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Transition, Tradition, and the Individual Talent in Ma Van Khang's *Against the Flood*

Art was free, but swam in silent partnership
with the flux of society.

—*Against the Flood*

SPEAKING OF HIS OWN NOVEL, *THE HAVEN*, REPUTEDLY his finest piece of fiction, Khiem, the protagonist of *Against the Flood*, states, “It was layered and resonant with metaphor and multiple ideas in meaning”.¹ Much the same can be said about Ma Van Khang’s own novel, the subject of this brief study, for it presents a time of transformation in Vietnam during the 1990s, an era in which such noble attributes as selflessness, sacrifice for the greater good, and respect for the old ways were rapidly giving way to a rising tide of self-indulgence, opportunism, and corruption in both private and public life. The thoughts of Mr. Tue, an idealistic revolutionary and spokesperson for the novel’s moral center, reveals the downward spiral:

He knew that life in this country was changing radically, that production was increasing rapidly and with it and the policies, there were new problems. Many were getting rich; corruption and class division, the gap between rich and poor were growing. (ATF, 281)

Ma Van Khang navigates his text amidst this social and ethical chaos, writing a novel in which he both keeps faith with the present political situation and at the

same time celebrates traditional Vietnamese values. In short, what the fictional Khiem says of his novel, “He did not betray his covenant with his society”(ATF, 99), also applies to the novel in which he resides, Khang’s very own *Against the Flood*.

Khang does not betray the “covenant with society” because his graphic portrayal of personal and political corruption is counterweighted, indeed, overwhelmed by affirmative depictions of Vietnamese culture, the compassion and decency of the common folk, and the integrity and courage of those who best embody revolutionary ideals. Despite “the flood of betrayal, degradation, and greed sweeping over the world”(ATF, 275), Khang, a loyal heir of tradition, includes frequent references to Vietnamese folk wisdom, history, literature, religion, and legend, a veritable counter deluge reminding his readers of Vietnam’s rich cultural heritage. Furthermore the novel’s many truly insidious characters are juxtaposed by their virtuous counterparts. Thus, just to cite a few examples, the fraudulent friend, Lieu, is offset by the true one, Think; the vicious spouse, Thoa, by the noble beloved, Hoan; and most importantly, the corrupt new wave of government bureaucrats—especially Pho, Quanh, and Phu—by the old guard, incarnations of the revolutionary ideal—Tue, Diep, and Khiem himself, who, bonding with each other, maintain compassion, social justice, and respect of tradition, regardless of the power of their opponents. Framing and resonating with the novel’s primary strand of plot, the betrayal of Khiem professionally and domestically, is the legend of Princess My Chau, a favorite of Vietnamese who identify with the princess victimized by fate and betrayed by those she honors.

The New Order

During the late 1990s, our protagonist Khiem—a loyal party member, college graduate, combat veteran, and gifted novelist—works in a government publishing house, surrounded, for the most part, by back stabbing incompetents envious of his talent, education, and position. With the major exception of the perceptive, intelligent, and attractive Hoan, a college graduate underemployed as a proofreader, with whom he falls in love, Khiem’s world is an aesthetic wasteland where opportunism reigns supreme. It is not long before Pho, Khiem’s newly appointed superior, a former student that Khiem had to expel for cheating, leagues himself with his peers, none of whom has more than a seventh-grade education, to remove Khiem from office. As his coworkers unite against him, Khiem thinks:

A new order had been fully established now, formed by the pressure of power and the acquiescence to fear, by the need to follow and by the

perception of self-benefit.... It was the flood and now [he] was walking against it. (ATF, 107)

Those few who possessed enough self-respect not to participate in the office coup had their signatures forged by the fraudulent majority to make the vote unanimous. Khiem, therefore, would lose his position, and 2,000 copies of his recently published masterpiece, *The Haven*, would remain in storage, overseen by those who detest him. In the less-than-capable hands of his replacement, Quanh, the intellectual validity and aesthetic judgement that the office held under Khiem soon evaporate. As always Ma Van Khang allows his characters to condemn themselves by their own words. For example, consider Quanh's consistent lack of logic as he attempts to prove, by listing a series of non-sequiturs, that he is as qualified as his predecessor:

First, I'm older. Next, on the intellectual side, he graduated from pedagogical university, but I graduated from real life.... Morally, I'm clearly much better than he is, since I'm trusted by both the upper echelons and all my colleagues.... I come from Cam Thuy, in Thanh Hoa province, the home of King Le. Coming from those origins, I must have more power than Khiem. (ATF, 114-115)

Given the limited intellectual range of Quanh and his cohorts, it is no surprise that they are ultimately arrested for corruption.

His betrayal by his wife is perhaps more sordid than his victimization by his colleagues. His spouse, Thoa, is a serial adulteress who is not above flaunting her infidelity to inflict as much pain on Khiem as she can. A case in point is her most recent affair with Moc, a self-proclaimed herbal doctor married to another woman. While weakened, bedridden, and delirious Khiem is easy prey, first for Thoa, who mocks his current lack of virility, next for Moc, whose practice of traditional medicine, exacerbates Khiem's condition. Ultimately the pair shamelessly persist in sexual activity within earshot of the semi-conscious Khiem:

...they were truly like animals, [those] two, and even sometimes pretended to be animals during sex, and would scream filth at each other, as if it increased their pleasure. (ATF, 148)

Thoa's infidelity began shortly after her marriage to Khiem and increased in frequency while her husband fought in the south during the American war. But for sheer depravity Khiem's unfaithful spouse is easily surpassed by her lover, Moc, who boasts of his rape of a woman dazed and in labor. "I was the only one with nurse's training," he reveals while happily reminiscing, "so I chased everyone else away; I was all alone with her. I did whatever I wanted, and she didn't know any better. It was great" (ATF, 135). At one point in the novel a Buddhist monk observes that in the 1990s animals are turning into people. The behavior of Thoa and particularly Moc suggests that the reverse is also true.

While the perverse pair mentioned above illustrate the extremes of self-gratification, that tendency so prevalent in the new order, the norm itself is far from praiseworthy. For instance, when Hoan, Khiem's beloved, returns to her place of birth, she soon realizes that any recollection of an idyllic village is soon cast "into the realm of legend" (ATF, 201), as she notes that

...kids in the schools were shooting heroin now, and there were prostitutes everywhere. When the big spenders had their parties at nightclubs, the girls were always served up to them afterwards; they were called "fresh things." (ATF, 201)

When Khiem first visits a medical center for treatment, he hears a patient scream, "This hospital is a market and the doctors are peddling death" (ATF, 139), a fact not disproven by a doctor more concerned with establishing a sexual tryst with an attractive nurse than examining his patient. His lack of professionalism results in Khiem's mistreatment by his philandering spouse and her nasty boyfriend. But *Against the Flood* makes clear that sexual promiscuity in the once puritan north is merely the proverbial tip of the iceberg, for self-indulgence underlies all opportunistic behavior. When, for example, Quanh cheers the arrest and almost certain execution of Hoan for traffic in narcotics, Khang's narrative voice provides a scathing social commentary:

Three cheers that we've relegated to history the comradeship that had been the essence of the struggle for independence and freedom: hooray for the opportunists who took advantage of their opportunities, tricked the unwary, slandered their comrades, and grabbed power for themselves. Bravo to the filthy and ruthless competition for individual gain! ...Viva the rule of hooligans! (ATF, 264)

But Ma Van Khang does more than criticize the new mode of behavior, more significantly, he also reminds his readers of the value of the ancient ways and considerably more recent Marxist ideals.

Tradition

As if to combat the flood of greed, corruption, and self-interest, Ma Van Khang includes in his novel frequent references to folk wisdom, religious ceremonies, the therapeutic value of the countryside, and folk heroes reincarnated in the Marxist mold. Within the pages of *Against the Flood*, we find a folk saying to cover the complexities of life, the mysterious workings of fate, even the vagaries of human behavior. According to Hoan's Uncle Tuy, a virtual compendium of folk wisdom, the sea is like life: "It contains good and bad, kind and cruel. ...Yes, there are many kinds of fierce fish in these waters. If we're born on this earth, it's our fate to deal with such things" (ATF, 28). Hoan's brother, a partially disabled veteran, is no stranger to folk wisdom either, as he explains the shifts of fortune. "The river always reaches his turning point," he notes, "and each human being has his time" (ATF, 191). While dozens of folk sayings deal with the oddities of human behavior, one pondered, ironically, by the cruelly duplicitous receptionist, Tiny Hoy, may be the most comprehensive, "You can measure the depth of a river, but not the human heart" (89). In any case, these analogies, platitudes, and clichés, as well as dozens of others sprinkled throughout the text, provide comfort and encouragement to both characters and readers alike.

Frequent allusions to traditional customs and religious ceremonies further reinforce the significance of Vietnamese cultural heritage. Through the eyes of his protagonist, Khang describes in great detail a celebration of the legendary Princess My Chau, complete with "ancient national flags bearing the five characteristics of the universe," "eight trigrams and the four sacred animals," flagbearers in traditional garb, a "dragon-shaped palanquin of the emperor," a "phoenix-shaped palanquin of the empress," and eight smaller palanquins bearing the images of village gods (ATF, 30-31). The procession itself was dignified and solemn, "following an exacting ritual which decreed that each step they took should cover precisely one foot of ground" (ATF, 31). In contrast to the earlier spontaneous and at times rude behavior at the beach, Khiem notices that the ritual "was marshaled and ordered by sacred belief" (ATF, 31). He further observes that "the feelings that cemented human beings to each other were neither chaotic nor dictated, but grew naturally from the same sense of spiritual reminiscence he saw all around him" (ATF, 32).

Similarly in the novel, religious ceremonies hold participants spellbound. At the ritual inviting his deceased mother's soul into the pagoda, we read of its physical and spiritual impact upon Khiem:

The clacking of the wooden fish, the tinkling of the temple bells, the chanting of the nuns entered Khiem, filled him with a strange and sacred emotion. His soul seemed to be lifting from his body, separating, rising to a different plane. He was aware of faint floating presences around him, saw the bamboo shoot in [his sister's] hand tremble slightly, as if touched by a breeze, then begin to shake violently, as if surging with a universal energy. It began to spin. (ATF, 276)

The effect of the ceremony on his sister is even more forceful and fulfilling: "she could feel the presence of her mother's soul, her mother's voice speaking to her. She felt she had returned to her childhood, to the sanctuary of her mother's arm" (ATF, 277). The durability of Vietnamese custom is perhaps best illustrated among the opportunists who usurped Khiem's role, for despite their efforts to remove the altar behind the stairs, subordinates rebuild it so that it is still standing after their superiors are apprehended for corruption.

As with other contemporary Vietnamese novelists, whether Bao Ninh, Duong Thu Huong, or Le Luu, the Vietnamese countryside for Ma Van Khang, especially the place of one's childhood, has an amazing restorative capacity. Khiem refers to this place as his haven, becoming rhapsodic as he first describes its serenity then its therapeutic effect on him:

The low, palm-studded foothills and the forested mountains beyond caressed his eyes. The nervous beat of his heart, the plop of water buffaloes' hooves in the narrow, muddy rice paddies, the caw of crows in the palm fronds, the jungle myna's cry, the drip of water in the deep limestone wells, all were absorbed into the vast blue peace of the sky.

He felt recovered from the journey, the countryside soothing and strengthening his spirit. Let people keep cheating, lying, betraying.... It had nothing to do with him; he couldn't be touched. (ATF, 169)

Although Hoan's visit to her place of birth revealed the dark underbelly of economic prosperity in the form of teenage drug use and rampant prostitution, her foray into the highlands suggests the interconnectedness between the land and its

inhabitants. While at first glance, the awesome majesty of the western cordillera seemed to dwarf human accomplishment, a closer look reveals that in this remote region, too, people were both nourished and spiritually enriched by the land in which they lived:

The eye couldn't encompass the vastness of the countryside, scattered with gardens, orchards, and rice paddies, pegged by ancient shrines to the spirits of the mountain: the five tigers, the white dragon, the jungle goddess, the earth mother, and more, all of them perpetually shrouded in white incense smoke. (ATF, 218)

Hoan, who earlier had performed as the lead dancer at the Princess My Chau festival, thus re-enacting her victimization because of love, "visited and burned incense at each of the shrines, performed the expected rituals with respect and care" (ATF, 219). Apparently, Hoan, like her true love Khiem, is revitalized by the land and its customs.

Crucial to the countryside are its living folk heroes, virtual incarnations of the Vietnamese spirit, old revolutionaries who struggle against obtuse bureaucrats to work for the betterment of others. Their integrity amidst corruption, perseverance amidst defeat, focus amidst negligence, serve as an inspiration to both reader and protagonist. Let us begin with the younger of the two, Diep, a rural folklorist never formally educated. Having fought against the French and later the Americans, Diep, after being wounded in Quang Tri province, was "demobilized with the rank of captain and assigned to work with the people's committee in charge of cultural activities for the masses" (ATF, 172). Unable to deal with the stupidity of those in charge, he resigned and soon after quarried limestone, dug wells for people, and farmed. According to Khiem, who quickly befriended this kindred spirit, Diep turned to writing poetry, "exposing whatever evil he found" (ATF, 172). Knowing that "'money' and 'lust' blind people's eyes" (ATF, 173), and that "Mandarins were always temporary but the people went on forever" (ATF, 176), Diep, outspoken and honest, confronted local officials about the ever present incompetence and corruption, lacing his criticism with folk sayings and rural anecdotes. Rapidly his fame as a poet and raconteur increased, perhaps because of the credo that informs his life:

Every word written by me is a brick, a vote. Only an honest person can struggle against cruelty and evil. In short, that is a way of loving life. (ATF, 175)

What better person for Khiem to befriend than one whose trust was also betrayed by corrupt officials within the system.

But serving as an ethical beacon to both is Mr. Tue, who, as Diep reports, “disguised himself as a beggar and went to investigate how people really lived and found out how the cooperative leaders were cheating the farmers—He was punished” (ATF, 174). Regardless of Tue’s many charitable deeds—whether digging wells for soldiers, donating tents for “displaced children and food and clothing for...old people” (ATF, 175)—Tue was disciplined by “thieves, traitors, and cheaters who take credit for other peoples’ efforts” (ATF, 175).

So inspirational is Tue that Khiem idealizes him in a story entitled “Mr. Tue’s Garden,” in which we are told that Tue is descended from a clan whose family members “*are still worshipped in the pagodas*” (ATF, 231) of his native province (italics are Khang’s own). As Khiem continues his narrative, we read that “*people around here say that when this century ends, the one person who is likely to have his name inscribed on a stela or his visage sculpted on a statue is Mr. Tue*” (ATF, 238-39). This is due to his rescinding “the regulations which had limited agricultural production” (ATF, 239) and replacing it with a contract system that allowed the peasants to prosper. While his unauthorized decision was used against him, “people regard him as a gift from heaven” (ATF, 239). Of the garden itself, Khiem writes: “*The eternal cycle of nature in it demonstrates the failure of those who have wanted to ruin. A man’s true strength is marked by the desire he has to offer himself to others*” (ATF, 240). Although the text refers to the selection as a story, the tale accurately depicts the attributes of the character depicted in the novel as well, where Mr. Tue, after acknowledging the people’s love for him, still admits, “I have not been worthy of them” (ATF, 212). Mr. Tue, in other words, is the moral barometer by which all other individuals are measured, and in the novel under discussion only a very small handful approach the criteria.

Craft

Simply stated, Ma Van Khang’s *Against the Flood* may be the most self-consciously literary Vietnamese novel in existence. Consider the following: the plot is structured around the Legend of Princess My Chau; the sequence of events are informed by the metaphor of the flood. The protagonist of the novel, Khiem, is

himself a novelist, who, in moments of crisis, views the people around him as characters in a novel; and Khiem befriends others who possess heightened literary sensibilities who in turn often cite or allude to dozens of other writers. As a result, we encounter the names of such western authors as Balzac, Camus, De Vigny, De Long, Hemingway, and Sartre, as well as their Asian counterparts such as Nguyen Binh, Xuan Dieu, Kim Dung, Nguyen Giao, Thi Hoang, Lu Tsun, and Nguyen Tuan. Furthermore Khiem's friends often act as literary reviewers, at times discussing the protagonist's own writing with him. Khiem himself offers an analysis of his literary milieu, comments on his own craft, and ponders at length what it means to be a contemporary novelist in Vietnam. In addition, Khiem falls in love with Hoan, an avid lover of literature, by evaluating the works both have read, especially those of the protagonist. A major issue in the text is whether or not Khiem's masterpiece, *The Haven*, will be distributed, kept in storage, or destroyed. Other writers attempt to intervene on his behalf, and one in particular is successful. Two thousand copies of the novel are saved from the recycling shredder by Diep, a folk poet, who is able to do so, not coincidentally, by citing an ancient tale to a driver, who has won a poetry prize as an adolescent. Finally, the novel concludes with a eulogy to the recently deceased Think, a close friend of Khiem, who, aside from being, according to Khiem, an ideal reader, had forsaken a literary career when reprimanded by authorities for failing to write ideological poetry.

As Khiem contemplates contemporary society, he notes that during the 1990s literature was "disintegrating around him" (ATF, 93). Some writers abandoned their work to pursue a more lucrative career in sensational journalism. Others forgot originality to recycle a well-worn style and familiar story lines, deluding themselves that they were in tune with the classics. Still others tried one of two paths: either producing "cleverly plotted...provocative material...devoid of art, imagination... [or] insight (ATF, 93) into humanity, or run-of-the-mill stories of adultery" "that often became the basis for instant-noodle video soap-operas" (ATF, 93). And, lastly, there was an extremely sullen group that "discarded their art to take on the role of polemicist, without seeing how it would finally debase their talent" (ATF, 94).

In response to this disintegrating literary milieu, Khiem defines his own aesthetic protocol, whereby he remains true to his faith in humanity, his homeland, and himself. He sees himself as part of a "miniscule group of true writers," who "knew literature was not politics and not economics" (ATF, 94), who "didn't compete with other writers for prizes and fame" (ATF, 94), who "saw themselves as the continuation of two thousand years of civilization" (ATF, 95), who "acknowledged

and grew from that past, while at the same time put something new into the world” (ATF, 95), and ultimately who knew that to write good literature, “a writer had to truly live life, with all its vicissitudes and contradictions, to live in it and understand it, to use life and nothing but life to illuminate life” (ATF, 95).

For Khiem the crystallization of all of the above is found in his best work to date, *The Haven*:

He couldn't deny that the novel was a plot of land on which the shadows of his real life moved, fiction framed by autobiography. But it had been sifted through his imagination; its verisimilitude and art didn't come from a recitation of facts, of so-called objective reality, but from the recognition that human beings were a mix of the conscious and the subconscious, of instinct and spirit. *The Haven* was a novel. It was not a political fable. Nor was it a scream nor an insult nor a poem. He had invested all of his passion and all of his pain in it—but none of his hatred. The most brutal details in the book were lightened with humor—the cosmetic of literature that softly covered the harsh lines of cruelty. (ATF, 99)

During the course of the novel, we observe that Khiem does include people that he knows into his fiction, as “The Garden of Mr. Tue” discussed above, or the anecdote that he heard from Diep in a narrative entitled “For the Love of Lit.” Indeed, the further one reads, the more Khiem seems to be either the spokesperson for or an alter ego of Ma Van Khang himself, since both are army veterans, both are writers of fiction, and both work at a publishing house. Furthermore, there are startling similarities between the predicted future of the fictional Khiem and the actual autobiography of the real life Ma Van Khang. For example, in the novel, Khiem's close friend, Dr. Think forecasts a glowing professional future for our protagonist, “You'll...throw out ten more novels and dozen short story collections and win a National Award” (ATF, 155). These accomplishments echo those of Ma Van Khang's ten published novels—one with the same title, *Border Area*, as that written by Khiem—nine collections of stories, and the Vietnam Writers Association prize for the best short story collection (ATF, 308). In short, shadows of Ma Van Khang's biography appear in *Against the Flood*, just as those of his fictional author appear in both his novels and short narratives, the fictional writer, in effect, verifying the aesthetics of his creator—and vice versa.

Writing of the modern Vietnam, Robert Templar in *Shadows and Wind* notes that “there are concerns about the widening gap in society between rich and poor, young and old, urban and rural”.² While Ma Van Khang and his fictional novelist acknowledge such fissures, they are quick to point out that the flood of corruption, ignorance, pettiness, and self-interest must be viewed in a much wider context, one which cannot discount the inspiration gleaned from two thousand years of cultural history—whether it takes the form of the therapeutic effect of the countryside, the collective wisdom of the folk, the spiritual enrichment provided by religious faith, or the example embodied in its heroes both ancient and modern. The tension between the pull of the present and the power of the past has always been a concern within a society, but it has seldom been so effectively rendered in contemporary Vietnamese literature as it has been in Ma Van Khang’s *Against the Flood*.

Notes

1. Ma Van Khang. *Against the Flood*, trans. Phan Thanh Hao and Wayne Karlin (Willimantic, CT: Curbstone Press, 2000), 3. (hereafter cited in text as ATF).

2. Robert Templar. *Shadows and Wind: A View of Modern Vietnam* (New York: Penguin, 1999), 352.

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