



# An Ecology of Morality

## Political and Material Excess in Dương Thu Hương's Novels

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**Abstract** Exiled writer Dương Thu Hương is one of the most renowned contemporary female writers of Vietnam, famed also for her criticism of the Communist Party. In her works *The Zenith* (2007) and *Paradise of the Blind* (1993), translated and published abroad, she uses the recurring themes of excess and deficit to comment on the political deterioration of the state, a tragic reality that began just years after gaining independence from France. The hunger that ravages the villages is countered by the ironic gluttony of ghosts, and the performative asceticism practiced by party members only masks the actual greed underlying their political decisions. On one level, this article examines how the politics of excess, playing with different human virtues and vices, reveals a deep irony in the governing systems of Vietnam and the rhetoric of independence. On another, it also points out how Duong Thu Huong uses karmic energy as a narrative force which mercilessly punishes, humiliates, and educates, ultimately promising a restoration of equilibrium. The article argues that ecocritical engagements with Southeast Asian literature must take into account both a natural and supernatural understanding of the environment. This leads to new understandings of diaspora and spiritual allegiances to the homeland that are especially pertinent for the Vietnamese community abroad.

**Keywords** Southeast Asia, Vietnam, eco-literature, materialism, karma

In the works *Những Thiên Đương Mù* (1988), translated as *Paradise of the Blind* (1993), and *Đỉnh Cao Chối Lợi* (2009), or *The Zenith* (2012), Dương Thu Hương juxtaposes blindness with a place deemed worthy of success or satisfaction. The original Vietnamese titles, literally “Blind Paradises” and “Blinding Summit,” respectively, point to the problem that is at the heart of both novels—namely, the inability to see on both physical and moral levels. These works probe at the irony of the existence of places such as a paradise or a zenith. Paradise, if understood to be a place like heaven, is reserved for the good and just, and zenith, with its implied altitude and distance, suggests a privileged perspective and position. Calling such paradises blind, or made for the blind, however, removes a major sensory element (the visual) that makes enjoying the heavenly

qualities of the place possible, and ultimately it implies impaired judgment. How ironic it is, then, to look or aspire to these physical and metaphorical positions when they do little to improve one's sight or judgment.

The two texts take into consideration two crucial moments in the Communist Party's governance of Vietnam: the land reform campaign of the 1950s in *Paradise of the Blind* and Ho Chi Minh's family scandal in the 1960s in *The Zenith*. The first moment was a public disgrace that led to a jarring range of innocent deaths (between fifteen thousand and forty-five thousand) and the disillusionment of many intellectuals regarding the viability of the Communist government. The second, kept out of public knowledge, led to Ho Chi Minh's discreet exile from the party. Clearly vocal about her political stance, Dương Thu Hương examines the extent to which the public and political intervene with the private and personal through the family tragedies that occur in each of these texts. In dwelling particularly on the material excesses present in both novels, she expounds upon the profound metaphysical quality of Vietnamese culture and life, in which one's actions and desires do not stand alone but are interconnected with that of others in the physical and spiritual world. This grants new meaning to the intricate relationship between politics and society, politics and literature, and politics and the environment, for these realms are not bounded by mere human relationships or actions but by the larger forces of karma and the restoration of a universal equilibrium. Informed by ecocritical readings of the author's treatment of the theme of excess, this essay thus argues that the author manages to insert her political criticism of socialist Vietnam within this language of karma, thus situating Vietnam in a larger ecology of morality and justice beyond its physical boundaries and particular histories. The incidents in her novel are not to be seen as specific to one distant part of the world but an iteration of the human drama we can all experience living in this shared world.

### Reading Nature in Dương Thu Hương's Work

When thinking of eco-literature in Vietnam, Dương Thu Hương is not the first name that comes to mind. A more likely writer would perhaps be Nguyễn Ngọc Tư, whose short stories imbue life into landscapes and natural phenomena.<sup>1</sup> But such associations are grounded in a limited conception of what constitutes the ecological. While Dương Thu Hương does not explicitly address environmental issues such as deforestation or climate change, in her stories she makes continuous reference to the environment, in which human experience is presented through the lexicon of the bio- and metaphysical world. *The Zenith*, for example, opens with the idyllic forest views surrounding Lan Vu temple interrupted by the mournful cries of a child who has just lost his father. The sound of tragedy reverberates through the forest, and all surroundings become a witness to this filial loss. The president who hears this cry feels it penetrate his heart like

1. Her notable works include "Cánh đồng bất tận" (2005), which has been adapted to a film in 2010 by director Nguyễn Phan Quang Bình; *Sầu trên đỉnh Puvan* (*The Sorrow Trees of Puvan Mountain*, 2007); and *Cố định một đám mây* (*Permanent a Cloud*, 2018).

a bird who has fallen into a thorn bush.<sup>2</sup> The emphasis on filial connection is not only between kin but also between man and nature, for “such is the binding quality of the love between father and son, the oldest melody in the symphony performed by all living creatures.”<sup>3</sup> These references expand the understanding of one’s experience and existence in the world and illustrate the extent to which the author sees all life as interconnected.

This essay proceeds with a methodology that is particularly in tune with the interactions between the human and nonhuman world, and with an environmental lexicon that can inform the way that we read the texts and what they reveal about Vietnam during a certain political era. I propose a reading based on an ecology of morality, which is distinguished from an environmental or ecological ethics because it is anthropocentric rather than ecocentric. It not only is an environmental metaphor for the human interactions that occur in a political or social system but refers directly to the intricate ties between humans and the bio- and metaphysical world—namely, how the consequences of human and human-centered actions are reflected in nature. This follows what Pamela McElwee terms “environmental rule,” in which looking at Vietnamese laws around nature and landscapes actually unveils the concerns of the state regarding nationhood and subject formation. The socialist state often framed social problems as environmental problems, so that nature became a site for larger anthropocentric politics at play. McElwee’s work confirms that in the context of Vietnam, ecology does not pertain exclusively to nature but is heavily implicated in politics.<sup>4</sup> Identifying an ecology of morality in Dương Thu Hương’s work is an effort to better understand the cyclical quality of human judgment and behavior, among humans and their constructed environments, and among the bio- and metaphysical environments in which they dwell in as well. In engaging with such an ecocritical hermeneutics, we learn that ecocriticism in Southeast Asia cannot be understood independently from myths and the supernatural world, for the contemporary history of these cultures is grounded in their relationship with the environment through agriculture, through ancestral worship, and through their adaptations to climate change. In this reading of Vietnamese fiction, the relationship between the human and natural world takes into consideration a holistic understanding of existence, so that humans and nonhumans alike inhabit a shared cosmos. If we allow the term *nonhuman* to describe not only the physical world but also that which exists beyond human form and understanding, ecocriticism can be an effective way into better understandings of Vietnamese literature and art.

Furthermore, considering the socialization of natural terminology in the twentieth century, such as social Darwinism in the race toward a teleological modernity, it is also possible to think about what constitutes the natural world or natural phenomena in

2. Dương Thu Hương, *Paradise of the Blind*, 5.

3. Dương Thu Hương, *Paradise of the Blind*, 4.

4. McElwee, *Forests are Gold*, 5.

Vietnam beyond physical, tangible terms. Is it merely an exercise of language to consider natural phenomena metaphorically, or is it possible that such phenomena in Vietnamese history and social consciousness do not distinguish between the physical and metaphysical world? In other words, the tendency to see manifestations of life in social and political activity, as revealed in our vocabulary terms such as “moral decay” and “rotten luck,” can perhaps point us to a more profound understanding of Vietnamese culture and society. This essay thus proposes to take seriously the recurring lexicon of ecocriticism—of terms such as *sustainability*, *excess*, *waste*—in both *Paradise* and *The Zenith*, as clues into the blurred lines between nature and culture, anthropogenic catastrophe and natural disaster.

Also important to note is that Dương Thu Hương’s works emerged after the Đổi Mới (Renovation) era, an economic moment of reform in Vietnam that turned to privatization and global trade. This catalyzed major paradigm shifts in Vietnamese society, which are reflected in an emergence of new expressions in literature. We see an increased environmental consciousness in the works of many writers at this time, including those of the aforementioned Nguyễn Ngọc Tư but also Nguyễn Khắc Phê, as well as new definitions of roles and structures in society.<sup>5</sup> The separation between creativity and politics diminished as more writers began to express candid political views through their works.<sup>6</sup>

### **Karma as the Restoration of Equilibrium**

One way to understand morality and ethics is in terms of balance and equilibrium through Aristotelian ethics. Rather than seeing virtues as binary opposites of vices, Aristotle suggests that virtues exist within a doctrine of the mean, a balance between excessive or deficient exhibitions of certain behaviors.<sup>7</sup> In the behavioral sphere of shame, for example, modesty would be the balance between shyness (excessive expression of shame) and shamelessness (lack of expression of shame). Or in the realm of fear and confidence, rashness and cowardice are both vices—excessive and deficient exhibitions, respectively, of the virtue of temperance. Deficiency or excess are thus two sides of the same coin, a structure of vices that allows us to map the existence of greed and lack onto the same landscape of Vietnam. Balance as an ideal is akin to the equilibrium promised in the concept of karma.

Karma is conventionally understood as the relationship between one’s action and its consequences. In the Buddhist context, it is also thought of through an agricultural

5. Werner and Bélanger, *Gender, Household, State*. See also works by Nguyễn Khắc Phê, such as the novel *Thập giá giữa rừng sâu* (*Cross in the Middle of the Deep Forest*, 2002).

6. Here, I use “creativity” rather than “literature” because the role of literature is prescribed under the Socialist regime as serving politics. In Trương Chính’s “Đề cương về văn hoá Việt Nam” (Theses on Culture), originally written in 1943, literature needed to fulfill a public need and was a tool that the government could utilize to transmit its political program and perspectives. See Ninh, *World Transformed*.

7. Aristotle, *Ethics of Aristotle*, 104.

metaphor in which the karma for one's actions can ripen over the course of one's life; one reaps what one sows. The temporal quality attributed to karma, in which what goes around will come around, is, however, intricately tied to a spatial quality, the beginnings of a consequence of an action already at work elsewhere. This conflation gives the impression that actions, as well as time, do not operate on a linear scale but are connected to one another *ad infinitum*.

In this vein, the different iterations of karma or karmic energy in *Paradise* and especially in *The Zenith* can be understood as an effort to restore moral and political equilibrium holistically. The excesses of the state, for example, are "paid for" by the starvation of the people, and seemingly disparate narratives are connected by a common event through mere ripple effects.

This writing style has earned Dương Thu Hương criticism, with poet and critic Linh Dinh claiming her prose is "perverted with a heavy-handed political subtext."<sup>8</sup> But as Thomas Bass claims in a recollection of his interview with the author, perhaps Linh Dinh has missed the point, for Dương Thu Hương never pretends to be subtle about her political stances. Regarding a comparison between her and Bảo Ninh, whose famous novel *The Sorrow of War* (1993) begins similarly to Dương Thu Hương's *Novel without a Name* (1996), she merely said, "I am a committed dissident while he [Bảo Ninh] lives a normal life."<sup>9</sup> Her novels are not codes or representations of politics; they are, in effect, political interventions. This contests the role that cultural productions were assigned in General Secretary Truong Chinh's "Đề cương về văn hoá Việt Nam" (Theses on Culture) in 1943, claiming literature and such to be the ideal vehicle by which the state could disseminate their top-down approach to political reform.<sup>10</sup>

Such political intervention is an important marker of Dương Thu Hương's work and of literature after *Đổi Mới* in general. This period of economic liberalization brought on a brief period of openness for intellectuals, where discourses of politics—namely, of socialist law—merged with literature until the state's paranoia quickly led to strict censorship.<sup>11</sup> Dương Thu Hương's *Paradise of the Blind* is arguably "the first of its kind in Vietnam to fold socialist legal discourse into fiction," pushing the boundaries for political and legal participation, as well as literary intervention.<sup>12</sup> She was also the first author to critique the land reform campaigns and the degradation of intellectual life under the Communists. Often paired with Nguyễn Huy Thiệp as key dissident writers of this era, Dương Thu Hương contemplated the deterioration of society to "indigenous consumerism" and the postwar state's inability to deliver on wartime promises, but still

8. Linh Dinh, *Night, Again*, xiii.

9. Bass, *Censorship in Vietnam*, 73.

10. This was presented at the February 1943 Standing Committee meeting, and later published in the journal *Tiên Phong* in 1945.

11. Luu, "State Socialism and the Legal Subject," 216.

12. Luu, "State Socialism and the Legal Subject," 218.

promoting a “party-sanctioned culture.”<sup>13</sup> Despite having their own writing trajectories and concerns, these two Đổi Mới writers overlap in their deep dissatisfaction with their contemporary society, with the use of blunt language and surprising narratives that question humanity and its nature. For Dương Thu Hương, her political commentary of the Socialist government in Vietnam is especially effective because she grounds them in fundamental basics, not only of human nature but of the elemental design of the universe. In other words, the blindness she addresses in both works, which afflicts those who are unable to see the reality surrounding their actions, is one that means turning a blind eye to the basic systems of the universe.

### **Manifestations of Excess in *Paradise of the Blind***

In *Paradise* the protagonist, Hằng, is a textile worker in Moscow, whose family history is retold through a series of flashbacks during a train ride to see her maternal uncle, Chính. The flashbacks reveal the conflict, a civil war of sorts, between the paternal and maternal sides of her family. Her uncle, a member of the Resistance who eventually joins the Communist Party, was tasked to carry out the land reform campaign in his home village. As one of the first measures to consolidate the authority of the Communist Party, the campaign rallied together peasants, turning their resentment toward landowners into revenge. Family members were turned against one another, and many innocent landowners were prosecuted in the name of land redistribution. In Dương Thu Hương’s novel, Chính carries out his duty to persecute the family of Tồn, his brother-in-law and the father of the protagonist, Hằng. Out of anger and shame, Tồn commits suicide, leaving his wife and daughter behind. Years later, as a party cadre, Chính tries to uphold a minimalist lifestyle, which leads his sister Quế to work and sacrifice all her earnings so that he and his family would have plenty to eat. As Quế displaces her maternal love toward her brother’s family, her own relationship with her daughter Hằng deteriorates. This waning maternal love is compensated by paternal Aunt Tâm, who pours all her wealth into nourishing her niece, Hằng, the only living descendant and reminder of her brother. The story is of continuously misplaced filial duty, often compensating for some perceived sense of lack or scarcity.

Because characters are constantly trying to compensate for some sense of lack, we see excess emerge in the minute details of everyday life as well as in life-changing political decisions. This becomes more evident as overworking is perpetuated by overconsumption. By dwelling on these details, Dương Thu Hương is able to comment on the intricate relationship between politics and society so that the political errors of people in power are paid for by the suffering of those subject to that power. If we go so far as to consider such suffering as karmic consequence, it links the fate of the different social classes together, so that the Vietnamese people as a whole are responsible for their own livelihood as well as for their suffering.

13. Zinoman, “Declassifying Nguyen Huy Thiep,” 310.

There is an important moment in the novel where the author contrasts the two New Year's festivities at the home of Hăng's uncle Chính and that of her Aunt Tâm. These two members of different sides of her family have different relationships with material goods, which is at the core of Dương Thu Hương's criticism. Uncle Chính's greed for authority as well as for material goods seeps through the seams of his supposedly ascetic lifestyle. In this particular celebration of Tết, Hăng and her mother visit uncle Chính and his family in the residence for party cadres. They offer them small luxuries such as pâté and meat, which the family accepts with feigned reluctance. Chính has good reason for this behavior because living in such close quarters with the rest of the cadres means that every indication of luxury can be suspicious. Pushed to conform, "these people are incapable of tolerating even the slightest difference" that might draw attention.<sup>14</sup> Hăng describes:

My aunt immediately rushed to close the door and draw the curtains over the window. My mother spread out the groceries. It was a feast for at least eight people. Her sister-in-law's eyes widened against her pale face, her gaze was meek, vacillating. Uncle Chính wheeled around. "This isn't necessary, really, why all this waste?" But his voice was unconvincing and toneless, directed at no one in particular.

The example of Chính's greed here is matched with Hăng's mother's own insatiable desire to work in order to continue to provide for her brother: "I realized she had a mission now, a new source of happiness: to serve the needs of my little cousins. How intoxicating it can be, self-sacrifice. . . . Soon she added tomatoes and bamboo shoots to her business. Neighbor Vi noticed too, 'Your mother is too greedy. The body's resistance has limits. . . . An elephant wouldn't be able to bear this pressure, let alone a human being.'"<sup>15</sup> This was a way for her mother to acquire a place in her brother's family, earning his attention and approval through monetary means. It seems that indulgence is not only reserved for pleasure and goods: self-sacrifice in excess could also be turned into a vice.

Uncle Chính comes to expect the dedication of Hăng's mother's in providing for him, to the point where her own meals are whittled down to just a few ingredients. As Hăng and her mother becomes emaciated with hunger, she begins to notice physical changes in her uncle's wife: "I noticed the bulge of fat on her thighs and rump as she hurried over to serve us; and I noticed her eyes, which darted furtively in the direction of the hamper of food my mother had set on the floor."<sup>16</sup> But at least in such abundance, she senses a softness in uncle Chính and his wife, and a willingness to let Hăng and her mother into their lives. This mutual happiness lasts for a year until Chính is diagnosed with diabetes. Stricken by disease, and spoiled by excess, Chính turns his bitterness toward his older sister:

14. Dương Thu Hương, *Paradise of the Blind*, 124.

15. Dương Thu Hương, *Paradise of the Blind*, 115.

16. Dương Thu Hương, *Paradise of the Blind*, 174.

“Where’s your mother?” he asked me, watching the door greedily.

“She’s gone to try and buy some oranges.” I replied.

“Oranges? Why? I’m forbidden to eat fruit.”

“My mother thought you could eat fruit.”

“Nothing. Nothing,” he whined. “The doctor has forbidden everything.”<sup>17</sup>

The irony of diabetes, a condition in which the body is unable to process sugar, is that it puts uncle Chính on a strict diet and he can no longer enjoy the same foods as before. However, Chính’s medical condition only plunges Hằng and her mother into further poverty and hunger because his treatment requires American medicine and special food supplements. With no thought to the strides that his sister’s family must take to pay for his treatment, Chính only focuses on the abundance to which he no longer has access. Meanwhile, the relationship between mother and daughter is further strained as they both struggle with hunger.

The absence of sustenance is juxtaposed with the wealth at Aunt Tâm’s disposal. In the Tết celebration at Aunt Tâm’s household, Hằng observes the butchers and chefs as they prepare a large meal for an entire village. The detail with which the author recounts the slaughtering of the pig, from its “sharp screeching” as it is being killed, to the careful retention of blood, to the “naked whiteness of its skin,” exaggerates the return of a feudal ritual that would be banned by the Communist Party after 1945. Such staging recalls Nguyễn Huy Thiệp’s description of a similar preparation in “The General Retires,” written just one year before *Paradise* in 1987. In this short story, the son feels inclined to slaughter a pig to welcome his retiring father back to the village, but his participation in the ritual is empty of meaning. Ironically, the gesture, which figures into what the party deems “wasteful” is done to welcome the return of the general, who is a national and party hero. It seems then that the criticism, on the parts of both writers, is less around the ritual than around its suppression. Even in *The Zenith*, the villagers are able to avoid disciplinary action for having celebrations by including party cadres in the festivities. For Aunt Tâm in *Paradise* in particular, the ritual creates an opportunity to discuss political matters with the vice president of the village, whose authority infringes upon others’ property and well-being. It is no coincidence that his name is Đường, or “sugar” in Vietnamese, befitting of his large figure. While she serves tea, wine, and sweets, Aunt Tâm manages to raise several topics of village concern, including the unfair arrest of a villager and the hypocrisy of the vice president’s comfortable situation amid everyone else’s poverty. All the while, she also graciously and authoritatively recounts political allegories about the ideal way leaders should govern.

It is in Aunt Tâm’s parables that the only mention of blindness in the entire novel appears. In one story about the famously corrupt mandarin, Trần Bình, he tricks the doctor who was treating his father and son for their ailing eyes by paying him

17. Dương Thu Hương, *Paradise of the Blind*, 178.



counterfeit money. As revenge, the doctor sends a group of blind singers to the mandarin's home and subsequently flees, leaving Trần Bình in humiliation and his father and son without treatment. Soon, his own eyesight also fails, and "the dynasty of blind men became a laughingstock of the people."<sup>18</sup> Trần Bình's only passion is known to be money, and so legend has consolidated his rule in the region into the following vulgar saying: "With Trần Bình at the helm, even a man's balls will lose their hairs."<sup>19</sup> This means that as an individual with authority, he left the people stripped bare, quite literally. The story, meant to be a political lesson, was understood by everyone at the party to refer to Vice President Đường and his own exploitative measures to take away land from his villagers for his own family. He gave land to his daughter, who has no experience in cultivating or taking care of it. In between offering sweets to the man, Aunt Tâm makes snide remarks about his daughter's privileged position and manages to get the village official to promise out loud that his daughter, like everyone else, "will live on her own, by the fruit of her own labors . . . and nothing else." Here, the author layers narratives within one another, which all point back to her commentary on the land reform campaign. By the end of the event, despite Aunt Tâm's small victory in getting Đường to make such a public concession, she knows that her embarrassment of the official will come around again, for "he's capable of plotting against someone because of an evening like this. And he's got the power and the means to do it too. Just you wait—."<sup>20</sup> Even here, Aunt Tâm is aware of how the forces of the universe works, in which one victory here is a loss elsewhere.

The overflowing presence of food in this particular scene serves as an effective tool for negotiation: it extends the invitation to the person in question, gathers an audience who will serve as witnesses, buffers the criticisms, and distracts from palpable discomfort of the situation. There is irony in feeding an already pudgy man, whose appearance alone embodies a character who takes pleasure in enjoying past his fill. Yet the pleasure of eating is countered by the reproach in her words, and only in continuing to offer him sweets can such difficult conversations take place. Aunt Tâm, much like author Dương Thu Hương, has managed to navigate authority figures in her own way, suggesting the indirect means in which criticism must be presented to be effectively communicated. In the many narrative layers in this scene, the stories within stories, Dương Thu Hương slowly peels away at the facades of the society organized by the party, including their contradictions.

### A Critique of Materialism

As recent scholarship on Vietnamese ecocriticism argues, the Communist Party, grounded upon a socialist reading of *The Communist Manifesto*, takes the materialist ideology as a

18. Dương Thu Hương, *Paradise of the Blind*, 160.

19. Dương Thu Hương, *Paradise of the Blind*, 160–61.

20. Dương Thu Hương, *Paradise of the Blind*, 163.

justification for the use of nature. Vietnamese literature, which has been explicitly employed by the state for nation-building agendas since the August Revolution, perpetuates images of natural abundance that go hand in hand with the fecundity and potential of the nation. Chi Pham and Chitra Sankaran point out how the state, in applying this Marxist ideology, perpetuates the role of humans in transforming and working natural resources, citing Hoàng Trung Thông's "Song of Breaking Soil" as a popular example of Marx and Engels's argument for the "subjugation of nature."<sup>21</sup> That humans can make something out of anything, such as rice out of soil and stones, simply with strength and dedication, highlights first and foremost the value of human work and glosses over any agency or contingency possible in the environment, such that it can be easily manipulated and transformed. Along similar lines, the land reform campaign, as one of the first major programs initiated by the new government in North Vietnam, reifies this idea that land is something to be not only manipulated but also regulated and redistributed. As with the example of Vice President Đờng and his daughter, land often fell into the hands of the unqualified, which only meant that it would not be properly taken care of. This campaign, which intended to do away with class differences and feudal societies, also disrupted labor synergies between benevolent landowners and their tenant farmers.

On one hand, framing human work in this way is a response to the exploitation of economic systems under colonial rule. The narratives of development, progress, and modernization attached to the civilizing mission of colonialism underlies this claim to human authority to profit off agricultural work. The alcohol monopoly or the exportation of rice, for example, were systems in which the Vietnamese were unable to enjoy the fruit of their labors directly but had to export and then repurchase those goods from France, which disrupted the intricate relationship between supply and demand that is determined by the Indigenous people and their usage. Yet on the other hand, the commodification of nature remains present, though in alternative form, under Communist Party rule.<sup>22</sup> The question is not so much the exploitation of the labor and the land as it is for whom such exploitation exists; the sovereignty over one's land in this case grants the authority to do as one wishes, even if it violates the respect due to one's so-called motherland.

The environmental critique behind the land reform campaign and its underlying ideology is especially relevant to understanding the deeper implications in Dương Thu Hương's critique of the campaign in *Paradise*. The obsession with material possession, from excessive working to the trading of goods, allows the author to make her claim: material excess is inextricable from moral excess. What we see in *Paradise* is also an evolution—or more aptly, deterioration—of excess, revealing a deep irony in the governing authorities of Vietnam, who are the alleged role models that nevertheless succumb

21. Pham and Sankaran, *Revenge of Gaia*, xi.

22. McElwee's work on environmental rule spanning colonialism into communism is a good example of this continuous manipulation of nature. See McElwee 2016, chaps. 1 and 2.

to sordid means in order to survive. The entire premise of the novel is Hằng's train ride to see her uncle so that she could assist him in his black market dealings. Hằng, who is college educated, resorts to working in a factory in Russia, as did many Vietnamese women in the 1980s.

There are more layers to Dương Thu Hương's critique of the Socialist government's obsession with materialism. An important moment in *Paradise* suggests that this critique is not only to point out human vices but to reveal instead the precariousness of our being, so easily swayed by the threat of uncertainty or scarcity. On the train, Hằng recalls an incident where one of her roommates misplaces a sewing machine, turning her suspicion to the three other girls in the house. The roommate is both reluctant to accuse the girls out of principle and yet is also adamant that the only possible explanation for its disappearance is theft. After deciding collectively to look for it, the girls find the machine in the pantry, in a box of dry foods. The girl is deeply embarrassed, remembering having put it there to prevent it being stolen in the first place. Hằng looks at her roommate with a kind of pity as she recognizes this kind of behavior, having seen it in other people back at home: "In my neighborhood in Hanoi, I had a neighbor afflicted with the same mania. From time to time, you could hear her husband curse her, after he found a package of moldy tea stuffed under a pile of clothes, or a pound of sugar in a tin of noodles. The habit of misery had twisted these people, driving them to this paranoia."<sup>23</sup> The shame that overcomes the roommate after the object is found distorts her physical appearance, "her flat nose look[ing] even flatter," her cowardice making her more hideous.<sup>24</sup> After leaving the girl to wallow in her shame, everyone returns to their ordinary activities, and outside, "the storm, this torrent of pure beauty, continued to flood the earth."<sup>25</sup> Paranoia may be an anxious response to the loss of control, but the elements nevertheless persist, the storm carrying on outside. Hằng's logic for why someone could be "afflicted with such mania" is that one only becomes greedy as a result from the trauma and impending threat of not having enough, as if such future avarice can compensate for one's history of lack. In an effort to break and reset a cycle of continuous lack and violence, the ending of *Paradise* is an invitation to move on from the past, as Hằng decides to forsake her aunt's wishes to maintain and protect her estate. "I can't squander my life tending these faded flowers, these shadows, the legacy of past crimes." It is with the light of moon, "at its zenith," that she arrives at some clarity and resolve.<sup>26</sup>

### **Sacrifice and Disillusionment in *The Zenith***

Like *Paradise*, *The Zenith* intertwines two narratives, that of the Woodcutter's Hamlet and that of the President, whom readers can quickly deduce to be Ho Chi Minh. Situated on

23. Dương Thu Hương, *Paradise of the Blind*, 84.

24. Dương Thu Hương, *Paradise of the Blind*, 85.

25. Dương Thu Hương, *Paradise of the Blind*, 85.

26. Dương Thu Hương, *Paradise of the Blind*, 258.

different levels of the mountain, these two family narratives mirror each other in significant ways. From tests of filial duty, to age gaps in romantic relationships, Dương Thu Hương brings human experience to a common ground of love, greed, and shame that despite social rank or political distinction, is nevertheless shared. This is precisely one of the reasons why the text was published abroad, since the personal narratives around the President risk tainting the ascetic patriotism that he represented. The author's political commentary is even more striking in *The Zenith*, for the President's convalescence in the mountains is the party's way of dismissing his authority altogether. His ignorance of the goings on of people in the villages directly below, as well as his own eventual disillusionment with the party officials, further comment on the inability of those at the very top of the hierarchy to see the effects of their power and decisions. That he can hear the crying of the young son over the death of woodcutter Quang, or that his own marriage with Xuân, forty years his junior, parallels that of Quang and his young wife, underlines this irony of unseeing as implied in the Vietnamese title of the novel. This is mirrored in the way that the President is also unable to see due to his physical and social disposition.

The story of the Woodcutter's Hamlet revolves around an upright father, Mr. Quang; his wife; and his four adult sons. An intense hunger suddenly afflicts Mrs. Quang, who consumes so much that she puts her wealthy husband into debt. But the husband never complains, only working harder to satiate his wife's cravings. This unusual affliction brings fear to the village, unable to understand Mrs. Quang's insatiability. Is it an illness? A ghost? Is it contagious? After showing up uninvited at the home of Miss Vui, the party committee secretary, the wife has her last New Year's meal and dies within twenty-four hours; she is found leaning against a rock in the rain. Her death brings about the question of customs and filial duty and the recent abolition of extravagance in customs such as weddings and funerals. Party authorities had recommended that clapping replace fireworks and simple gatherings replace banquets. To send off Mrs. Quang, however, the villagers cite the importance of duty and the need to counterbalance her condition before death. This only confirms the villagers' suspicions about such hunger being rooted in a supernatural cause: "If no one worships our ancestors, they will become roving hungry ghosts. If those buried below become hungry ghosts, how can the living people prosper?"<sup>27</sup> Such hunger reveals the anxieties of the village, reminding them each of their fortunate disposition to be alive and the importance of paying respects to their ancestors. The line between the living and the dead is permeable: even if they belong to two different worlds, they share an ecosystem in which the appetite of one is connected to the satiety of the other.

Imagery of animal slaughter returns in *The Zenith*. This time, the violence of the domestic ritual brings it to a level in which death and sacrifice for a nationalist cause is at stake. The President recalls a Tết memory in which the military headquarters were able to provide an extravagant meal of congealed duck's blood with pig intestines (tiết

27. Dương Thu Hương, *Zenith*, 130.

canh) for the soldiers on occasion of the national holiday. But despite this festive celebration and rare feast, his aversion to blood ever since he was a child—its smell, color, and visceral reminder of death—leaves him disgusted, to the point of secretly discarding the traditional dishes set aside for him. This feast, full of reminders of violence and consumption, is but one example of the way death would continue to haunt him.

This same memory reminds the President of a film on the customs in Africa he had seen in Paris many decades earlier, when he was living in the City of Lights as a young vagabond. In the film, the local people drew blood from a cow and drank it fresh, while it was still warm. The images enter his dream and lead him to an important realization:

At night his dreams were splattered with red. Animals were slaughtered, blood squirted up; they screamed, jerked, and shook in crazy and desperate ways. All the people had their mouths splattered with fresh blood; all their smiles were also bloody. . . . This had been the first time since childhood that he had experienced such fear. It was like the first time he had held a flashlight to clear a tunnel in which eternal darkness threaten one's life. Thanks to that movie on African customs, he had found a comparison, a point of reflection. He saw that realizing the shortcomings of a nation was like having a fever: you must endure before you can cure.<sup>28</sup>

As Hao Jun Tam observes, Dương Thu Hương's novel is a mirror held up to confront the nation: "One must be honest about the party's flaws before one can repair them."<sup>29</sup> The reflection of his culture in African customs allows him to see these customs with the objective perspective that distance affords. The memory of this custom is conjured again, when during one of his hallucinations, the President encounters Chairman Man, a fictional characterization of Mao Tse-Dong. The chairman reproaches him for his sentimentality and "schools him in sovereignty,"<sup>30</sup> to borrow Tam's words: "Do you see how I treat those I call 'comrades'? I suck the blood from their veins as a farmer releases water from a field. I take their blood to clean the steps that lead to the throne because the color red is the color of power and glory. Nothing can represent the color red better than human blood."<sup>31</sup> The specter, a figment of the President's imagination, looms over him like China's presence over Vietnam. Chairman Man mocks him for his belief in Western democracy and likens the President's fate to that of a pig, waiting to be slaughtered: "Therefore they simultaneously suspected that you had affection for the French and took advantage of the Western principle that the majority rules to bind you like a butcher ties a pig before bleeding it to death."<sup>32</sup> Unfortunately, the plot

28. Dương Thu Hương, *Zenith*, 73.

29. Dương Thu Hương, *Zenith*, 373.

30. Tam, "Revising Ho Chi Minh," 371.

31. Dương Thu Hương, *Zenith*, 338.

32. Dương Thu Hương, *Zenith*, 338.

twist to this premonition is that not only is the President sacrificed, but so is his beloved, Miss Xuân. Only nineteen when she meets the President, she bears two of his children and is never recognized as his legitimate wife before she is sexually assaulted and killed.

It is through his interactions with the party concerning family matters that the President reveals himself to be a contemplative but extremely flawed man. We learn that upon his wife's request, he pleads with the party members so that she and their relationship can be recognized before the nation. Unsurprisingly, the party members reject the idea, mocking him and his inability to see that such details about his private life will only confuse the people about the image they worked so hard to cultivate. He is disappointed, but he does not petition or insist they change their mind. In addition to the disclosure of his family life, this passivity is what makes the President's portrayal so polemic in Dương Thu Hương's novel. Much of the sections dedicated to the President are often descriptions of his indulgent contemplations, in the quiet of his room; while he is an intellectual and pensive person, his thoughts never cross the threshold of his mind to be realized in action. While he reflects on his role in putting into effect the very policies and leaders in charge, his remorse and inaction remain elusive. Despite these efforts at moral penance, the President is best described as a coward, unable to change or even challenge the institutions that he helped to put into place.

In the aftermath of Miss Xuân's death, it becomes clear that the hero of the novel is not the President, but rather his secretary and trusted confidant, Trần Vũ. Dispersed throughout the novel are snippets of his noble behavior, including adopting the President's son as his own, after Miss Xuân's death. Upon hearing about the murder, it is he who confronts the general secretary, Thuận, crystallizing the fact that it is not one's position or expected heroism that counts but the authentic ability to live one's life according to one's beliefs.

As he is about to leave Thuận's house, Trần Vũ learns that it was Thuận who wanted to keep Miss Xuân a secret, because he "believed providing such an uncomplicated example would bring the Old Man [the President] more prestige in all our eyes."<sup>33</sup> In other words, by omitting personal details and presenting the President as a celibate nationalist married only to his country, he would incarnate the ultimate hero for Vietnam. In response, Vũ rhetorically asks of Thuận, "If you were using simplicity to create prestige, why didn't you personally practice it first? Why didn't you ask for a simple thatched-roof house with climbing vines out in the suburbs, rather live in this overly imposing house?"<sup>34</sup> The President, no longer a beloved Older Brother, becomes instead something to be sacrificed up to the god of the revolution, no different from the pig slaughtered for the Tết holiday, for ceremonial purposes. We also learn through this encounter between Vũ and Thuận what little power the President has over the rest of the party members. It was not so much that the President didn't want to stand up for

33. Dương Thu Hương, *Zenith*, 468.

34. Dương Thu Hương, *Zenith*, 468.

himself but that he felt he stood no chance. Gone were the days when “everything was done based on feelings of brotherhood.” Here, the crux of Dương Thu Hương’s critique is not so much the flawed persona of the President nor his cowardice but rather the self-interested nature of the government driven by material consumption, the “brotherly comrades no more than merchant partners with their goods on a ship in the ocean . . . protect[ing] their interest in the cargo.”<sup>35</sup>

It is through Trần Vũ’s interactions with peripheral figures in the novel that Dương Thu Hương ultimately reveals the most poignant political commentary. In one example, Vũ contemplates the survival mechanisms that a street vendor who serves him wine must adopt. To Vũ, he is warm and offers him a superior wine, but to patrons who often don’t pay, he offers a lower grade. The vendor has no choice but to keep selling his cheap wine on credit for fear his business would be sabotaged. This leads Vũ to reflect with compassion:

We had the revolution to liberate the people, but, at the end, what we have is only a miserable drama in which decent and honest people can find no place to stand. Those who can make it are forced to be dishonest and disloyal. Or at best, little people like this old man must look upon life as having two sides—like some kind of reversible armor. When I was still young, people were not that bad. It’s the new society that pushes them down the slope.<sup>36</sup>

This sympathy is a stark comparison to the disgust Vũ expresses toward Thuận and even members of his own family. His disillusionment with his wife’s beauty and their young love is a deeper metaphor for his disappointment in society and its governing regime.

In revealing more of the President’s personal history, the author undermines the distance required in order to maintain his cult. In humanizing him, examining up close his flaws and deep contemplations, his regrets and hesitations, he is no longer the saint to be held on a pedestal and treated differently but a human being with the needs and wants of any person.<sup>37</sup> The effort to protect the image of the President is merely a facade to cover up a deeper flaw regarding the deterioration of governance, especially if the President is not the sole target of Dương Thu Hương’s critique. In many ways, humanizing the President also in turn dehumanizes the actions of those surrounding him, performing what one character describes as “taking the cane from the canton chief to hit the head of the canton chief . . . this type of counterattack, of turning the tables on the big shots, has been used for thousands of years. Now they explain it in a more modern way: the action of a boomerang.”<sup>38</sup> This boomerang promises indeed that what goes around, will come back around.

35. Dương Thu Hương, *Zenith*, 466.

36. Dương Thu Hương, *Zenith*, 288.

37. Dương Thu Hương, *Zenith*, 300.

38. Dương Thu Hương, *Zenith*, 481.

It is striking that the President's story is set atop a mountain overlooking local forests, for Ho Chi Minh once made the observation that "forests are gold; if we know to protect and develop them well, they will be very prosperous."<sup>39</sup> As Pamela McElwee suggests, planting trees was like planting people, and this management of forests was a larger metaphor for "the management of people as subjects and nature as object."<sup>40</sup> Delivered at the Mountainous Areas Party Education Conference in Hanoi in 1963, Ho Chi Minh's speech was consistent with the party's agenda conflating natural abundance with national potential. But for the older and fictional version of the President in *The Zenith*, there seems to be a change of heart. Rather than seeing the forest, the nation, or its people as something he can control, he recognizes that "the masses are not more than a gust of wind, a wave, a tornado, a hurricane, a fire. . . . [The mass] takes no responsibility for what it does."<sup>41</sup> The nation and its people, much like nature, follow their own course in life. In this representation, the President has to deal with the guilt of subjecting his nation and its people to such a regime and accepts that he too is subject to some force greater than him—a force like karma—where he will have to "repay the mountains and rivers" along with its people, during his time at Lan Vu temple.

As the physical zenith in the novel, Lan Vu temple is "where the cosmic energies of rivers and mountains unite."<sup>42</sup> Looking out into the horizon atop the mountain, the President comes to the conclusion that "there is only one reality: it is his land; it is tied to him, and he to it, forever." While this is a contemplation that the President reflects upon regarding his attachment to Vietnam regardless of its politics, amid a natural backdrop, the land to which he refers is also physical. At this moment, he is greeted by the kind face of Buddha. In other words, it is when the President surrenders to karma, knowing his death is his last apology and contribution to his people, that he achieves an unprecedented happiness, a paradise of sorts. That the President's death falls on the same day as the day of national independence illustrates a connection between the natural course of life and the emergence of a nation.

### Conclusion

This ending to the novel puts into perspective the larger question of writing in exile for the author Dương Thu Hương, and of writing in the diaspora for the many Vietnamese no longer living in Vietnam. It is an important contemplation regarding what it means to be connected to Vietnam, even as she pens her novels in Paris, and even if the Vietnamese people do not readily have access to her works. The expression "writing in exile" derives a particular meaning about one's positionality or status in relation to a place, an exile *from* or *of*. Why continue to write about a place when one no longer

39. Quoted in McElwee, *Forests Are Gold*, 4.

40. McElwee, *Forests Are Gold*, 4.

41. Dương Thu Hương, *Zenith*, 491.

42. Dương Thu Hương, *Zenith*, 501.



dwells there? Dương Thu Hương's works gestures toward an answer that does not only have to do with a haunting of memories or a preoccupation of an imagined place but with the idea that such a place is embedded in the fabric of one's biology, one's very flesh. This is precisely the sentiment evoked when the President describes his connection with the nation: "Because we are born in this land, a muddy unhappy acre of dirt. Because the thin, resonating cord of the nation's soul vibrates in mine . . . penetrat[ing] all my cells, from my skin, my blood and my bones."<sup>43</sup> This grants new meaning to the way that we might read Vietnamese and Vietnamese American literature that consider violence, loss, and the aftermath of war. Indeed, the ravaged landscape of Vietnam in the wake of Agent Orange, of napalm-burned villages and mass graves, render visceral the living casualties of war. In the imagery of Vietnam aflame, the relationship between human and environment is fraught, not only because of the direct consequences of political actions that lead to war but also because regardless of how the land is transformed, the Vietnamese feel nevertheless so inherently bound to it. What do we make of destruction when it is caused by humans, and when we feel the consequence of that destruction as if it were on our own flesh? These are the difficult questions that emerge when we consider the relationships drawn in Duong Thu Huong's novels, between humans and between humans and the bio- and metaphysical world. As she shifts ecocritical representations of Vietnam away from war-torn landscapes and puts the Vietnamese in a larger context of universal karma, any sides of the war (North and South) are eliminated as well as the distinction of being Vietnamese and non-Vietnamese. As beings who seek belonging, we are bound together by a bond to a shared geography and a shared earth. It is the very filial bond that touches all living creatures mentioned in the early pages of *The Zenith*. And yet, despite, or perhaps because of such a bond, we as humans cannot fully control or manipulate the land or the beings connected to us. We are perhaps called to think about our relationships with the world around us, and with one another, beyond ones of mastery, ownership, or control (with a possessive 's) but of humility, influence and relationality.

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43. Dương Thu Hương, *Zenith*, 491.

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