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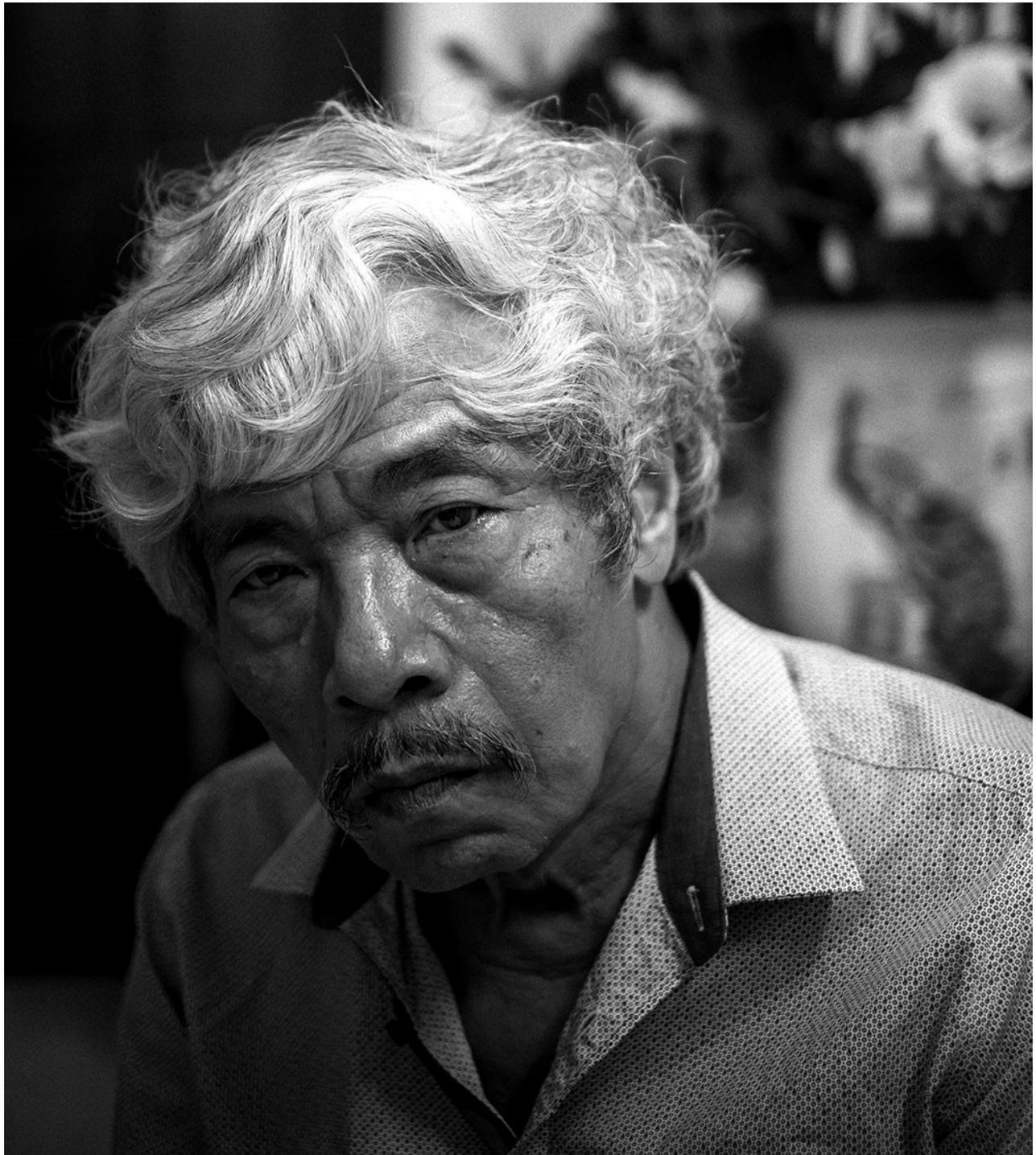
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Issue 12 , Profiles , Vietnam August 2018

Bao Ninh's wars

John Fuller



Bao Ninh. Photo: Linh Pham

When we ring the doorbell of Vietnam’s most famous novelist, “Für Elise” begins to play. Bao Ninh, author of the internationally acclaimed novel *The Sorrow of War*, still lives in the city of his childhood — the same city where his protagonist, the tortured veteran Kien,

wanders by night, when “the spirit of Hanoi is strongest ... even stronger in the rain. Like now, when the whole town seems deserted, wet, lonely, cold, and deeply sad”. The writer’s home, a typically vertical urban Vietnamese construction, is down an alley off a main road just south of West Lake, where Kien and his childhood sweetheart, Phuong, swim the day before he goes to war, and which triggers hopeless nostalgia in Kien when he returns home a decade later.

Bao Ninh, himself a North Vietnamese veteran, is often asked if the novel is autobiographical. The answer is no. And while it’s possible to walk around Hanoi today and see streets and lakes mentioned by Kien, his Hanoi is a world apart. On the day of our visit with Bao Ninh, Hanoian summer is in full swing and West Lake glimmers in the sun. Families picnic on the grass and the wealthy inch their BMWs down the narrow lakeside road. To the east lie the dense Old Quarter and the government villas of downtown Hanoi; to the west are the new residential high-rises and car dealerships of the city’s sprawling suburbs.

“Für Elise” ends and the door opens. We sit on couches in the living room, sipping tea and not touching the fruit laid out on the table. Bao Ninh holds a pillow as he talks, then sets it down beside him, then picks it up again. He’s wiry, with a shock of curly silver hair. He often ends sentences by tilting his head back slightly and raising his eyebrows, as if daring you to express offence at or object to his words, which always seem frank and delivered without thought of consequences. At sixty-five, he’s a man recently reacquainted with his own mortality: earlier this year, his first health check in over a decade confirmed the need for bladder surgery. On the day we meet, he’s at home recovering.

Bao Ninh has not released a novel since *The Sorrow of War*, first published as *Than phan cua tinh yeu* (“The Destiny of Love”) in 1990. A book of his

short fiction was released quietly in 2013, followed by a book of essays in 2016. He's now at work on another major project, but he doesn't want to call it a novel (or say much about it at all). When we arrived, he told us he had agreed to the interview only because he thought we would ask exclusively about his thoughts on other writers' work. But since we were already there, we had a conversation anyway.

When did you find out that you needed an operation?

I'd been invited to talk at a literary festival in South Korea. One of the writers there, who happened to be a doctor, told me I didn't look so well and that I should have some tests done. If I'd been in Vietnam at the time, I wouldn't have bothered. But health services are much better in South Korea than in Vietnam, and I wanted to know how healthy I was in general. The tests revealed that I had a huge bladder tumour. I'd been careless, according to the doctors. When I saw the tumour on the screen, I could tell that it was really big.

How did the operation go?

It was just keyhole surgery. The only worry was the size of the tumour.

How do you feel now?

Much better, but not 100 per cent. In the meantime, my doctor has told me not to smoke or drink. I still smoke, although less than I used to, but I haven't touched a drop. During the war, when I was young, I was fearless, but now that I'm old I'm kind of afraid.

How has the operation affected your lifestyle and writing routine?

It's had a huge positive effect. I have more ideas for my writing. It's hard to tell by looking at me, but I used to be sedentary. I thought there was no need

to rush anything, so I became lazy. But I've been trying harder since the surgery. At least I have a goal in mind, even though I don't know if I can reach it.

I don't have a problem with my healthier lifestyle. My doctor was very understanding; he told me that I could drink a little bit if I felt the need, because he feared that I might go into shock or something if I suddenly stopped drinking. Giving up has been good for my body, so perhaps it's also good for my mind. I didn't usually drink alone, but sometimes when I had friends around I could be quite a hard drinker.

You feel the urgency because you know that you have little time left?

Yes. I'm old now, and so I can't procrastinate any more. I'm afraid. The illness will affect me first and then my family.

What are you working on at the moment?

Just short fiction.

No novels?

I have some ideas, but writing novels demands a lot of effort. There's a Vietnamese proverb that says that if you expect something you won't receive it. So I don't want to talk about it. I had a collection of short stories published in 2013, which included stories I wrote a long time ago, along with some new ones. I write every day. It's like a hobby, and being published isn't part of it.

What's your subject?

The war. Well, not really. I write about wartime — my time — but not specifically about the war. To explain: if you write about your time and

someone says you're writing about peacetime, I would say that's not true; it's just the time in which you live. Everyone has their own time.



Bao Ninh, 1990. Picture credit: Catherine Karnow

The *Sorrow of War* was Bao Ninh's final project at Hanoi's Nguyen Du Writing School, which was established after the war with the aim of training writers to support the socialist state. Older writers collected money to print copies of the work, which first circulated throughout the capital, largely underground. In 1994, an English translation by Phan Thanh Hao and Frank Palmos was published to international acclaim and earned the gratitude of critics who welcomed the book as a window into a society they had witnessed only through black-and-white war photography.

Kien's story is told episodically, shifting un-predictably from scenes of war's grotesque violence and dark humour, to the gloom of postwar Hanoi, to the

memories of his childhood with Phuong, as he prepares his manuscript in bouts of liquor-fuelled monomania. His life before the war is beyond recovery. There is no triumphalism in the novel, and very little politics or ideology, which is why the book was so groundbreaking when it was published and why it remains discordant with the Communist Party's official narrative of a glorious war.

In 1986, when the government initiated *doi moi*, its series of economic and political reforms, the war was long over but the tone and approach of wartime propaganda persisted; literary critic Hoang Ngoc Hien, a co-founder and head of the Nguyen Du Writing School, argued that Vietnamese writers were describing "life the way others want it to be". But Bao Ninh wrote *The Sorrow of War* just as *doi moi* was altering all aspects of Vietnamese life, including literature. Nguyen Huy Thiep, Duong Thu Huong, Pham Thi Hoai and Bao Ninh shattered taboos and courted controversy with their dark depictions of poverty, social discord and corruption.

As *doi moi* transformed Vietnam's economy and foreign policy, opportunities for literature shrank. Duong Thu Huong went into exile, *The Sorrow of War* was briefly banned, and Nguyen Huy Thiep has not published since the mid-2000s. Today, writers are still subject to intense scrutiny and censorship. Bao Ninh treads carefully in this environment. He is publicly celebrated, and photocopied versions of *The Sorrow of War* are available at every bookseller in Hanoi's tourist areas, where they sit on shelves next to *Lonely Planet Myanmar* and Ho Chi Minh's *Selected Writings*.

Though he speaks quite frankly about the problems of contemporary Vietnam — corruption, stifled expression, the government's Orwellisms — he says he's not political. *The Sorrow of War* was a breakthrough when it was published because it contradicted the propagandistic narrative of the

war. But Bao Ninh considers stridently anti-government literature to be equally guilty of the crime of bad art. “Writers aren’t journalists, nor are they politicians,” he says. “Writers portray lives only, and it’s none of their business if the government is good or bad. Life has its own laws. A good government can live in peace with its people, but a bad one ...”

How do you feel, being internationally known as the best living Vietnamese author and representative of Vietnamese literature?

I don’t think that I’m that great; I’m certainly not a representative of anything. It was only that my book was translated into English, and then into Korean, so I was invited to give a talk in South Korea. It never crossed my mind that I would be representing Vietnam. When I go abroad, I get the chance to talk to writers from many other countries. But there are drawbacks to speaking only Vietnamese.

Foreign media have often said that I am the best living Vietnamese writer, which I don’t think is true, because there is no best or worst in literature. There are bad writers everywhere, of course, but they’re not really writers in the true sense. But if you’re a real writer, there are no rankings. Nor do I think countries have a national literature. People often talk about Vietnamese literature, Thai literature or American literature, but I don’t think it’s that clear-cut. My work has no relation to that of Nguyen Binh Phuong or Nguyen Ngoc Tu, for example. The idea of a national literature is just something invented by the media.

I think I’m well known abroad because my book has been translated into English, unlike most literary works from Vietnam ... If works by Nam Cao or Vu Trong Phung were translated into English, English-speaking readers would love them.

How would you like *The Sorrow of War* to be perceived by foreign readers?

I wrote it for Vietnamese readers. I was reluctant to see it translated into English. When foreigners visit me, I usually ask them what they think of the book — not the content but the language. Sometimes I read world literature in Vietnamese translation, but the Vietnamese version is often so bad that I end up throwing the book away, no matter how great the writer. There are so many bad translations of Hemingway, for example. And although I know how great Hemingway was, I threw away the translations I had. Another translation I picked up, of some short stories by Tolstoy, was unreadable. So, that was my fear — that the English translation of my work would be bad. But I didn't have any expectations, and the larger my audience the better.

I'm confident in my command of Vietnamese, because it's my realm. But I'm less confident when my work travels beyond the original language. On the content, I think everyone has their own views about the Vietnam War, but no one should assume that the war was the way I portrayed it. Literature is not history or politics; literature is literature. It's wrong to read my book in an attempt to understand the war.

Who is the ideal reader of *The Sorrow of War*?

I've never thought that far. Writers write. I write for soldiers, about the Vietnam War, from the point of view of the Viet Cong, of Northern Vietnamese soldiers. Back then the soldiers had to read ridiculous things. I wanted to write something for Northern soldiers that was intrinsic to them. The Vietnamese novel before 1986 was formulaic, didactic, phony and deceitful. It was of no importance.

Towards the end of the war, when transport had begun to improve, the government brought not only rice and guns for the soldiers but also books, a

lot of books, from the North. I was the secretary of the youth union in my unit and was also assigned to work as a librarian. I could see that the soldiers didn't want to read that rubbish; they threw the books away, even though they were about them, the soldiers. No one could read those kinds of novels. How could you stand a book that praised you to the point of stupidity? What they did read was literature in translation, especially Turgenev's short stories in *A Sportsman's Sketches*, which they pored over until the copy was dog-eared, even though it praised no one and said nothing about wars or battles. No one remembers the other books, even though I didn't have the authority to discard them. I do remember that they were very thick, written far away, in Hanoi, and unreadable from the first page. Some even told downright lies. They weren't novels but fictionalised propaganda. It would have been better to read political resolutions. To some extent, I believe that those books downplayed the war by trivialising it and its effects on the Vietnamese people, depicting them as pack of barbarians and robots. But how could robots fight the Americans?

Is your approach to writing similar to that of Kien or the narrator in *The Sorrow of War* in that the book is an accumulation of fragments?

Partly, yes. But it's exaggerated, and exaggeration is an essential part of literature, as long as it's not overdone. Yet I don't think there's a single writer who can write like that — I mean, by mixing things together. But I wrote the book that way and readers seem to love the fragmented style and my use of language. But Kien and I have nothing in common, other than being soldiers. Many asked if I was Kien; I said no, not at all. They even went so far as to tell me I should write my life story. But I was just a normal soldier and my life has been nothing special. I was like everyone else at the time, going to war. If there were a war now, I think you would go, too.

Has the book's success changed your way of writing?

Perhaps my writing has changed, but not because of the book. It's just that I've grown old and my thoughts have changed along with my age.

Do you think that your sacrifices in the war were worth it?

Each generation has their own concerns. It's unwise to think too far into the future. When I was a young man, no older than thirty, the American invaders were before my eyes, so the only thing I could do was to fight them. How can one see as far as the next century, which is in the hands of the next generation?

Today you can see that the Vietnamese people were excited about former president Obama's visit. And American goods are everywhere here. Some people have even questioned the point of the war against the Americans. But you can't just say that. Others go as far back as the war against the French. Some say that if we hadn't fought the French, Vietnam would now be more civilised and much better off. So many people were killed in those wars, and yet Vietnam isn't as affluent as Singapore or even Thailand. But you can't say that, either. Today is your time; current events shouldn't make you regret the past.

What do you think is the main story today?

Writers write about the conscience of their time. I belong to another time, so I can't speak for writers of this one. However, today's writers have a vantage point from which to examine the past, and they have the right to ask questions about why we fought the Americans, for example, and what it achieved. But if it were me, I would challenge such questions; in my time, fighting the Americans was a point of pride. A young writer today can ask questions to which good readers will have answers. Years ago, if you asked those kinds of questions you could end up in jail.

The cultural and literary landscape in Vietnam is becoming more positive, and it will develop further. People can now think more freely and ask critical questions. For example, what is a “socialist-oriented market economy”? When I was in school, there was no such thing. Why on earth does a communist country have that concept? I’m not a Communist Party member, but I don’t think communism and a market economy can go hand in hand. A socialist economy is a collective and command economy. Am I right? The market, in contrast, belongs to capitalism. So what does a “socialist-oriented market economy” mean? A writer can ask such a question.

How does the state’s censorship affect writers?

Censorship is a ridiculous notion of the propaganda department. I don’t think the highest-ranking officials know about it. It’s ridiculous, for example, to ban the recently published *Moi chua* (“Termite Kings”), by Ta Duy Anh. Whenever I go abroad, I tell others that the situation in Vietnam today is much better, much freer than before 1986. I’m not bluffing — it’s true. The publication, in full, of *The Sorrow of War* marked a substantial improvement in freedom of expression in Vietnam. The book was published even though it had been criticised, albeit only by those in literary circles. So things have changed; there’s now much more freedom to write.

But some foreigners have disagreed with me and said that I’m flattering the government. “What about ‘Termite Kings’?”, they ask. They know it’s been banned.

Censorship is an archaic, conservative and despicable power, but it’s not as powerful as it once was. Of course, those in the culture ministry can ban a book, but it means little. Writers still write, and the risk of censorship doesn’t change the way they work. During the Nhan Van–Giai Pham movement, in the 1950s, times were turbulent. Censorship still exists today,

and it has some impact — some writers are banned from publishing — but in general it's a joke. At its core it's totally different from what it used to be.

How do you expect your next work to be received?

Because my time was wartime, it's inevitable that I'll write about the war. But there's more to Vietnam than just war. The country has gone from being communist to half-communist and then to fake communist. Now it's barely even a communist country: the prevailing doctrine is red capitalism. So why don't I oppose it? People in Vietnam have their own lives, and living here has its advantages. It's just the politics of different times. Vietnam once fought fiercely against the Americans but now welcomes them. To be honest, most Vietnamese prefer the United States to China. I do, too. I write, but being published is another story. And because I live in a "communist" country, I can't say everything I want to. It's my right to think, of course, but in Vietnam sometimes you can't say what you think. I'll keep thinking, and I'll continue to express my own opinions, but some of what I write I'll have to keep in my drawer.

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