, the same plastic or aluminum atrocities, the same twisting of language by propaganda, etc…. [O]n the one hand, [the developing world] has to root itself in the soil of its past, forge a national spirit, and unfurl this spiritual and cultural revendication before the colonialists' personality. But in order to take part in modern civilization, it is necessary at the same time to take part in scientific, technical, and political rationality, something which very often requires the pure and simple abandonment of a whole cultural past. (1965: 276-277)

The antagonism between cultural-political and economic interests, however, does not actually lead to the wholesale abandonment of one interest for the embrace of another as suggested in Ricoeur's comment. The contemporary cultural scene in the third world, and even within the West itself, witnesses processes of negotiation that aim to resist the restrictive choices that Ricoeur has outlined and reach a reconciliatory condition in which interests across the cultural-versus-economic disjuncture can be achieved. R.

Radhakrishnan lucidly recapitulates this cultural scene of what he calls the postmodern world:

> Culture becomes the embattled rhetoric of home, authenticity, and "one's ownness" deployed strategically to resist the economic impulse towards "sameness." Yes, we want to be part of the borderless economic continuum, but at the same time, let us be who we are; our cultural identities are not up for sale or commercial influence. It would seem then that the economic terrain activates a pure process without a Subject, whereas the cultural domain is anchored deeply in Identity. (2003:3)

Unsurprisingly, in Vietnam, as in many other developing countries, the confrontation between cultural and economic interests turns upon sexuality as a means of mediation between national culture and international integration. Vietnam particularly has a rich history of deployment of femininity in its various encounters with the West and the rest of the world. Each encounter, set in a particular historical context, shapes in its own way the particular use of femininity, which all together produces a feminine subjectivity ready to be changed, one with a chameleon content prone to perpetual re-signification. Hue-Tam Ho Tai (1992) dates the origin of this fluidity underpinning modern gender construction back to the 1920s, when questions about the role of women in society were first discussed among male intellectuals. Unfortunately, the discussion was rather disingenuous because "gender acted as a coded language for debating a whole range of issues without overstepping the limits imposed on public discourse by colonial censorship" (Tai 1992: 90). The woman was deployed as a means to disguise subversive discourses rather than as an end, and her emancipation, if any, was only a by-product of deliberative practices in the public sphere at the time. More important, as Tai points out, was the multiplicity of symbolic functions cast upon the woman which would eventually

eliminate the real condition of women from social consciousness. Tai shows how the woman in the early twentieth century was appropriated by various social groups and institutions to articulate their meanings and the kinds of change they wanted to bring about. These disguised practices that cut across public discourses under colonial rule, I contend, have engendered a metadiscourse of the fluid meanings of woman and womanhood, and against the background of such a metadiscourse, each narrative about women and their conditions is constructed in a significantly liberalized manner.

Áo lụa Hà Đông reveals an inheritance of this tradition fabricated within the metadiscourse of femininity. The film features a rather liberal re-signification of the image of the silk dress in which it comes to signify the woman's virtues of sacrifice and endurance, abandoning its presumably original meanings of progress (as opposed to other traditional dresses), women's emancipation (for its new design that accentuates the female body), and feminine beauty and sexuality.[16] However liberal it is, the re-signification is secured in a setting populated by history and traditions. The setting of war times and the rural landscape of Vietnam integrates the film into the canonical narrative of the past that predominates artistic production in Vietnam and effectively familiarizes the film with contemporary audiences as it speaks new meanings. With popular images such as the thatched house, the areca tree, rice fields, the river, numerous traditions and rituals performed by the characters, and also bombs and the familiar image of devastation

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[16] Nguyễn Thanh Sơn, a young literary critic in Vietnam, views this resignification as a "historical error" in his review of the film published on a daily newspaper and Talawas, a popular online forum. See Nguyễn Thanh Sơn, "*Áo lụa Hà Đông* - Lại mặc cảm 'thiếu quê hương'" *Talawas*, March 16, 2007, http://www.talawas.org/talaDB/showFile.php?res=9472&rb=0204.

and death, the film creates for itself a familiar cultural and historical space within which its newness is rendered factual, self-evident, legitimate, and natural. The woman's sacrifice signified through the dress is thus perceived against a background that serves to legitimate and naturalize the culturally and historically unfamiliar by absorbing it into the familiar.

Buried in the rich imagery that invokes national culture and history, the film reiterates the trope of responsibility transference from the male to the female character that we have seen in the myth of the Trưng Sisters and *Cánh đồng hoang*. And the transference is complete, of course, within a re-signified home. In Dần's home, Dần assumes the responsibility of a major breadwinner as her husband is a humpback and has limited labor capacity; and it is certainly also the case, as in other narratives, that such a transference of responsibility does not mean a liberation of the woman from her traditional role as mother and wife. The retention of the woman's traditional identity is guaranteed by a simple accident: all of their five children are girls. In such a family, with the humpback as the only man, the women form a world of their own, and the man remains an outsider. This outside position of the man, nevertheless, is not an effect of exclusion, but rather an effect of the transference of responsibility. Remember that the transference takes place as early as their marriage when Gù transfers to Dần the *áo dài*, his most precious property whose genesis he does not know just as he does not know his own history. Gù was only told that he had been abandoned at a temple, covered in the *áo dài* and that he was discovered and brought up by a generous man. In a way, Gù has inherited the dress, which had existed before his coming into the world, then covered him, and represented the only knowledge of his past, the only meaning of his identity. In

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a culture that valorizes ancestor worship, one's sense of oneself is informed by the knowledge of one's ancestors. As for Gù, the dress, which he kept but could not use, is a substitute for his ancestry, his past, and as such, constitutes his identity.

If the dress constitutes Gù's identity, what does it mean to transfer one's identity to another across the gender line? If identity is constituted in one's relation to one's ancestry, one's past, or one's history, such a transference transforms the man into an ahistorical being, an outsider of history without an identity. The film shows us a world of women within the flow of history with their daily struggles (after accepting the dress, *the* history) and a man remaining transcendental to that history. Rather than experiencing history, Gù witnesses it from an outside position that resonates with Nguyễn Du's own position in his acclaimed *The Tale of Kiều*. The first four lines of this national epic by Nguyễn Du introduce us to a world caught in the turbulent flow of history in a way that the flow itself can only be seen from an outside position:

> Trăm năm trong cõi người ta,
> chữ tài chữ mệnh khéo là ghét nhau.
> Trải qua một cuộc bể dâu,
> những điều trông thấy mà đau đớn lòng. (1983: 2)

And I offer here a literal translation of the lines:

> In a hundred years of a human life span,
> The word genius and the word destiny are apt to feud.
> After an upheaval passing by,
> What is seen pains the heart.[17]

[17] I use my own translation instead of Huỳnh Sanh Thông's because in his translation, the ahistorical and transcendental positionality found in Nguyễn Du's lines is completely lost. By inserting the pronoun "you," Huỳnh reduces the seeing subject in the original text to a speaking subject, and thus reduces the original order outside of history,

My translation, I hope, is literal enough not to lose the important positionality that I want to emphasize here. These opening lines reveal a subject contemplating what it sees in the history flowing by its sight, the spectacle, rather than a subject submerged in and experiencing history itself. Being able to see, contemplate, and feel the pain, yet never articulated in an "I," the subject pronounces itself as an ahistorical subject, a being transcendental to what is going on in the upheaval, and from that position, the seeing subject narrates what it sees, the tale of Kiều, a tale of the woman's suffering and sacrifice for the men in her family. It is, after all, a history of women, so as Nguyễn Du concludes his narrative by reducing it to a commonplace:

> The crude, incoherent and lengthy words,
> May at least amuse a few night hours. (ibid.: 166, translation mine)

The narrating voice that we hear from Nguyễn Du's masterpiece is an ahistorical voice, a bodiless voice from a position that resides outside of history. It is a voice that can narrate without the essential positionality of an "I," because subjectivity is fundamentally bound in history. Vietnamese men, as it were, are never represented as subjects within history. In such a signifying economy, there are no Vietnamese men, but only Vietnamese women, and history invariably becomes the history of women.

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the upheaval, to an order within history. In some other translated versions, "one" is used instead of "you," yet the effect is the same reduction. Thông's translation reads:
> A hundred years – in this life span on earth
> talent and destiny are apt to feud.
> You must go through a play of ebb and flow
> and watch such things as make you sick at heart. (Nguyễn Du 1983: 3)

Throughout *Áo lụa Hà Đông*, Gù is depicted as a possessor of history who has the power to activate history, cast it upon feminine subjects and regulate it as needed. He inherited the *áo dài* from his unknown past – the absence of knowledge itself represents the non-history of men – and cast it upon Dần. Out of necessity, Dần has then adjusted the *áo dài* to fit An, her oldest daughter. An wrote an essay for her class about the history of the very *áo dài* that she was wearing to school every day, which the teacher commended as the best essay and asked her to read in front of the class. However, before she could finish her reading, the whole class was killed as an American airplane suddenly came and bombed the region. The scene at the burial ground in which Gù holds his dead daughter against Dần's and his other daughter's refusal to be separated from An epitomizes a family in which the man appears only as an unnecessary intervener. After bequeathing the *áo dài* to Dần, Gù fades into absence, *presencing* the women as the only inhabitants of the family, the only subjects in the flow of history.

After An's death, Dần continues her struggle for a decent *áo dài* for her other daughters. In an attempt to collect more logs on a stormy day, which Dần has told her husband would be enough to exchange for an *áo dài*, Dần falls off the boat and drowns in front of her husband's eyes. Once again, Gù is depicted as a *witness* rather than a subject experiencing history. Another significant moment in which Gù reemerges from the absence and intervenes in this flow of history, which is always the history of women, is in the final scene of the film. As the scourge of war overwhelms the region, Gù's bereft family has to evacuate the village. One of the daughters discovers that they have forgotten the *áo dài* in the house, and she immediately returns to save it. Unable to prevent his daughter from her determined attempt, Gù joins her to head back home,

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plunging himself into the burning house, rescuing the *áo dài* and handing it to his daughter, who has been waiting outside to take it back. After Dần's death, the death of the first receiver of history, Gù continues his role as a transcendent possessor of history and perpetuates history by handing it back to his daughter. The re-signification of the *áo dài* as provoked in the film is complete when the second daughter receives it back from her father at the end of the film: a sign of women's emancipation of the colonial period is re-signified to represent the feminine virtues of sacrifice and endurance.

From *Cánh đồng hoang* to *Áo lụa Hà Đông*, there emerges a sense of fluidity in the way the woman and her home are represented symbolically. In *Cánh đồng hoang*, the woman takes up arms to fight against the perpetrators of violence while maintaining her traditional role as a virtuous wife and mother. At the end of the film, she emerges as a fighter and mother, holding a rifle in one arm and her son in the other and walking perseveringly in the immense flooded field. In *Áo lụa Hà Đông*, the woman character is similarly brought to the fore through her continual struggle to make for her daughters an *áo dài*. In this case, the *áo dài* itself, the symbolic emancipation of the woman's body from tradition, is resignified to mean sacrifice and perseverance. In what follows, I show how a Vietnamese American scholar and writer re-reads the symbolic meanings of women and deconstructs the signifying economy in which women assume total presence as shown in my analysis of *Cánh đồng hoang* and *Áo lụa Hà Đông*.

If gender is a becoming, a cultural acquisition, as suggested in Simone de Beauvoir's postulation that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (1997: 295) or a performative as theorized by Judith Butler in many of her works, the becoming, or

performance, takes place within a history where there are no men, a signifying economy in which women assume total presence. In her documentary *Surname Viet Given Name Nam* (1989), Trinh Minh-ha deconstructs this total presence of the woman through deliberately narrowed filmic frames deployed to expose the essential artificiality of the documentary genre. Trinh refuses to see truth as it is presented or present. Truth, according to Trinh, does not reside fully in and by itself as the present, and truth is but a possibility made possible by the interval: "Yet, what is put forth as truth is often nothing more than *a* meaning. And what persists between the meaning of something and its truth is the interval, a break without which meaning would be fixed and truth congealed" (Trinh Minh-ha 1990: 77). Trinh calls for the liberation of meaning and truth from any closure. In her view, meaning is one possibility of truth and truth presents itself to us only through meaning. What we know as truth is but *a* meaning of it, and primordial truth, the truth residing before and outside of language, of the filmic frames, is always mediated. Meaning is the only access we have to truth, but meaning itself is subject to the free play of *différance*, and meaning of the cinematic frames does not reside in the present, in what is said and shown, but also in the interval, the very filmic frames that intervene and produce meaning. Trinh rejects the false identification of language – and in her final analysis, the filmic frames, the said and shown in a documentary – with reality.

In this light, Trinh contends that the larger frames only give an illusion of truth as they can include more of it but never all of it; the narrower frames, while presenting themselves as an artificial interval, force viewers to contemplate what is beyond the frames and see truth as a play of *différance*, of the differing and deferred interplay of present and absent. The close-up is thus an interval that by narrowing the frames,

minimizes the inclusion of reality and exposes the presence of the frames, the condition

of the cinematic production of meaning. *Surname Viet Given Name Nam* uses this

cinematic technique to deconstruct the politics of *presencing* the woman in the

construction of femininity. The documentary is comprised of interviews with five women

that are interrupted by brief scenes that recount various cultural aspects of Vietnam.

While the interviews are mainly about women's conditions in the socialist society of

contemporary Vietnam, the intervening scenes narrate the lives of several historical

female figures. The background music of these scenes features Vietnamese folksongs,

lullabies, and poems that lament women's fate of incessant suffering, uncertainty, and

male dependency. Many times in the documentary the background music permeates the

interviews and absorbs the female voices. In the same vein that conjures up the

reconfiguration of women into discursive devices, the image of the female interviewees is

frequently presented in deliberately narrowed frames in a way that as they speak, the

camera frame traverses their bodies, showing fragmentary close-ups of their eyes,

mouths, faces, breasts, and hands. At times, the speaking women are covered by subtitles

that are dispersed all over the screen, turning the speaking subject into the background of

the pervading graphic words.

Apart from allowing sound, text, and image to trespass their conventional spaces,

Trinh deconstructs her own documentary by exposing its artificiality. In the second half

of the documentary, Trinh's camera narrates the lives of the same women, yet in their

roles as real Vietnamese women living in the United States. At this point, the interviews

in the first part are exposed as reconstructions of real interviews done in Vietnam. The

two parts of the documentary seem to cancel each other out, dividing stage and reality as

distinct realms of meaning. However, just as the narrowed frames that extend viewing beyond that which is included in the frames and forces into view the very condition of meaning as a chain of differing and deferring, the division of stage and reality brings forth the essential artificiality of the documentary genre and reinstates meaning as an essential fusion of stage and reality. Trinh's filmic frames tell stories not only of women but also of the frames themselves. In *Surname Viet Given Name Nam*, the frames do not hide themselves to give an illusion of truth as present, but are incorporated into that which they frame. The incomplete, fragmentary images of the woman's body render the frames present and compel viewers to extend their seeing beyond the frames. If *presencing*, making present that which is framed, is fundamental to cinematic representation, it is also essential to the gender politics of Vietnam. By deconstructing the filmic frames and exposing the illusion of truth as present, Trịnh's documentary, in the same move, deconstructs the presence of Vietnamese women in the politics of representation. Throughout the entire documentary, any presentation of the woman as present is immediately distorted by background images and sounds, by the trespassing subtitles, or exposed as construction and reconstruction.

Many feminist projects tend to take women's presence in representation as their political goal towards emancipation. The premise of these projects is that women are underrepresented and remain in the shadow, voiceless and marginalized. Emancipation in such a condition is often equated with the woman's visibility through re-presentation. The situation is, however, rather different in Vietnam, where women's visibility is pervasive in social institutions and cultural practices. Vietnamese women can "enjoy" their presence in every aspect of life, social, political, and cultural. There are associations

and unions for women organized at all governmental levels through which they are represented, their voice heard, and their concerns attended to. They publish their own newspapers and magazines, which are certainly under state control and censorship. Women who served in the wars are commemorated in separated museums.[18] The position of Vice President of the state is always occupied by a woman who symbolizes women's presence in politics.[19] All state organizations and institutions celebrate Women's Day (March 8) with different activities that praise women's past and present contributions to the cause of nation building and commemorate their heroic history, and flowers and gifts are generously given on this day. As Trịnh has reminded us, such presence does not constitute the truth of women, and her camera insistently compels us to look into the mechanism of *presencing*, of making the woman the only subject of history.

3.3 Resignification and Cultural Translation: From Butler to Bhabha

Through my analyses of several texts (by which I include film and documentary), we have seen the way in which femininity is constantly and preemptively re-signified to serve contingent nationalist purposes. At the heart of the re-significations is the double movement that both retains and breaks away from traditional femininity, culminating in a structure of gender that remains a structure by repeating itself in novel ways. The

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[18] Mary Ann Tétreault argues that separation in commemorative practices does not ensure equality. The only museum where images of men and women are most integrated is the War Crimes Museum in Hồ Chí Minh City, but according to Tétreault, the museum memorializes victims, and not agents. Thus, it is an ambiguous site to celebrate gender equality. See Tétreault (2000).

[19] This is a highly symbolic position (without much decision-making power) in the political system and has never been secured a seat in the Politbureau, the most powerful body of the Communist Party that comprises significant figures holding different key positions in the state structure.

structure repeats itself, yet never returns to itself because each repetition takes place

within specific social, cultural, and political contexts. In this way, each repetition

reinforces the structure and at the same time disrupts that very structure to produce

meanings. As new meanings are produced through repetition, they quickly gain

discursive legitimacy, which is, in the last analysis, a legitimacy for future repetitions,

future re-significations. What is produced in each repetition is not only a re-signified

femininity that is legitimate once and for all, but also an augmentation of the legitimacy

of re-signification itself. The continual process of re-signifying repetitions sets in motion

a discursive mechanism in which femininity is rendered perpetually and legitimately re-

signifiable. This condition suggests a fluid and elusive form of oppression that does not

rely on the Beauvoirian signifying economy that renders the woman as the Other, a lack

in relation to man, or the Irigarian phallogocentric mode of signification in which the

woman is "marked off" from the domain of the signifiable.[20] Oppression here is an effect

of perpetual re-significations of femininity rather than of the specific meanings of the

category of woman that each re-signification invokes. Here, we find Irigaray's politics of

mimicry ineffective, if not impossible at all. By mimicry, Irigaray refers to the woman's

task of deliberately assuming the feminine role as determined in/by phallogocentric

language. In so doing, she converts "a form of subordination into affirmation, and thus to

begin to thwart it" (Irigaray 1977: 76). Mimicry, as Irigary puts it, is a "playful

repetition" of the masculine logic that exposes "the cover-up of a possible operation of

the feminine in language" and unveils "the fact that, if women are such good mimics, it is

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[20] For a discussion of Beauvoir's and Irigaray's positions on patriarchal language,
see Judith Butler (1990: 1-46).

because they are not simply resorbed in this function" (ibid.). Mimicry, however, invariably presupposes a certain unchanging essence that makes possible the mimetic repetition. In a condition where the feminine role keeps changing, being constantly re-signified, the playful repetition is deprived of the foundational core required for its possibility. Through my analysis, I have suggested that repetition has been incorporated into the patriarchal language in the form of re-signification, and once re-signifying repetition has become a constitutive part of the oppressive language, mimicry can hardly be realizable.

By looking into the specificities of each re-signification of femininity through different historical junctures, I have shown that gender structures in Vietnam operate under an overarching structure, that of re-significability. This overarching structure works to legitimize every possible re-signification of femininity, giving every new meaning immediate discursive currency. The movement from *Cánh đồng hoang* to *Áo lụa Hà Đông*, in which the woman as an embodiment of national history moves to a woman of great endurance and sacrifice for familial survival, could be said to represent a rupture in representation. However, within the overarching structure of re-significability, rupture seems to be neutralized and lose its regular sense and also its power to break, to disrupt, to differentiate as the word itself signifies. The category of woman constituted within re-significability becomes fluid, versatile, and highly vulnerable to appropriation. I have also suggested that feminist projects that fail to counter re-significability, focusing on the specific meanings of femininity instead, are self-defeating. As re-significability is essentially a de-essentialization of the category of woman, countering the specific meaning of femininity at a specific historical juncture will eventually relapse into another

meaning which is invariably produced by the same mechanism of power. Emancipation in such a context can be achieved only when the overarching structure of gender configurations is deconstructed, and how this is done is not discussed in this paper. Instead, I conclude by challenging the theory of performativity proposed by Judith Butler by showing its limits when applied to gender structuring in Vietnam.

Butler's theory of the performativity of gender forms a strong foundation for her feminist politics, which I think is primarily a politics of re-signification. In her view, re-signification itself constitutes a form of emancipation as it appropriates foundational signification, disrupts it, breaks it open, exposes its exclusionary mechanism, and ultimately, reinstates that which is excluded from and through signification. In her essay "Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of 'Postmodernism'," published two years after her seminal *Gender Trouble* (1990), where her theory of performativity germinates, Butler reinvigorates her politics and distinctly positions it as a sort of anti-universalism. She calls into question any concepts, categories, or claims that are essentially formulated under a universalizing rubric which she contends privileges some realities while excluding, or even erasing, others. A concept such as the postmodern, as shown in this essay, exemplifies a "gesture of conceptual mastery that groups together a set of positions under the postmodern, that makes the postmodern into an epoch or a synthetic whole, and that claims that the part can stand for this artificially constructed whole" (Butler 1992: 5). Subsuming with one single stroke diverse theories, from French feminism to deconstruction, from Lacanian psychoanalysis to Foucaultian analysis, into the so-called postmodern commits epistemic violence through "an effort to colonize and domesticate these theories under the sign of the same" (ibid.). In a similar vein, Butler

challenges the notion that politics requires a coherent and stable subject, which according to her, designates different subject positions and realities a totalizing identity to strengthen feminism's representational claim. By refusing to grant specificities, "identity categories are never merely descriptive, but always normative, and as such, exclusionary" (ibid.: 15-6). Butler, however, never announces the death of those categories, but insists with rigor throughout her works that identity categories, such as "women," should be liberated from totalizing frameworks that erase differences in the name of unity and coherence. Feminism that presupposes a unifying subject only repeats the exclusionary power structure that it seeks to subvert, and more importantly, agency is impossible when the category of women is fossilized with a fixed referent. She articulates this view lucidly:

> … if feminism presupposes that "women" designates an undesignatable field of differences, one that cannot be totalized or summarized by a descriptive identity category, then the very term becomes a site of permanent openness and *resignificability*. I would argue that the rifts among women over the content of the term ought to be safeguarded and prized, indeed, that this constant rifting ought to be affirmed as the ungrounded of feminist theory. To deconstruct the subject of feminism is not, then, to censure its usage, but, on the contrary, to release the term into a future of multiple significations, to emancipate it from the maternal or racialist ontologies to which it has been restricted, and to give it play as a site where *unanticipated meanings* might come to bear. (Butler 1990: 166; emphasis mine)

In this light of the resignificability of concepts and categories, Butler argues that terms such as *queens*, *butches*, *femmes*, *girls* "redeploy and destabilize the categories of sex and the originally derogatory categories for homosexual identity" and do not merely reflect an assimilation of homosexuality back into the terms of heterosexuality (ibid.). When a gay person identifies "himself" with the feminine referent "she," he/she is, as Butler sees it,

appropriating the feminine signifier "to multiply the possible sites of application of the term, to reveal the arbitrary relation between the signifier and the signified, and to destabilize and mobilize the sign" (ibid.: 167). The pronoun "she" as used by a homosexual no longer signifies a female identity or gender within the heterosexual system of signification. The field of application of the term is thus enlarged and opened to contestation, appropriation, and ultimately, resignification.

Resignificability in Butler's formulation is premised upon a reconceptualization of the category of gender in which gender is understood as an effect of stylized performances, and does not express or externalize an essence or ideal. She writes:

> Gender ought not to be construed as a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*. The effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self. This formulation moves the conception of gender off the ground of a substantial model of identity to one that requires a conception of gender as a constituted *social temporality*. (ibid.: 191)

The distinction between expressivity and performativity in the conception of gender is a crucial one in Butler's theory. Gender viewed as performative does not rely on a preexisting core identity that it is supposed to emanate from or adhere to, and therefore, there is no true or false gender. Rejecting the Cartesian formulation of the subject and following Nietzsche's notion that there is no doer behind the deed, Butler's theory posits identity as an effect of performances that are demanded of the subject and the deeds that are done. Once liberated from ontological essentialism which places categories of identity beyond contestation, and once reconceptualized as constituted by performed acts, gender

is granted the possibility for resignification within its own constitution. In other words, the performative point of view unveils the constitution of gender as containing within itself the quality of resignificability, which Butler uses as a locus of her politics. However, Butler's poststructuralist position in her reworking of identity categories does not get rid of ontology altogether. Her politics is indeed grounded upon another type of ontology, one that Stephen K. White calls "weak ontology," in which being is conceived as *potentiality*, and not a definitive state beyond contestation and resignification as implicated in "strong ontology" (White 1999).

In her later work, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (1997b), Butler offers a thorough elaboration of her theory in which she reconciles and combines Pierre Bourdieu's and Jacques Derrida's readings of Austin's theory of the performative, and provides a fuller insight into the force of the performative utterance. Both Bourdieu and Derrida are dissatisfied with Austin's account of the force of the performative. In his extrication of what gives a linguistic utterance its forcefulness in doing what it says (illocutionary force) or in producing a set of effects from what it says (perlocutionary force), Austin maintains that it is established conventions that make performatives possible. When a presumptive performative conforms to all appropriate conditions as dictated by conventions, then the word becomes the deed. Bourdieu's critique of Austin's notion of convention and its forcefulness involves an account of the power of social institutions. While Austin's formulation posits power within language, Bourdieu contends that "authority comes to language from the outside" and that "language at most *represents* this authority, manifests and symbolizes it" (cited in Butler 1997b: 146). In

Bourdieu's account, the performative takes on a social dimension that is absent in Austin's theory.

This sociality of the performative, however, is unsatisfactory for Butler because such an account seems to impose a dead end on agency as it assumes the absolute stability of social institutions and the perfect reproduction of power through the performative. Butler suggests that while Bourdieu acknowledges that the subject who performs a speech act is always implicated in a social network of power and that not all performatives are successful, "he fails to take account of the way in which social positions are themselves constructed through a more tacit operation of performativity" (ibid.: 156). For Bourdieu, the performative falls into either of the two possibilities in regard to the social position of power of the subject who utters the performative: authorized and unauthorized. An unauthorized speech act is doomed to failure because it does not have the social authority needed for its legitimacy and efficacy. Butler rightly points out that by positing an equivalence between "being authorized to speak" and "speaking with authority," Bourdieu is blind to the possibility that a subject can speak with authority *without* being authorized to speak. In a way, Bourdieu's account represents an ideal speech situation in which "performative utterances are only effective when they are spoken by those who are (already) in a position of social power to exercise words as deeds," and such a view "inadvertently forecloses the possibility of an agency that emerges from the margins of power" (ibid.).

Authorization produces authority, yet authority does not invariably need prior authorization for its possibility, and this very possibility of authority without prior

authorization, "a derailment from within," constitutes the locus of Butler's politics. But how is authority without authorization possible? In her answer to this question, Butler turns to the notion of iterability that Derrida develops in his reading of Austin's theory. Ascribing performative utterances the logic of the sign, Derrida claims that a performative utterance is possible because it breaks with its prior context and that this breaking force itself is a constitutive element of the sign. A sign must be repeatable in its constitution, yet repetitions do not effect a sedimentation of its usages because each repetition is carried out in an unanticipated context, constituting a break, a structural independence from the historicity of the sign. Here, as opposed to Bourdieu, Derrida instates the force within the structure of language. Butler uses this Derridian iterability as a structural foundation in conjunction with the social dimension of performative utterances developed in Bourdieu's account to arrive at a scene in which the dominant, authorized discourse is expropriated and resignified. By combining the structural and social dimension of performativity, Butler shows the dynamic of social power and language as a two-way channel in which language not only represents but also signifies social conditions. In this dynamic, subject formation through performativity contains within itself the possibility of reformulation:

> The performative is not a singular act used by an already established subject, but one of the powerful and insidious ways in which subjects are called into social being from diffuse social quarters, inaugurated into sociality by a variety of diffuse and powerful interpellations. In this sense the social performative is a crucial part not only of subject *formation*, but of the ongoing political contestation and reformulation of the subject as well. The performative is not only a ritual practice: it is one of the influential rituals by which subjects are formed and reformulated. (ibid.: 160).

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In Butler's view, this possibility of reformulation constitutes a site where agency comes into play and brings about new meanings. Agency emerges when fundamental conceptualizations of identity are exposed as contestable and resignifiable. Butler's poststructuralist position does not shake off foundations entirely, but accept those foundations as they provide the terms by which the subject is recognized and life becomes livable. Radical departures from foundations, from norms, may threaten the viability and recognizability of the subject, or even worse, may be exploited as a rationale for the continuing authority of the norm. In her later book, *Undoing Gender* (2004b), Butler reiterates this position and underscores the resignificability of gender norms through their reproduction: "To the extent that gender norms are *reproduced*, they are invoked and cited by bodily practices that also have the capacity to alter norms in the course of their citation" (2004: 52). Butler is also aware that not all departures from norms can constitute an effective subversion; she asks "what departures from the norm constitute something other than an excuse or rationale for the continuing authority of the norm? What departures from the norm disrupt the regulatory process itself?" (ibid.: 53). Resignification, therefore, does not suggest an overthrowing of norms because that would mean an overthrowing of the constitution of the subject, of agency, itself. Resignification implies that the subject invariably remains "a critical and transformative relation to [norms]," a relation powered by the capacity to "suspend or defer the need for [norms], even as there is a desire for norms that might let one live" (ibid.: 3). Resignification does not celebrate difference as such but "establish more inclusive conditions for sheltering and maintaining life that resists models of assimilation" (idid.: 4).

Although the notions of viability, recognizability, and norms that Butler enunciates in *Undoing Gender* mainly deal with bodies that tend to be "radical deviations," such as intersex, transgender, and cross-dressing, of interest here is the universal regulatory power at work in the production of cultural intelligibility. By eliminating foundational categories of identity from politics, Butler's theory of performativity seems to appeal to universality in an attempt to represent diverse realities while avoiding the totalizing stroke that suppresses all differences. There is no doer behind the deed, and similarly, "there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (Butler 1990: 34). One of the premises of Butler's thesis is that gender identity is a kind of grammatical fiction, a metaphysical category that has been taken as *a priori*, as real and prior to subject formation. Therefore, any resignification that is (mis)placed in the sphere of this grammatical fiction will not produce the desired effect. It has to be, from the performative perspective, invariably situated within the sphere of actual performances. It follows from this premise that theory can undo this grammatical fiction, or at best expose its fictionality to free politics from the shackles of foundational conceptualizations.

At this juncture in her performative theory, Butler turns to the notion of cultural translation to explicate the politics of resignification, a notion that she has used to repudiate Slavoj Žižek's notion of a Lacanian bar in subject formation (Butler, Laclau, and Žižek 2000: 37). In *Undoing Gender*, Butler expands cultural translation and posits it as a transformative dynamic between the fundamental categories of ontology and their limits:

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I would suggest that in this last process, we can only rearticulate or regisnify the basic categories of ontology, of being human, of being gendered, of being recognizably sexual, to the extent that we submit ourselves to a process of cultural translation. The point is not to assimilate foreign or unfamiliar notions of gender or humanness into our own as if it is simply a matter of incorporation alienness into an established lexicon. Cutlural translation is also a process of yielding our most fundamental categories, that is, seeing how and why they break up, require resignification when they encounter the limits of an available episteme: what is unknown or not yet known. It is crucial to reconigze that the notion of the human will only be built over time in and by the process of cultural translation, where it is not a translation between two languages that stay enclosed, distinct, unified. But rather, *translation will compel each language to change in order to apprehend the other*, and this apprehension, at the limit of what is familiar, parochial, and already known, will be the occasion for both an ethical and social transformation. It will constitute a loss, a disorientation, but one in which the human stands a chance of coming into being anew. (2004: 38-39; emphasis in the original).

Although Butler never offers a full-fledged discussion of cultural translation the way Spivak and Bhabha have done and the theme of cultural translation hardly appears in her work any more elaborated than the quote above, she captures the main lines of contemporary thinking in translation studies and applies them to the issue of subject reformation and the resignification of fundamental categories and identities. For her, cultural translation represents a dynamic process that is regulated by norms and yet, contains within itself a measure of creativity beyond these norms. Most innovative in Butler's use of cultural translation is her positioning it between the subject and the structures of power, normativity, and knowledge that regulate the emergence of subject in the social field. Not unlike Bhabha, Butler posits cultural translation as a condition that yields newness into the world. However, Butler's account of agency, of the process of negotiation and mediation in translation, gives more nuances to cultural translation, compared to Bhabha's view of cultural translation as a mere dimension of third-space indeterminacy. The issue at stake here, as I have shown in the previous chapter, is the fact

that cultural translation does not lie exclusively in the hands of the subjugated subject so that it can be turned into subversive politics. Power itself also relies on cultural translation for its own constitution and reproduction (see Chapter 2).

In a word, Butler's theory deconstructs identity categories, exposing its metaphysical grounding in order to shift the locus of subversion from the fictional sphere of fixed identities to the existent sphere of subjective acts, which is also the realm of cultural translation. While this political move is plausible as it empowers the subject in its own process of formation by positing agency in actual subjective/translational performances, such politics might succumb to another fiction: that regulatory power relies on categories of identity for its operation and oppression. The absence of a prior, fixed gender identity behind gender acts does not universally mean that the sphere of performances exclusively belong to the subjects who perform them. The gender conditions in Vietnam that I have discussed thus far suggest that oppression itself relies on the absence of identity, and in this way, oppression conceals its own workings and becomes ever more fluid and elusive. The absence of identity does not entail an absence of power and oppression; rather, power takes another form that is even harder to expose. Contingency, fluidity, borderlessness, or in sum, resignificability, are what constitute power by which the woman is extremely vulnerable to appropriation. Each appropriation seems to invariably involve a resignification, and the scene of gender construction appears as a chain of resignifications without any fixed construction. If thought of and theorized in terms of constructs, categories, boundaries, and regulations, gender in this kind of operations seems to vanish. Without any fixed terms, it hides itself from view.

In *Bodies that Matter*, Butler recapitulates the performative grounding of power: "There is no power that acts, but only a reiterated acting that is power in its persistence and instability" (1993: 9). Acting has to be "persistent" in the sense that it has to reiterate norms in ways that the subject remains within the realm of the recognizable and livable, and at the same time, acting exposes the instability of norms, "the *de*constituting possibility in the very process of repetition [of norms]" (ibid.: 10). Between persistence and instability there seems to be imposed a fissure, a divide by politics even though Butler contends that both are constitutive of performativity. The divide is imposed, to make it seem as if instability could be separated from that which it constitutes and transformed into a site of agency; as if power could only take hold of the persistent, leaving open its own constituting instabilities to free expropriations. Butler's politics seems to treat the persistent and the unstable as separable ontological constituents, with each playing a distinct role in the structure of the performative. For agency to emerge, her theory is inclined to posit the persistent as the foundational core for the production of power and the unstable as a free-floating dissociable constituent. The case of Vietnam, however, suggests that this model might not work because the demarcation of the two spheres seems impossible. Both the persistent and the unstable merge into one another in an indissoluble whole to constitute the structure of gender which is invariably a structure of resignificability. At this point several critical questions arise. What kinds of acts are performed in a condition where gender has become a rich and exploitable resource for the articulations of power, where gender itself seems to vanish through its own fluidity and resignificability? Can resignificability be redeployed as a means of resistance as suggested in the performative theory of gender now that it has been deployed as a means

of oppression? In other words, how can feminism in this context figure the battle over resignificability between the oppressor and the oppressed? Could it be posited that feminism in Vietnam must be first of all concerned with the resistance against resignificability itself rather than an appropriation of it? If resistance to resignificability is condoned as a feminist project, will such a project require a fixity, an invention of some fixed ontological identity, a kind of Spivakian strategic essentialism?

There are certainly no easy answers to these questions, and as I have stated at the outset of the project, this chapter attempts to show the limits of a Western theory when applied to a specific context rather than suggest solutions or necessary modifications of the theory. What we have seen throughout my analysis reaffirms the common thesis in contemporary feminist theories that there is no universal form of oppression, nor a universal subject of feminism. This insight, however, should not be used as a rationale for the prejudice against theories that are presumed to articulate the Other. The fact that "realities have leaked into one another," to borrow Salman Rushdie's phrase, compels us to think beyond borders to recognize the leaking zones and also expose the epistemological constraints and limits that theories essentially involve. My application of Butler's theory is not meant to negate it, because the theory has in a way provided me with a powerful language to represent the conditions of gender issues in Vietnam while at the same time being able to recognize the conditions of the language itself. The language of resignification has taught me that while resignificability can be a means of emancipation in some parts of the world, it is oppression elsewhere. What I have achieved in this chapter is an analysis of resignificability and how it has been appropriated to oppress women. This is by no means an exhaustive project in this issue.

The perpetual resistance against various foreign enemies throughout Vietnam

history has rendered politics a very fluid and flexible domain and turned it into a site of

perpetual cultural translation (see Chapter 2). The current political condition of the

country, the compromise between communist ideals and capitalist market economy,

highly reflects the fluidity and contingency of discourses. This is one of the many

instances in which the changing conditions that the country undergoes require it to re-

translate its own discourses. Although this chapter ends without any solutions to the

problem that it raises, the problem of resignification as oppression, it has opened up for

me a critical path for my future research. This path as I see it now will allow me to

connect translation studies with gender studies to tackle the issues partially addressed

here. I believe that translations from French during the colonial period and then from

English since the open door policy in 1986 have to a large extent shaped the way gender

is constructed and re-constructed in Vietnam. As a site where the strongest powers of the

world meet and compete, Vietnam has always found itself at the border, at the crossroad

of the most dominant cultures and ideologies. In such a position, translation certainly

plays no small part in mediating differences, negotiating conflicts, and forming a national

identity that is never bound in a fixed form or essence, but inclined towards perpetual

self-resignification, or self-translation and re-translation. Identity here *is* translation,

resignifying in reiterating that which is translated to address contingent political

conditions. Resignificability appears to be the only "essence" of the woman, which is in

many ways produced by the encounters of diverse political moves based upon diverse

cultural and ideological grounds. Femininity itself is at the border, a kind of translation,

and its resignificability is fundamentally a product of the continual process of translation

and re-translation. In Chapter 2, I have discussed the problematic of cultural translation in relation to issues of hybridity and ambivalence. Through my analysis of the construction of femininity in Vietnam, I suggest that the quality of resignificability in which femininity is imbricated represents another dimension of hybridity and ambivalence absent from Homi Bhabha's conceptualization of cultural translation. This points towards new directions for research that specifically looks at the historical spectrum of translation, from the colonial period to contemporary Vietnam, and figures out any tension, negotiation, compromise, rejection, and absorption that all together shape the history of femininity, a history of resignification or cultural translation. At the crossroad, Vietnam has no specific location, as the crossroad itself is spaceless and timeless. It is forever ungraspable, unidentifiable, and this is the only identity it has.

CHAPTER 4

WESTERN OTHERS (AND 'OTHER' WESTERNS): TRANSLATING

***BROKEBACK MOUNTAIN* INTO VIETNAMESE CULTURE**

In previous chapters, I have discussed the problematic of cultural translation as enunciated by Homi Bhabha and Judith Butler and argued that cultural translation should not be appropriated as the politics of resistance or subversion in a way that is blind to reliance of the colonizer, or power in a larger context, on cultural translation itself. If cultural translation is recognized as underlying power relations, then both the colonizer and the colonized, or the subject and regulative norms, participate in cultural translation. In this chapter, I turn to the level of textual performance of cultural translation. As a textual performance, cultural translation, I suggest, needs to take into account the contingency of any translation project (see Chapter 1). For contingency to be realized into a specific translating strategy, the translator must conduct what Maria Tymoczko (2007) would call a holistic cultural analysis of the target language and culture. My analysis on the occasion of translating Annie Proulx's *Brokeback Mountain* into contemporary Vietnamese culture includes cultural processes that displace translation and homosexuality from, respectively, official literary norms and gender practices.

4.1 Story of the Other: Homosexuality

The long history of resistance against foreign domination has engrained in the Vietnamese mind a very sharp sense of home and foreignness, of friends and enemies, of self and other. Boundaries between Us and Them are established in times of war and conflict as a necessary condition to identify both the subject and object of resistance; and

in peace, a condition presumably the opposite of war, those boundaries are reinforced rather than torn down, especially in the case of peace under the powerful force of globalization. As globalization tends to eradicate economic borders between nations, the world is deeply territorialized culturally. Different realities "have leaked into each other" in the postcolonial world, to borrow Salman Rushdie's phrase, but paradoxically, this interpenetration only serves to enhance discursive practices that negate the incursion and construct differential identities that claim uniqueness, unity, and purity. Globalization widens gaps among nations culturally just as much as it unites them economically. The binary division between Self and the Other becomes inherent in cross-cultural relations. The Other as a defining basis of the Self is often charged with difference and degradation, as seen in the case of Vietnam. What I have noticed is that scholars in the West have placed too strong an emphasis on its own representation of the Eastern Other, particularly in postcolonial theories, neglecting how the West itself is represented in the East. There exists a western Other of the East that is often absent from postcolonial discourses. As Edward Said has warned us in many of his projects, the East is not a silent and passive reality awaiting Western representation.

Perpetual resistance against foreign domination followed by postwar nationalism has produced within the cultural landscape of Vietnam a Western Other through a chain of signifiers: cruel invaders, hungry plunderers, blood-thirsty killers, or more generally, decadent imperialist cultures. The Vietnamese language is rich in debasing terms that denote the negative attributes of the enemy. Debasing the enemy, the Other, is facilitated by an extremely rich system of third-person reference. *Thằng*, *chúng*, *bọn chúng*, *tên*, *hắn*, *lũ*, *bọn*, *đám*, *quân* are some of the many third-person pronouns that show hatred

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and contempt towards the referred subjects. Children acquire the use of these terms quite naturally as they are part of the language of historical narratives taught at schools and circulated in the media. I still remember two lines from a popular poem that schoolchildren learn in their reading classes: "O du kích nhỏ giương cao súng / Thằng Mỹ lom khom bước cúi đầu," literally means "The little guerrilla girl raises her rifle / The American guy stoops forward, looking down." The poem is illustrated with a cartoon of a small Vietcong girl with her rifle pointing at a giant handcuffed American soldier looking down at his feet as he stoops ahead of the girl.

Through the contrastive imagery that divides Us from Them, such as small versus big, girl versus man, free versus captured, victory versus defeat, the poem makes full use of emotionally charged terms "o" and "thằng," which are both lost in the English translation. "O," pronounced as the vowel sound in "hot," connotes the female gender, intimacy, and also charm, while "thằng" is used for a male of lower status, usually to show one's contempt. A double victory is presented, a warfare victory and a cross-cultural gender victory: an indigenous girl defeats the American male soldier and subjects him to her own power. The overall message is not just the American failure in Vietnam, but a defeat charged with disgrace and mortification of a superpower signified through the smallness of a young girl. Such a divisive representation of Us and Them is indeed embedded in a system of differentiation that is at work throughout the war and continues into postwar national construction. As this system intersects with the authoritarian pronouncements of national culture, the consequence is a cultural intolerance to foreignness and hybridity, and also a nationalist promotion of cultural integrity. The

foreign, the hybrid are designated as the enemy.[1] An example is the condition of Vietnamese Amerasians and their mothers after the Vietnam War. These children were often referred to as "children of the enemy" and suffered social marginalization. They are the first signifiers of the Other right on Vietnamese lands in the postwar era (Debonis 1995).[2] Within such a cultural framework, the foreign, including its trace, is rendered intolerable, foregrounding the obsessive aspiration to purist cultural integrity.

Cultural purity defines the construction of national identity as it represents political independence and unity much needed for a new sovereignty. Language is one of the most prominent forefronts in this purifying movement. Purifying the Vietnamese language often involves the elimination of the Classical Chinese vocabulary that has been historically incorporated into the language (see Chapter 2). Apart from the 'contamination' that this foreign element in the language may induce, Classical Chinese vocabulary is rather pedantic and even shows a nostalgic yearning for the feudal past of Vietnam, a historical period perceived as antithetical to the atmosphere of newness

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[1] Certainly, this could not be done without an ideological amnesia. The country's own past of translation (see Chapter 2) has for a long time been repressed, and the repression, interestingly enough, is perpetuated by translation itself. The institution of *quốc ngữ* as the national language has in a way ostracized writings in classical Chinese. For most Vietnamese nowadays, Chinese classics have to be read in translation, which facilitates the ideological imagination of a pure Vietnamese culture. In this sense, translation directly participates in the work of memory and amnesia.

[2] In his book *Children of the Enemy: Oral Histories of Vietnamese Amerasians and their Mothers* (1995), Steven Debonis recounts over a hundred interviews that he had with Amerasian children fathered by U.S. soldiers. Upon recalling their lives in Vietnam after the war, many say they can never forget their ostracized experiences. As a child, I often heard the word "Mỹ lai" used in my neighborhood to designate some kids of about my age who had darker skin and curly hair. Without being cognizant of the historical condition that produced such differences in appearance, we, "kids of pure blood," learned how to keep ourselves away from them. "Mỹ lai" carried highly negative connotations.

inspired by revolutionary ideologies. I can still recall the many language drills I had in secondary school that required translating words from Classical Chinese into "pure" Vietnamese.[3] Interestingly enough, the original intralingual translation for the purpose of purity and simplicity quickly gained momentum during the brief war with China in 1979 and has shifted into a symbolic act of exclusion. Underpinning this shift is the Us-versus-Them system of differentiation that has characterized political discourses in Vietnam since the country gained independence. The postwar culture of Vietnam is largely imagined along the line of boundaries distinguishing Us from Them, inside from outside, Self from the Other. Resisting foreignness, especially that which comes from the Western capitalist world, becomes the emblem of national construction.

This system of differentiation not only fabricates a discursive reality of the Other for the definition of the ideal Self, but also creates a point of exteriority through which culture displaces unwanted values and practices from within. Cultural values and practices undesirable for cultural coherence and unity are not merely denied or criticized, but deported to the territory of the Other, the presumed place of their origin. Homosexuality is an example of this process of displacement. Contemporary representation of homosexuality in film, literature, as well as in the news tends to depict homosexuality as a social movement imported from the West, as a story of the Other. A

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[3] One of the most fervent opposers of this "purifying movement" has been Cao Xuân Hạo, who contends that the dichotomy of classical Chinese versus pure Vietnamese is unnecessary and even disastrous for the language. He argues that classical Chinese can no longer be considered a foreign language because it has been deeply localized and become an integral part of the Vietnamese language. Expurging that part of the vocabulary would thus mean a self-displacement that impoverishes rather than purify the language. See Cao Xuân Hạo (2001).

recent film about this theme that has captured wide public attention is Le Hoang's *Trai Nhay* (The Dancing Boy, 2007). The film is about an on-call massage boy who is forced into a sexual relationship with a gay Vietkieu businessman. The boy is portrayed as a straight, innocent and hardworking person while the Vietkieu is a wealthy businessman with rather conspicuous homosexual behavior. Unsurprisingly, the homosexual character is a Vietkieu, a Vietnamese American who comes back to his home country from a foreign culture and disrupts the well-ordered home culture represented by the straight and innocent boy. The title of the film suggests the theme of homosexuality, which would arouse enormous public curiosity as it has long been designated as the unspeakable. The film marks the beginning of an era of openness in Vietnam, yet it precipitates a kind of discourse that contains homosexuality within the designated territory of the Other. The Othering of homosexuality is also manifested in cultural stereotypes, and also in performances on the part of homosexual subjects themselves. They tend to gather in specific bars and nightclubs in major cities like Sài Gòn and Hà Nội and thus territorialize their own visibility within this social space of urban nightlife. These clubs are still imagined in the public mind as icons of Western cultures which have permeated Vietnamese culture through globalization. Rural areas, which harbor eighty percent of Vietnam's population, are perceived as free from homosexuality. A gay farmer or peasant is a far-fetched and extreme notion in the Vietnamese mind. This is probably the reason why the film has the title of "The dancing boy" while it tells the story of a straight boy who earns his living by providing on-call massage services. Dancing boys are merely background characters at the bar that the massage boy comes to one evening. The title, however, is quite inviting to young audiences as it suggests the sensitive and largely

unrepresented theme of homosexuality. Quite irrelevant to the plot of the film, the title

provokes the stereotypical designation of homosexuality as a cultural product of the West

suggested in the image of "the dancing boy" and the associated "decadent" nightlife.

Realities "have leaked into one another," and the fact that 'they' are 'here' with 'us,'

requires culture to quarantine 'them' within designated territories, so as 'our' identity is

not interrupted or mutilated. Homosexuality exists and persistently exerts its visibility in

social and cultural spheres, and for that matter, it is designated as a realm of the foreign,

the immoral, the excluded. As Foucault points out in his *History of Sexuality* (1978),

contrary to what is suggested in the repressive hypothesis, the eighteenth and nineteenth

centuries of Europe witnessed an outgrowth of discourses on sexuality that prohibited,

designated and contained sexual practices within boundaries of power. A similar process

of discursive formation can be seen in today's Vietnam.

A cursory survey of some current literary events in Vietnam can illuminate this

Us-versus-Them thinking that dominates the cultural landscape of the country. Some

younger authors today deliberately use explicit sexual representations in their writings.

One pioneer in this movement is Nguyễn Ngọc Tư, who in her short story "Cánh đồng

bất tận" (2006) writes about rural southern Vietnam with gloomy stories of prostitution,

rape, and incest. For that matter, cultural authorities began to review her works, which

often created controversy and debate among critics, reviewers, and popular readers. For

some time, Tư was suspended as a writer, due to her "unrealistic depiction of rural life."[4]

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[4] As I am revising this chaper, whose writing began in 2007, "Cánh đồng bất tận" and its author have enjoyed a much better life. The story has won some official writing awards. In 2010, it was translated into a film of the same title. Just as its original story,

Rurality is an untouchable icon of Vietnamese culture and politics. Many Vietnamese saints and gods do farming work or have their origins in wet rice agriculture. Vietnam has a huge corpus of folksongs that glorify and romanticize labor in the rice fields. Politically, farmers are depicted as constituting one of the two major leading forces in the joint leadership of the Communist Party, as represented by the symbol of a hammer and a sickle crossing each other in the flag of the party. Rurality embodies both cultural and political power, and representing it poses a great challenge in terms of censorship and publication.

Another woman author, Y Ban, also writes with explicit sexuality in her stories, yet manages to avoid discipline because she allows her characters to Westernize themselves when it comes to sex. Her strategy, which I think Gideon Toury (2005) would call "pseudo-translation" or "fictitious translation,"[5] involves settings with more exposure to Western culture. Even the title of her collection of short stories reveals this strategy of "passing for the West" in order to speak the unspeakable: *I am Đàn Bà*, with *đàn bà* meaning woman. The woman in her story is certainly not a bilingual person, yet the

the film provoked polemic points of view. The changing reception of the text within the course of three years might indicate a political openness that I could not imagine when I started this project. However, it is always inadequate to assess the problem of power, ideology, and censorship on the basis of outward official discourses, including the institution and distribution of awards. I contend that an official award given to a radical text does not necessarily mean aboslute political openness. The reception and circulation of a text, in a country like Vietnam, where the state controls the production of meanings, are always imbricated in a complex network of power relations.

[5] Toury uses the term to designate a cultural behavior in textual production, whereby authors present their texts as if they were translated. He argues that such a disguise can help win a higher level of tolerance from the audience for texts that deviate from the sanctioned patterns. The story of the two Vietnamese woman authors has to some extent testified to this theory.

hybrid language of the title enables the author to escape censorship and discipline.[6] In

such a Western disguise, the text enjoys a higher level of acceptability despite its

subversive novelties. The West becomes the point of exteriority for the displacement of

unwanted values and practices from within and also for authors to speak the unspeakable

from without.

4.2 Story of the Other: Translation

The system of differentiation and the exteriorization of homosexuality that I have

discussed in the previous section has several implications for my translation of Annie

Proulx's novella *Brokeback Mountain*. Unsurprisingly, the task is enormously

challenging, not just because of the preconceived foreignness of the subject matter in the

target culture, but also because of the containing and disempowering conception of

translation. In a way, translation and homosexuality in Vietnam share the same fate: they

are contained and disempowered. In *Enlarging Translation, Empowering Translators*,

Maria Tymoczko proposes a holistic approach to cultural translation in which translators

are required to translate beyond the level of surface cultural aspects by considering the

larger "field or system of cultural formations that must be negotiated in translating a

source text within which the specifics of the text can be situated" (2007: 234). Central to

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[6] Upon my return to Vietnam during the summer of 2007, I searched for the book in the largest bookstore in Hồ Chí Minh City and was told by a sales clerk that it had been banned. A month later, I read in the news that Y Ban's *I am Dan Ba* had won the second prize in a writing contest sponsored by the state. However, the prize was withdrawn, as said in the same news, because the book had been published, and was thus disqualified – only unpublished texts were eligible. Such conflicting stories about the publication and reception of the book, about its absence (the ban) and presence (the prize), seems to deny the book its reality. In a way, the book bears the fate of a translation in itself because translation is considered a sort of absence, a non-reality. I will elaborate on this point in the subsequent part of the chapter.

this approach is an exclusive emphasis on the source text and its embodying culture. In what follows, I suggest that a holistic cultural approach should also take into account the cultural field in which the translated text is received, and more importantly, an analysis of the status and practice of translation within that field.

Current theoretical and practical pronouncements by mainstream translators and literary critics in Vietnam are still restricted within the binary categories of original versus translated or derivative, of primary versus secondary or subordinate. Such a logocentric conception of translation, which views the original as the logos, the presence, and as such, the good, the unique, the standard, the untouchable, perpetuates the peripheral position of translation. Translation is but an absence of the original and, as it were, has no reality in itself. This negation of translation can be found in numerous translator's notes and prefaces in which translators often relegate their own work to a deficient substitution with unavoidable errors. One the one hand, translating itself is configured as an act of guilt that often compels translators to write apologetic prefaces. On the other hand, their conception of meaning is still restricted within the received hegemonic power of the original text. Translation is configured in a discourse that takes meaning as a singular, unchanging unified essence, presupposing the possibility of accurate decoding and re-encoding across linguistic and cultural boundaries.

The presumed authority of the original, unity of meaning, and absolute translatability have produced what I call the compulsory duality of accuracy and fluency. Within this paradigm, as meaning can be fully decipherable and transferable across linguistic and cultural boundaries, the translator's task is largely defined as that of

decoding the original meaning and re-encoding it into the target language. In this

translational process, the translator is supposed to achieve both accuracy and fluency, a

task that practically dooms the translator's work as impossible. With meaning conceived

as intentional and fixed, a translation *must* be accurate simply because it *can* be accurate.

At the same time, it must be fluent and conform to the linguistic norms of the receiving

language, which is imagined as essentially homogenous, coherent, and pure.[7] Through its

paradoxical idiom, this dual discourse perpetuates the otherness of translation,

consolidating its state of non-reality and failure. On the one hand, accuracy is less a

qualifying category than a pretext for foreignizing translation. Being accurate often

induces being foreign, as implicit in any source-oriented practice. The foreignizing

language then signifies accuracy, and accuracy as a category in the compulsory duality

promotes foreignizing as an inevitable practice. On the other hand, fluency as a target-

oriented category, which fails in the face of the foreignizing language, denies translation

of legitimacy and value in the target system, perpetuating its marginal status. At this

point, there arises the question of why foreignizing in Vietnam needs to be articulated as

an inevitable practice and what social, cultural, and political conditions underpin its

dominant status.

While fluency is discernible to any reader of the translated text, accuracy remains

obscure and depends on the translator's confession, usually in the form of an apologetic

translator's note, or on the reader's trust in the authority and knowledge of the translator.

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[7] Again, this imagination of the Vietnamese language as pure and homogenous
necessitates an ideological repression of the translation history of the language (see
Chapter 2).

The readership of a translation is usually monolingual, and even bilingual readers fluent

in both source and target languages and cultures are unlikely to read both original and

translated texts, except for research purposes in academic fields such as translation

studies or cultural studies. To a common reader, accuracy is thus a contingent category

that always requires the translator's elaboration, which often takes the form of a

confession of failure as in the case of Vietnam, or the reader's trust implied in the

relationship between the reader and the translator. In *The Translator's Invisibility* (1995),

Lawrence Venuti argues that by valorizing fluent discourse, the Anglo-American

tradition of translation takes as its qualifying parameter the translator's invisibility, which

ultimately creates the illusion of original authorship and meaning. Venuti points out that

"the more fluent the translation, the more invisible the translator, and, presumably, the

more visible the writer or meaning of the foreign text" (ibid.: 2). If the original text

remains outside of the target reader's knowledge, then accuracy is nothing more than the

reader's imagination on the basis of some surrogate quality. If transparency pushes the

translator into invisibility and invokes the presence of the original author, and thus

original meaning in the translated text, then the category of transparency is no longer

distinguished from accuracy, which also takes originality, in terms of authorship and

meaning, as its central ground. At this point, it is arguable that transparency, the

presumed effect of fluent discourse, is paradoxically overlapping with what the

Vietnamese translator and reader conceive as accuracy. Although accuracy is commonly

defined as the achievement of the original meaning in the translated text, it is actually an

effect of fluency. In other words, the more fluent the translated text, paradoxically, the

more accurate it appears to be, because accuracy is at any rate a contingent and illusory

category to which the reader has no access and which he/she can only judge from the more visible feature of the translated text which is fluency.

The fact that accuracy is an effect of fluency seems to render the compulsory duality of accuracy and fluency a redundancy. What is the motivation for this articulation of a duality which seems both a paradox (the antagonism between the two constitutive categories) and a redundancy (one is the effect of the other)? It should be noticed here that the paradox can be experienced by the translator only, and readers remain outside of this experience. Actual practice of translation will certainly inform the translator that the achievement of both is simply impossible. For most readers, I believe, accuracy is invariably judged on the basis of fluency. In spite of its paradoxical and/or redundant idiom, the compulsory duality has profound cultural and political implications. There is a split in the duality as the categories within it articulate conflicting realities of translation. On the one hand, the category of accuracy is less a qualifying category than a pretext for foreignizing translation.[8] Being accurate means being foreign, as implicit in any source-oriented practice. The foreignizing language then signifies accuracy, and accuracy as a category in the compulsory duality promotes foreignizing as an inevitable practice. On the other hand, fluency as a target-oriented category, which fails in the face of foreignizing language, comes to disqualify translation as a legitimate canon in the target system, perpetuating the marginal status of translation.

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[8] This model might also be at work in the Anglo-American translational cultures in previous centuries. If this is right, then Venuti's critique of the translator's invisibility upon which his advocacy for foreignizing translation is based becomes problematic.

Venuti maintains that "the translator's invisibility is … a weird self-annihilation, a way of conceiving and practicing translation that undoubtedly reinforces its marginal status in Anglo-American culture" (ibid.: 8). The reverse seems to be true in Vietnam. The self-annihilation of the translator does not reside in his/her invisibility, but in the very paradoxical nature of the duality. Constituting the two extreme polarities of the translation process, the duality of accuracy and fluency precipitates the impossibility of translation. By pronouncing the duality while practically experiencing its paradox, translators efface their own work in doing exactly what they conceive as impossible. At issue here is the fact that this duality foregrounds the translator's visibility and foreignizing is articulated as an inevitable practice. Contrary to Venuti's formulation of the Anglo-American scene in which invisibility and domestication predominate, the problematic of translation in Vietnam is visibility and foreignization.

Now the question is why foreignizing in Vietnam needs to be articulated as an inevitable practice. What are the social, cultural, and political forces that call this practice into existence and grant it a dominant status? What is the role of the translator in such a context, with his self-nihilistic confession of failure? The answer to these questions can be framed in economic as well as cultural terms, with the translator as both the subject and object of this law of duality. Economically, accuracy can be achieved by a faithful rendition of the original, which is a much easier task than domestication as required by fluency.[9] The promotion of accuracy is thus understandable in a country where translators

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[9] Here I use Venuti's definition of domestication, which is "the reconstitution of the foreign text in accordance with values, beliefs and representations that preexist it in the target language." See Venuti (1995: 18).

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are often paid less than three dollars per page. Practically, there is no clear borderline between foreignizing and literal translation. In Vietnam, foreignization, which as a translation strategy aims to write linguistic and cultural differences into the target system, can be abused as a mask for several irresponsible translational operations, including careless reading and rendition of the original text. The dilemma of foreignizing translation is that it may harbor unscrupulous practices in the name of a theoretically proven strategy. Therefore, foreignizing translation can only constitute a substantive translation strategy when ethical issues are thoroughly addressed and linguistic boundaries between foreignizing and mere literal translation are clearly defined. Among the thousands of "foreignizing" translations in Vietnam, it is hard to tell which ones are done strategically as foreignizing, with the political implications suggested by Venuti, and which merely result from irresponsible translation.

Culturally, accuracy, or foreignization, assumes the reader's sympathy towards its unfluent language on the one hand and a high receptivity of the target culture on the other. As a strategy, foreignizing will fail to achieve its primary goal of signifying foreignness and subverting the target system if these assumptions of sympathy and reception cannot be realized. Sympathy cannot be taken as the act of reading of individual readers, nor reception as the number of translations being circulated in the book market. Ironically, the more foreignizing translations are produced, the more stable the peripheral position that foreign literatures assume within the domestic literary system. The larger number of translations of the same method simply consolidates the marginality of translated literatures by quantitatively essentializing their foreignness, and thus

reinforcing its own ostracized status. Foreignizing translations automatically assume the fate of "children of the enemy" with their characteristic hybridity, or *tính lai căng*.[10]

The eloquent pronouncement of accuracy and fluency in theory followed by the confession of failure in practice, the pervasive hybridity in translation, the historical obsession for cultural purification, all together constitute a power that denies translation its reality. Translation is displaced into the sphere of non-reality. This is not just the translator's self-annihilation produced by compulsory invisibility as historically practiced in Anglo-American culture. It is reality being robbed of what constitutes it as reality, i.e., reality made into non-reality, the realm of imperceptibility or inaccessibility. As an absence (of the original), translation tells lies. It can never be accurate, as revealed in its unfluent language (accuracy as an effect of fluency); nor can it be accepted for its hybridity.

Stories of the Other invariably come to Vietnamese through the medium of translation, a "lying" medium. The pull of globalization demands an ear for these stories, and translation becomes "the ear of the other." What concerns smaller cultures in this uneven world is that Western stories are imbedded in Western hegemony and tend to disrupt domestic coherence and unity. A general assumption by many observers is that Vietnam is struggling against the second U.S. invasion, an invasion of such forces as Hollywood, Coca Cola, and CNN. As globalization poses for smaller nations a polemic choice of either international integration or cultural integrity, translation emerges as a

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[10] The word "lai căng" in Vietnamese means hybrid, yet has a negative connotation just as the hybrid children of the enemy.

solution. Foreign stories, however powerful and hegemonic they may be, have to be told, or retold, through translation, and denying translation its reality is an effective way to mitigate this hegemonic power. Translators translate, and then confess to their readers that their translations fail, in the face of the law of accuracy and fluency, that the real meaning is lost in translation, and that what they are reading is but a deficient surrogate. Readers are constantly educated that there is a reality on the other side of the world which is unfortunately inaccessible due to language differences, and that translation is itself a violent reduction of reality.

The dual discourse of accuracy and fluency at first glance seems to suggest what Franz Rosenzweig calls the drama of "serving two masters," or what Antoine Berman in *The Experience of the Foreign: Culture and Translation in Romantic Germany* designates as a somewhat fundamental resistance to translation that all cultures have despite an essential need for it (1992: 4). If resistance to translation is a universal cultural phenomenon, as Berman seems to suggest, it should be furthered that the cultural and political ramifications of such resistance are not homogeneous around the world but vary depending on the power relations at work between the translating and translated cultures. For a postcolonial culture like Vietnam, where nationalism lingers on decades after the war, Western stories are perceived as posing a threat to cultural coherence and unity. As globalization promises the country a choice of economic integration after more than a decade of postwar isolation from the capitalist world, it also undermines the cultural integrity that the communist government has struggled to construct and preserve. In such a dilemma of integration and cultural identity, translation emerges as a solution. Foreign stories, however powerful, have to be told, or retold, through translation, and denying

translation of its reality is an effective way to mitigate the hegemonic power of the foreign. The foreign in Vietnam is then instituted not just as secondary experience through translation, but ultimately as unreal. The Other which comes through translation is thus irremediably deficient, and translation itself becomes the Other.

4.3 The Other of Western Translation Theories

How can I translate in a context where both translation and the subject matter being translated are doomed to be the Other and denied of their reality? Can a story of homosexuality ever be read as a story of reality within Us, and not a story of the Other? What translation strategies are available for the translator to resist the preconceived otherness of translation? In what ways can my Vietnamese *Brokeback Mountain* subvert the cultural displacement of homosexuality and reinstate it as a reality in the receiving culture through my translation? What kind of risks will I take if I refuse to translate into the "truth" of the dominant discourses on translation and homosexuality? And most important of all, can I find the answer to these questions in contemporary translation theories?

To date, translation studies has largely been a Western enterprise, and it should come as no surprise that translation theories have for the large part drawn upon Western experience of history, philosophy, epistemology as well as its relation to the rest of the world. The place of enunciation from which translation studies as a discipline is born and undergoes shifting theoretical re-articulations has been conveniently or ideologically grounded on translation experiences in Europe and in the United States. Even when a discussion about a particular translation necessarily involves a culture distant from the

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European and American cultural centers, the derived theories often relate back to this place of enunciation, be it an articulation of translation norms, a descriptive analysis of actual translation practices, or a denouncement of the complicity of translation in colonialism and imperialism. Translation studies talks about other cultures, yet in a way that ultimately concerns the West; in many ways, it is a dialogue of the West to the West about its Other.

This is not, however, to diminish the growing scholarship in the field in recent years that attempts to contest Eurocentric conceptualizations and calls for new definitions of translation that meaningfully take into account the highly differentiated discourses on translation across cultures and histories. In *Enlarging Translation, Empowering Translators*, Tymoczko stresses the need for translation studies to be alert to "the varied and capacious nature of the cross-cultural and cross-temporal concept *translation" as a necessary step towards an open concept of translation (2007: 65). Throughout her book, Tymoczko uses the asterisk to constantly remind us of this necessary openness. In *Translation and Identities in the Americas* (2008), Edwin Gentzler examines the vast continent of the Americas, yet carefully dissects geography into multiple cultural centers where he shows the diverse trajectories that translation has taken in shaping various cultural and literary movements, from feminism in Canada to cannibalism in Brazil and 'border writing' in the Caribbean. Enunciating translation as constitutive of cultures, Gentzler's study exemplifies the attempt to include cultural experiences beyond Europe and the United States as a new direction in theorizing translation. Some translation scholars have also mapped out alternative perspectives based on literary figures of marginalized cultures and refigured the image of the translator, and translation in general,

at the limits of received notions of self and Other. Christopher Larkosh, in "Translating Woman: Victoria Ocampo and the Empires of Foreign Fascination," assumes the responsibility of carrying out this test of limits by suggesting to "future writers on the ends of Empires" that "any theory of translation is necessarily a theory of alterity" (2002: 116). The "politics of alterity," as articulated by Larkosh in his other essay, "Je me souviens… aussi: Microethnicity and the Fragility of Memory in French-Canadian New England" (2006), questions grand identitarian narratives of monolingual cultures and polarized bilingualism and engages in "a truly hybrid ethnic identity" that cultivates the memory of microethnic nuances. Although Larkosh's work remains within the confines of the West, from the perspective that I am engaging in this paper, it still provides a workable model that informs my choice of strategies in translating *Brokeback Mountain* into Vietnamese, a point which I will return in the next section.

Works that set out to address the various types of translation existing beyond Western traditions as well as those that aim to re-discover through translation the micro-realities effaced and repressed by identitarian politics seem to still remain at the margin of translation studies. The discipline is overshadowed by works that in the final analysis turn back to this dialogue of the West to the West. Lawrence Venuti's *The Translator's Invisibility*, which has now become a classic in translation studies, sets the ground for an original critique of the Eurocentric foundations of the field. In this book, Venuti convincingly problematizes the ethnocentricity of the translation practices in the Anglo-American world that valorize transparency and fluency and thus suppress the translator into invisibility. Like Antoine Berman, Venuti borrows from the German Romantics the notion of foreignizing translation as a tool for his project. However, while Berman and

representatives of the German Romantics such as Friedrich Schleiermacher advocate

foreignizing translation as a way to construct and enrich their respective national

languages and cultures, Venuti translates it into an interruptive force that challenges the

established canons of transparency and undoes what he calls "the ethnocentric violence of

translation" in contemporary Anglo-American culture. Foreignizing translation for

Venuti performs a much needed resistance to the dominant domesticating discourse that

is violent to foreign cultures and suppressive and exploitative for translators. Interestingly

enough, this resistance, as Venuti is well aware, bears the mark of an imperialistic

imperative of "appropriating foreign texts to serve its own cultural political interests at

home" (1995: 308). Up to Venuti's endorsement, the history of foreignizing in the West

has been an imperialistic project that consumes the Other for the sake of the self, be it the

self of Schleiermacher's Germany, Berman's France, or of Venuti's Anglo-American

world. Perhaps such imperialism manifests itself most vividly when one begins to ask

questions about the very foreignness that constitutes the material of the project. What is

the nature of this material? What happens to the foreign as it is appropriated as a signifier

of difference and discontinuity within the receiving linguistic culture? Does foreignizing

not presuppose a concept of the foreign as homogenous? What is most troubling about

the politics of foreignizing is the silence around this totalizing conceptualization of that

which comes from beyond the place of enunciation of the self. As a pinnacle of the

enclosed dialogue of the West with the West, foreignizing loses sight of an ethical

responsibility for the Other, reiterating the very homogenizing mechanism it seeks to

subvert through a concept of undifferentiated foreignness. In what follows, I offer an

account of foreignizing as practiced beyond the Western traditions, namely in Vietnam,

and articulate a strategy for translating *Brokeback Mountain* that addresses both the contemporary translation culture of Vietnam and issues in language, identity, and the processes of cultural displacement discussed in previous sections.

In a country with a long history of nationalism like Vietnam, foreignizing translation provides a signifying difference that makes possible the nationalist imagination of internal coherence and unity. Cultural nationalism has effectively appropriated the foreign and turned it into a point of exteriority, rather than using it as an enriching material or an interruptive power. Foreignizing constructs a division between original writing and translation as separate symbolic orders and thereby fashions an ideal unified Self in opposition to a disorderly Other signified through the cacophony of foreignness emanating from the language of translation. If homosexuality is narrativized through this kind of translation, it suffers a double displacement: by its own otherness as a subject matter and by its status as a narrative caught in the medium of translation. Neither banned nor repressed, it is displaced as the Other merely by being translated.

Venuti may be right in his rigorous resistance to the dominant practice of domesticating translation in the Anglo-American world. However, a holistic analysis of the case in Vietnam, which takes into account both the translation culture and the cultural processes of displacement, does not seem to favor foreignizing if the aim of my translating *Brokeback Mountain* is to question the perceived otherness of homosexuality. My project is at best an experiment informed by results from holistic analyses and by my conviction that translation, having the power of representing other cultures, should be allowed a multiplicity of methods and approaches if it is to resist and destabilize, rather

than be complicit in, hegemonic representational ideologies and open them up to new questions and challenges. Translation invariably involves linguistic and cultural shifts and transformations, and the rising of one single approach to domination effectively constrains the very terms whereby translational shifts and transformations are possible, generating representational ideologies of the "-ism" kind as in Orientalism or Occidentalism. In his essay "Translation and Cultural Hegemony: The Case of French-Arabic Translation," Richard Jacquemond shows us an example of such "-ism" consolidated through translations which reaffirm the Orientalist representation of the Other and reduce it to an "irremediably strange and different" reality (1992: 149).

The current relation between domesticating and foreignizing translation in Vietnam represents an extreme case of relational difference, in which one is zero and the other equals the total sum, exhibiting an absolute domination of one practice over the other, thus an absolute form of power. Interestingly enough, a cursory review of the history of translation in Vietnam, particularly at the advent of *thơ lục bát* (six-eight verse form) written in the demotic script, *chữ Nôm*, is sufficient to enumerate examples of domesticating translations that have provided the main source of literary material for the construction of national canonicity, and hence cultural identity (see Chapter 2). While a full-fledged discussion of the shift from domesticating to foreignizing as the dominant translation paradigm at Vietnam's different historical junctures requires research beyond the scope of this chapter, it suffices for the current purpose to note the historical deployment of domesticating as a powerful tool in the construction of the Vietnamese culture and identity. Such a historical perspective has informed and inspired my perception of translation as recuperative, which involves using the historical

domesticating discourse, with its historical cultural weight, to counter the current situation of hegemonic foreignizing. One instance of domesticating translation like my own, especially such of a text ready to be displaced as Other, risks being unrecognizable within the current norms of translation, yet it resonates a voice from within restrictive normativity that demands negotiation for a non-paradigmatic multiplicity of translated narratives. Positing translation as fundamental to speaking, or narrating, Paul Ricoeur points out in *On Translation* that "just as in the act of telling a story, we can translate differently" (2006: 10). From the perspective of the translation culture as a whole, my attempt at domesticating *Brokeback Mountain* represents an act of translating differently to bring forth, not just a "linguistic hospitality" of dwelling in and receiving the Other's language as Ricoeur proposes, but a form of cultural hospitality in which homosexuality is not perceived as an external Other dwelling in our home, but already as the very condition of this home.

Any translator, whether translating from a dominated language-culture into a hegemonic one or vice versa, should learn to be frustrated by being caught in a polarized relational difference between translational approaches. In fact, neither domesticating nor foreignizing translation is ideological in itself. It is in their differential relations that ideology is generated. A translation is ideologically resistant when it subtracts from the hegemonic position that one particular approach has come to occupy, and complicit in reinforcing existing ideologies when it contributes to foreclosing alternative possibilities and suppressing all traces of multiplicity. In the current translation culture of Vietnam as I see it, translation needs to assert alternatives to prevent further petrification and subvert

the binary divide between Self and Other, even if the Other is already recognized

inhabiting the linguistic and cultural home of the Self.

4.4 Conceptualizing a Vietnamese *Brokeback Mountain*

> As it did go. They never talked about the sex, let it happen, at first only in the tent
> at night, then in the full daylight with the hot sun striking down, and at evening in
> the fire glow, quick, rough, laughing and snorting, no lack of noises, but saying
> not a goddamn word except once Ennis said, "I'm not no queer," and Jack jumped
> in with "Me neither. A one-shot thing. Nobody's business but ours." (Proulx 15)

This is the scene after the two protagonists of *Brokeback Mountain*, Jack and Ennis, have

sex with each other. Full of imagery and sound, yet it strikes the reader with a

fundamental lack, the lack of language. The men's consciousness of sexuality, it seems,

becomes transparent after their subversive bodily intercourse; at this juncture of falling

outside of sexual norms that sexual consciousness emerges. Norms are most stable and

effective in their regulative and productive power when consciousness of norms is

infinitely repressed. The moment when one no longer sees oneself as heterosexual, yet

practicing heterosexuality all along, marks the summit of normative heterosexuality

where it is totally open, and therefore, invisible. At this moment of absoluteness,

language becomes most limited and inadequate and norms are structured into language,

limiting signification to the extent that there is no possible signification outside of norms.

The representation of the outside is only possible through the negative terms of the

inside, of norms, which is in itself a translation from the unspeakable into the symbolic.

No lack of noises, yet wordless. There is more in Ennis's utterance "I'm not no queer,"

with which Jack finds complete identification, than the fact that they are engaged in a

homosexual relationship while each having his own heterosexual life. Silence abounds in

their relationship as a signifier of the outside of norms, a wordless, unspeakable outside; and for that matter, there lurks a desire to translate silence into language, as if silence could never fulfill a mode of existence or offer a livable life. At the moment of Ennis's utterance, silence is broken, and the outside is translated into the inside through negation. Queer, no-queer, not-no-queer are all the language of norms outside of which there is only unlivable silence. For Ennis and Jack, speaking is already translation, from silence into language, through which they experience the inadequacy of a language that recognizes only positive identities: homosexual, heterosexual, bisexual, queer, gay, lesbian. It is after all a translation that promises livability only through subjugation by language and its positivities. Framing their translated identity in the negative, the not-no-queer, they manifestly refuse the positive signifiers that divide subjectivities into bordered symbolic territories and thereby express an uneasiness with translation into existing separable identities; it is not only a translation-into, but also a translation-out-of that resists positive signification and territorialization. Speaking is already translation, and Ennis and Jack show that they can always translate differently to bring forth the negative space of being that is infinitely deferred by identity categories.

The negative identity of not-no-queer that Ennis and Jack craft upon themselves does not destroy normative heterosexuality or the positive terms of language. Rather, it signifies border-crossing necessarily as border-erasing. Proulx shows us throughout the story how negative desire constantly resists being spoken by positive language. In a world of normative heterosexuality, it is impossible to approach a person of the same sex with an unproblematic assumption that s/he is homosexual, unless there are visible or decipherable significations of the subject as such. The natural, or rather naturalized,

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assumption is invariably aligned to normative heterosexual desire, or in the case where subjects have been identified neatly within positive terms such as gay and lesbian, the assumption is thus aligned to the respective positive desires. Any expression of homosexual desire for another person whose sexual orientation is not yet identified has to be spoken through this alignment to either the dominant norms or the identified position if it is to remain within cultural intelligibility. How is then the desire of this negative not-no-queer identity expressed, especially when no signs of sexual identification are given? How do Ennis and Jack approach each other sexually? What language do they speak for their desires?

If the scene following their first sexual intimacy is filled with unspeakable silence, the moment preceding it is also heightened by a lack of language, a lack of desire speech. Positive signifiers are absent within the little space of the tent on Brokeback Mountain where the two characters approach each other sexually without any heterosexual assumption or expressed signs of homosexuality. In any case, are there signs within the sanctioned language that can adequately express the desire of negative identities? Here, they do not simply cross borders set up in positive language, but erase them completely. Within that little space of their own where silence reigns, readers are thrown into a sudden sexual scene just as the characters are thrown into each other's space and body without prior positive language and signification. An extensive quote from the text would show the unspeakable and unspoken desire that defies any use of language:

> "Jesus Christ, quit hammerin and get over here. Bedroll's big enough," said Jack in an irritable sleep-clogged voice. It was big enough, warm enough, and in a

little while they deepened their intimacy considerably. Ennis ran full-throttle on all roads whether fence mending or money spending, and he wanted none of it when Jack seized his left hand and brought it to his erect cock. Ennis jerked his hand away as though he'd touched fire, got to his knees, unbuckled his belt, shoved his pants down, hauled Jack onto all fours and, with the help of the clear slick and a little spit, entered him, nothing he'd done before but no instruction manual needed. (Proulx 14)

The scene goes on in silence, "except for a few sharp intakes of breath." It is filled with anomalous abruptness; no "instruction manual" is needed, yet their desire is more than instinctive. The same abruptness comes up again after four years of separation with literally no communication between the partners. During this lapse of time, each has established his own heterosexual family. Yet, their reunion is filled with a passionate kiss, and no renewal of desire needed despite the long absence, right on the open stairs leading to Ennis' apartment, within the gaze of his wife from inside the half-shut door. No borders exist between them as their relationship represents a world of no language, even if that world constantly risks being translated into the symbolic order of positivities, demarcations, and exclusions.

Reflecting on Annie Proulx's French-Canadian background and her involvement in Franco-American writers' group in New England, Christopher Larkosh (2006) invites readers of Proulx's works to be mindful of the author's translation of her own micro identity and career into the world of her characters. Highlighting the fragility of ethnic memory in French-Canadian New England under the weight of bilingualism and monolingual cultures with their demarcations and borders, Larkosh asks, "what language will Ennis and Jack speak as they are translated into other cultures?" (2006: 120). And here I add to this line of questioning about language and translation by reflecting on a

possible form for my Vietnamese *Brokeback Mountain*. As a domesticating translation, it abandons the micro-ethnicity embedded in the original text, yet will trans-create the interstices of identity crafted upon the characters. The silence outside of language and its eventual translation into language and out of the restrictive signification within that language is recreated in the translated version. The silence Ennis and Jack experience before and after their crossing/erasing sexual borders does not have linguistic or cultural boundaries. It is not Proulx's French-Canadian silence, nor is it any other specific ethnic silence. It is a silence that speaking subjects of any language and culture will experience at some point in their life. Silence is desire, a pre-symbolic desire that constantly risks being translated into the symbolic. *Brokeback Mountain*, for all its linguistic specificities, is not a text grounded in cultural untranslatability, but one that speaks a silent language of desire, and as such opens itself to multiple translations and trans-creations across linguistic and cultural borders. Domesticating *Brokeback Mountain*, therefore, is not tantamount to an imperialistic act that erases cultural differences through translation for a reductionist representation of the Other, but constitutes a strategy that allows the silence of negative sexual identity to be heard from within the inside/outside dynamic of the translating language and culture. In this way, a domesticated *Brokeback Mountain* does not make the receiving audience travel abroad, simply because there is no need for such a journey in this case. Gay and lesbian communities exist visibly at the margins of the domestic culture, and travelling into those "dark" corners of society is one way to resist the cultural displacement and exteriorization of homosexuality. Instead of letting the audience travel to imaginary distant lands through the foreign traces of translation, the domesticated *Brokeback Mountain* invites the reading public to travel into their own

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domestic cultural spheres where there are still micro-realities, ethnic or sexual, to be rediscovered and acknowledged with a more inclusive social and cultural outlook.

If translation is travel, travelling into our own Self is just as necessary as travelling into the Other. During the course of translating *Brokeback Mountain*, I found myself exploring my self, a self that I had hardly had a chance to think and wonder about, and if I did, it would be a grand Self presented to me through narratives that I had no voice in telling. Domesticating the voices and images of the Midwest America into Vietnamese culture, I could travel to territories beyond the immediate reality of a member of the dominant ethnicity and delve into the forgotten micro-ethnic vestiges buried under the cultural surfaces of nationalist ideologies. Could there be a gay H'Mong living in the remote mountainous areas of north Vietnam, miles away from the dark urban recesses of bars and nightclubs? Would he be wearing jeans, drinking tea, and driving a truck? What bodily stylizations are available to him and how would he perform his negative identity in cultural spaces beyond the ideological imagination of a homogenous national culture? To resonate the question Larkosh asks about Ennis and Jack's language as they travel the world, I also ask about the language that the translation itself would speak, as after all, the language of the translated characters is also the language of the translation. Ennis and Jack translate their silence into language at the same time they translate themselves out of language through negative identity. I absorbed a foreign text into Vietnamese culture at the same time I let the translation travel outside of that totalizing culture, into the micro-ethnic and sexual realities covered and effaced by the dominant culture. Like Ennis and Jack, I speak as I translate, and it is a speaking into as much as a speaking out of.

In what follows, I discuss some general techniques used in my translation. I brought Proulx's setting of the 1960s to the post-*đổi mới* Vietnam of the 1990s. This temporal shift would give the translation more cultural currency regarding the burgeoning of writings, fiction and non-fiction, about life in the era of national construction. The open-door policy of this period brought with it critical social and cultural transformations, and life in transformation became a rich resource for writers who wanted to resist the suffocating atmosphere of cultural and political isolation. This period witnessed the emergence of multiple voices in a momentum that shattered the dominant ideology. Figures like Nguyễn Huy Thiệp, Dương Thu Hương, Bảo Ninh, all quite well-known in the United States, came to prominence with their subversive modes of writing. Although many of their writings were banned, they have been remembered as leading figures who blew a new breath into the sedating body of canonicity constructed and preserved by socialist ideologies. Positing the translation in this period would not only give the work a sense of life in transformation, but also allow it to be read within the well-nurtured public memory of a brief, yet prolific, tradition of cultural subversion. Translating into this literary tradition of the 1990s is also already a translation out of the 1960s bordered geopolitical vision of both the source culture of the United States and the receiving culture of Vietnam.

Linguistically, the characters of the Vietnamese *Brokeback Mountain* speak the northern rural dialect. There is an imbalance in the Vietnamese language in terms of cross-regional linguistic exposure. While southerners are more familiar with northern dialect through different means, such as the media, literature, film, and the southward migration, many northerners find the southern dialect alien or even unintelligible.

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Speaking the northern dialects, therefore, the characters can easily identify with the larger reading public, avoiding regional enclosure. This linguistic choice is also useful because the south is imagined to be more of a commercial center with higher international exposure, in contrast to the more reserved north. Translating homosexuality into the southern dialect would simply place the text neatly into this divisive presupposition, which ultimately condemns the subject matter as an imported cultural product from the West.

Domesticating *Brokeback Mountain* was an enlightening experience for me as the activity posed numerous questions about language, culture, society, and most importantly, about my own self as a translator and researcher. It was a chance for me to wonder about the constitution of my own self, the conditions in which I am and continue to be constituted as a subject within social and cultural frames that have become too close and familiar to be visible. It is a journey into distant realities within my own culture, where there are people who live and speak every day, but are rendered voiceless and bodiless in the national imagination of cultural coherence and unity. In one of his essays, Larkosh stresses the urgent need "to recognize how translation is not simply our object of study, but also an essential intellectual and cultural tool that can allow the translator a measure of critical distance and selectivity in relation to current discourses, policies and priorities, thus shaping a new set of future ethical imperatives with relation to language, culture and society" (2004: 41). This essay of mine speaks to this need for a new recognition of the role of translation. Through my selecting of the text and the translation approach, I have contextualized the critical distance and selectivity in the form of a translation out of current discourses, ideologies, and practices, showing all the way the

rewarding experience of travelling through translation into buried micro cultural realities of ethnicity and sexuality. Translating homosexuality into Vietnamese culture requires the necessary translating out of the cultural displacement of homosexuality and of translation itself.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

The filthy children held out their hands as we walked by on a trail that snaked through the valley down to Lao Chãi village. They were murmuring something rather indistinct to us, a group of international tourists trying to get to the bottom of the valley. They sounded like chanting those mythical spells often found in the bedtime stories of my childhood. Though it was at the peak of the tropical summer, the morning in the valley was cool and misty, and clusters of clouds were floating by, closing off the valley and then opening it up at almost regular intervals. The terraced rice fields made the entire landscape look like a giant archeological site, where layers and layers of ancient construction had been dug up and were waiting for scientific examination. As we kept walking down the trail, we encountered more children playing. Upon seeing us, they stopped their game, pushed each other's way to get as close to us as they could and held out their hands, singing the same indistinct tone. They all looked pretty small in the immense open landscape, and their voice seemed to quickly fade into the morning chill. Mist-covered mountains surrounded us, and yet their voices found no echo, nor did ours. For some strange reason, we were quiet as we passed by them, as if to pay tribute to the incomprehensible locals, to the conspicuous otherness.

Travel certainly induces incomprehension, provokes imagination, and brings puzzling encounters and moments of ambivalent silence. As the trail meandered down the valley, the tourists, unable to resist the pull of the downward movement, walked faster. But their steps seemed to also follow a certain impulse to cover as much space as possible in the least time. The pleasant morning breeze and the picturesque scenery could not slow

them down, for they had planned a fixed schedule. The trail itself was only a means to get to the different scenic attractions along the way down to the village. Travel often implies a destination, and the distance to that destination is perceived as an obstacle to be overcome. When travel is bound up with time and schedules, space is reduced to mere destinations, and as Michael Cronin puts it, "a feature of contemporary travel has been space-time compression" (2000: 4-5). In our times, to get to a certain place already means to cover space in a fixed amount of time.

Travel carries with it a sense of displacement from the comfort zone of the home. In "fractal travel," which engages with "the infinite possibility of travel in the finite space" (Cronin 2000: 16-7), the traveler uncovers realities overlooked by those who are too anxious about getting somewhere at some point to engage with space itself, as if the idea of reaching a destination would compensate for the displacement. But home itself is never a fixed concept in one's mind. The boundaries of home shift as one uncovers the bodies and voices effaced in the imagination of a home, an imagined community. For many Vietnamese, home is that which is embodied in national symbols: the S-shaped stretch of land on the world map, the *áo dài*, or chùa Một Cột (one-pillar pagoda). But as symbols are called into the service of representing the universal, they, for that very matter, efface the particular. As the *áo dài* is claimed to represent Vietnamese women in international beauty contests, it effaces the existence of women from more than fifty other ethnicities, who are legitimate occupants of the same home, yet never wear *áo dài*. Legitimacy and representation do not mean the same thing. Travelling within one's country might not be as pleasant as one tends to think. It disturbs the sense of who one is; it cracks open one's sense of self, of one's own identity at the face of uncovered

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differences. A home, a nation, a country, or any other forms of imagined communities, is perpetually haunted by the return of repressed differences.

If imagined communities are socially constructed through a cultivated sense of "a deep, horizontal comradeship," as Benedict Anderson postulates in his *Imagined Communities* (1983: 224), the imagination of such a sense of communal belonging is made possible, not just through the internal forces of the communities themselves, but also through the ways we talk about the forces that travel between communities. Translation studies has in a way solidified a discourse that makes possible the imagination of unified and fixed communities. Such concepts as source, target, home, and host language and culture as used in translation studies tend to assume a measure of unitary wholeness in language and culture. Translating into Vietnamese, for many Vietnamese translators, would immediately mean to translate into the dominant standard language and cultural norms. In this sense, they translate *with* and *through* hegemony, consolidating hegemonic claims of universality. In the course of my experiential translation of *Brokeback Mountain* into Vietnamese, I found myself as a traveller who continually dwells into the space of otherness. Domesticating the foreign text into the marginalized dialect presented an experience of travel in which I engaged with the process of expanding space itself, and not with a unitary target, a predetermined destination. Ethnic nuances emerged during my translational journey as I attempted to translate *out of* the assumption of a hegemonic, unitary target language of Vietnamese. When Lawrence Venuti proposes the use of foreignizing translation as a way to disrupt the imperialist history of fluent translation, he himself assumes a homogeneous language and culture of the Anglo-American world. Foreignizing in Venuti's conception assumes

an introduction of foreignness across national borders, as if there is no foreign within the same nation. In a sense, as I translate into an ethnic dialect, a non-standard language and culture, I am already disrupting the imagination of the self-same wholeness within the Vietnamese national borders. Foreignness has long been taken to mean that which resides beyond national boundaries. In my conception, the foreign resides within any universal claims, constituting an abject inside that makes possible the work of hegemonic imagination of the nation.

The course of writing this dissertation has been for me a journey into the self, a national self in whose formation I have no voice. Being a Vietnamese in many ways also means being dispossessed of the possibility of seeing differences within oneself through the hegemonic imposition of an identity. As the four chapters unfold, each dealing with a particular issue, translation emerges as a tool for me to investigate the ways in which I am constituted as a subject in language and culture, across time and space. Reviewing the role of translation in issues such as subject (re)formation, cultural contestations, and social justice, I came to realize that underneath an identity is an array of repressed differences. Translation, mistranslation, non-translation, all participates in the constitution of identity at the expense of difference. What is more important for me is the realization that translation, with specific counterhegemonic strategizing, can be a powerful instrument in the deconstruction of identity itself, ushering in other voices and bodies as well as alternative possibilities of being. Translation lies in the in-between space of human interaction, domination, and resistance. It suppresses and liberates, depending on how it is done and used. Looking into translation, therefore, opens up insights into the nature of human existence and communication in relation to one another.

My journey is not just a journey into space. The temporal dimension of translation is no less important, especially for a country like Vietnam, whose history has been a history of translation. If translation has been the mode of survival for the Vietnamese, it has also been the only way I understand my own past, the past of the nation. Here, I see some new directions for my future research on Vietnam. How do the Vietnamese perceive their own history through the now "foreign" *nôm* script and classical Chinese? How is translation configured across time within the history of the same nation? What role does it play in the displacement of a historical period? How does translation, and with it non-translation, constitutes the Vietnamese sense of self in its relation to suppressive others? Also related to the temporal dimension of translation is the issue of the resignified femininity that I elaborate in one of the chapters. Through translation in time, identities never remain static and self-same. Instead, they are continually re-translated, or resignified, contingent upon the new social, political, and cultural demands. How the Vietnamese understand the category of woman has always been determined by the translation of texts from other cultures. The discourses on femininity in the first three decades of the twentieth century showed a certain contestation in translation between the Confucian classics on the one hand and the French women's rights on the other. The liberated woman was also used as a disguised discourse for national emancipation from colonial suppression. The woman through translation and resignification is one perpetually contingent and de-essentialized. Research on identities in a culture of and in translation must necessarily look into their ontological fluidity, not as a form of emancipation, but as a form of suppression itself.

This project of mine has attempted to engage with issues in translation studies on multiple planes: the personal self, the national identity, the historical trajectory, and at some points, the material and cultural dimension. The cultural studies approach, together with the postcolonial and poststructuralist perspective, has provided me with a necessary critical distance to my own object of study, which is translation in Vietnam and Vietnam in translation. For me, using contemporary translation theories as developed in the Anglo-American world in illuminating the history and culture of my own country has been an act of double criticism. On the one hand, translation studies provides me with a theoretical language to reflect upon the historical and cultural realities under study. On the other hand, those realities serve as an expanded scope of dataset that refracts back the theories being used. My engagement with Homi Bhabha, Judith Butler, and Lawrence Venuti reflects this double criticism, whereby Vietnamese realities are represented anew through "foreign" theories and the theories themselves are modified in the very process of their appropriation in a context outside of their original place of enunciation. The end results are new insights into both realities and theories.

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