BUNKONG TUON

A Conversation with Bao Ninh

It was November 13, 2015, a Friday. The Hanoi weather was mild, nothing unusual for that time of the year. Finishing up my lunch of rice and pork at a restaurant not far from where I was living, I took long heavy breaths as I thought about Bao Ninh visiting my seminar on the Viet Nam/American War and its effects on contemporary Viet Nam. I was leading a semester abroad in Viet Nam with American students; this was my second time in the Southeast Asian country and my students' first. We had been in country for almost three months now, and we were all excited about meeting a contemporary Vietnamese writer. I was particularly anxious about finally meeting Ninh, one of the first Vietnamese authors who opened my eyes to the other side of the American/Viet Nam War.

Bao Ninh is, of course, the author of *The Sorrow of War*, a book I use every time I teach "Discourses on the Viet Nam," a class that examines different perspectives on what the Vietnamese called "The American War." I have read books by American soldiers and seen Hollywood films about this war since I was a teenager. In these depictions, the North Vietnamese soldiers appeared fearless and mysterious. Their ability to weave in and out of rice patties and jungles made them seem equal parts awe-inspiring and frightening. Yet, when I first read Ninh's novel, I discovered soldiers who were not that different from their American counterparts. They too were afraid of dying. Most were young. A few fantasized about going AWOL. Many smoked rosa canina, a Vietnamese version of marijuana, to escape the realities of war. Virtually all of them dreamed about wives, girlfriends, and families back home. The novel also provided an image of post-war Viet Nam, where peace, though a noble goal, was never truly attained. In other words, Bao Ninh spoke the truth. And he spoke it courageously. The novel is brutally

honest in its depiction of war, and it is written with inspiring intelligence, grace, and beauty. A great writer has the uncanny ability to tap into the collective consciousness of his or her people and speak for his generation, and that was what Ninh did in *The Sorrow of War*.

When Ninh stepped into the classroom that day, my nineteen and twenty-year old students stopped their chattering and looked up. He stood about five feet and three inches tall, but he was bulky and solid. His hair and mustache were thick, wavy, and ashen. He projected strength, but he was also quiet, seemingly uncomfortable. At one point, he said he couldn't talk for very long as he couldn't go without smoking for more than an hour. Earlier in the week, my interpreter Lana Cao told me that Ninh loved scotch and whiskey. I walked up to Ninh, shook his hand, and handed him a gift bag that contained a bottle of Johnny Walker, hoping he would feel comfortable and welcome. Ninh took a seat in front of the class and listened to me introduce him.

My students and I began our conversation with the author of *The Sorrow of War*. Lana Cao interpreted for Ninh, and I wrote down what she translated. One hour later, I took Ninh to a nearby cafe, where we continued our conversation, clarifying and investigating further what he had said in class. Ninh felt relaxed as he chain-smoked in front of Lana and me. What follows is a compilation of my notes on the two conversations.

Why do you write?

When you go through something like war, you are automatically a writer. In a platoon of 500, I am one of ten survivors. The other survivors are farmers. When the war ended, they went back to the countryside. It is sad to see how war affected them. They were gentle beings, and war has changed them. I am not a creative writer. The war simply turned me into a writer.

What goals were you trying to accomplish when you wrote *The Sorrow of War*?

I was tired of the popular notions [in Viet Nam] that the war is over, that Viet Nam won, and that it is the greatest country in the world. I write against such notions. I want to show that Viet Nam is just like any other country. The truth is that there is nothing to celebrate after war.

Did you get into trouble after the publication of *The Sorrow of War*?

This was after the Đổi Mới movement, where Viet Nam was undergoing an economic, cultural and political renovation. The 1990s were more lax. The USSR was no more,

and the Berlin Wall had crumbled. The country was relaxed, and people were hopeful and optimistic.

What do you think is the role of war literature?

Literature is the opposite of war, which is death and hellfire. Literature is life and peace. When I wrote The Sorrow of War, I was thinking about the future of Viet Nam. I was thinking of peace. To write brutally and honestly about the war is to think about peace and the future. But no one listens to writers.

What are your feelings about war?

War brings out the best in humanity—especially human capabilities for love and friendship. The other survivors in my platoon, we get together each year.

Also, after you survive war, your masculinity, vivacity, and vigor are heightened, and women find you attractive. Women find me attractive when they learn that I fought in the war and survived. The same goes for women who participated in the war. They are very attractive to me.

What is the writer's role in Viet Nam today?

As a citizen, you are supposed to espouse the government's belief system and support governmental policies. Your job is to write for the government. I don't consider myself a writer in this regard. I am an irresponsible citizen. I write what I see, what I think, what I feel. I write against war and for peace.

Is Kien, the narrator in *The Sorrow of War* who, like you, is one of ten survivors in a platoon of 500 soldiers, Bao Ninh?

No! The Sorrow of War is a work of fiction.

Who are some of your favorite writers?

I am a fan of American writers and writers of Western literature, such as Hemingway, Tolstoy, O'Brien, and Heinemann. Their styles allow me to write about the war. Tim O'Brien and Oliver Stone depict war in a way that celebrates peace. There are some writers and filmmakers who depict war in a way that perpetuates warfare: you find anger, violence, and revenge in their work. The war machine continues.

Why did you go to war? What was the climate like at that time?

I was seventeen when I joined the army. There were only propaganda songs then, nothing else. Hanoi was being bombed every day. Buildings were destroyed. Male

classmates left to join the war effort, leaving their desks empty. If you were a guy and other guys had already gone to fight, the female students looked down at you and thought of you as a coward. So you went to war. As young men, we believed that we were invincible. We could never imagine that any of us could be killed.

At that time, there was no other choice for young men but to go to war. That was the only way for them to achieve their masculinity. When you gave young men guns, of course they would fight. They didn't think twice about the killings and the atrocities; they didn't know what war was really like. So they went to war believing that they were heroes and that only the enemies would die.

I am saddened that the Americans and the Vietnamese fought. We were complete strangers. Because of propaganda, one perceived the other as the enemy. The Americans saw the Vietnamese as the communists and the Vietnamese saw the Americans as invaders. There was hate in the air because the Americans invaded Viet Nam and constantly bombed our country.

Do you think there could be other ways (other than war) for young men to achieve masculinity?

That's a good question, but I am not a philosopher or teacher. I am simply a writer.

If Viet Nam were at war right now, what would you do if your son were to join the military?

The military is good for young men. It disciplines them and makes them resourceful. When my son doesn't listen to me, I want to send him to the military. But of course, no parents want to send their children to war. In America, I suspect that no one wants to send his children to war either.

Why was the novel at one point called *The Destiny of Love*?

The original title is *The Sorrow of War*, but the publisher changed that title to *The Destiny of Love* because they wanted to sell the book. Love sells. The Vietnamese people are sick of war; they want love and romance to take their minds off of war. [The book was published in Vietnamese in 1990 and, with Ninh's approval, was translated into English by Australian journalist Frank Palmos with the original title.]

What is your current project?

I am working on another war novel. This one is told from the perspective of the South Vietnamese soldiers.

Was there any book that particularly influenced your writing of the *The Sorrow of War?*

I am a big fan of Garcia Marquez's *100 Years of Solitude*. The book influenced my thinking about memory. Marquez said that life doesn't happen sequentially. Memory jumps back and forth between the present and the past.

Have you returned to The Sorrow of War and reread it? If so, what do you think of the book now?

I wrote *The Sorrow of War* when I was forty years old. I'm in my 60s now. I read the novel many times. I now see things I wish I could change. My advice to writers: don't read your book immediately after its publication. Give yourself some distance.

You have visited the U.S. several times. What are your views of US veterans?

I feel sorry for U.S. veterans. Of the two groups, the American veterans are more alone. When they returned home, many Americans didn't understand what they went through. The war took place in Viet Nam, and everyone here experienced it: the women, the parents, and the soldiers. In Viet Nam, the general feeling about veterans is one of sympathy. Yet, Vietnamese veterans do not get much assistance from the government. They have to find other jobs to make a living, as PTSD is a relatively new concept in Viet Nam.

BUNKONG TUON is associate professor of English and the current director of Asian Studies at Union College, in Schenectady, NY. He teaches courses on the Viet Nam War, Southeast Asian history and literature, and ethnic American literature. *Gruel*, his full-length poetry collection, was published in 2015 (NYQ Books).