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Quê Hương

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ETHAN TÍNH TRỊNH

14. QUÊ HƯƠNG

I have not recovered yet from an illness, I thus took a week off from work to recover. I am sitting alone in a small apartment when a chilly breeze reminds me that fall is here in Georgia, United States (U.S.). Whenever I stop working, I am alone. Whenever I am alone, I think about Vietnam. Even though my physical body is in Georgia, my mind always travels back to Vietnam. Every time I miss *quê hương*, I whisper the poem/song “*Quê hương*” written by Vietnamese poet Đỗ Trung Quân. The melancholy, the loneliness, and the fatigue control my body and make it difficult for my fingers to type on the keyboard. The fabrics of liminal space in this apartment, in this country, freeze my soul and body. I cannot move anywhere else beyond this space. However, listening to *Quê hương* (Nguyen, 2010) heals the dryness of my soul, watering it for recovery.

“*Quê hương* mỗi người chỉ một
Như là chỉ một Mẹ thôi
Quê hương nếu ai không nhớ
Sẽ không lớn nổi thành người”

Quê hương everyone has only one
It’s like you only have one mother
Quê hương, if you don’t remember
You won’t grow up as a human being

My translation for this poem/song is raw, rocky, and unsmooth. I admit my weakness in translating Vietnamese into English. I spent time finding a “good” translation for each word; I spent time thinking whether my translation successfully described what the author truly meant; I hesitated in this translation, in my *own* language. I think I failed in this translation. I did not want to give an English version at first, but the readers, specifically Vietnamese-Americans, will appreciate this raw attempt because it could help them trace lost identities of language and history. In addition, translating is a political act; it is not just linguistic translation; instead, it is an expansion of a soul, memories, culture, and politics into each word. Translating is not a skill, it is a wholeness of identities of one’s life. Therefore, for the rest of this essay, I will not italicize the word *quê hương* or any Vietnamese words because this is my claim as an act of resistance against the western academic writing style I am trained to publish in.

Quê hương means “country” or “homeland” in English, but the English translation sets physical, linguistic, and emotional boundaries for immigrants like us. For Vietnamese people, these English translations do not fully embrace or describe the authenticity, complexity, and richness of the word itself as our *quê hương* transcends physical spaces or boundaries. Likewise, it is hard and burdensome to describe my *nỗi nhớ quê hương* (or missing one’s country). This phrase sounds as complex as it means. It is complex in a way that I write about my country in a host country. It is complex in a way that I do not know if I still belong to my home country when I am now holding a different identity in my driver’s license. It is complex in a way that I stand in-between spaces of political borders between two countries (i.e. the U.S. and Vietnam). I thus get lost in my *nỗi nhớ quê hương*. I thus get lost in an act of translation. In fact, it has been five years since I stopped reading Vietnamese literature; I feel I am not competent at neither writing nor explaining in my home language. But one thing for sure is that I miss my *quê hương* now.

This *nỗi nhớ quê hương* (missing one’s country) is different from the *nỗi nhớ* my mom used to feel when she was waiting for my dad at the cemetery while he was away from Vietnam after the 1986’s Vietnamese Economic Reform. In 2018, as I wrote my autoethnography, *How*

hugging mom teaches me the meaning of love and perhaps beyond, I spoke from my heart and critical mind to give agency to Vietnamese moms and other women of color who suffer from domestic violence and abuse. In that autoethnographic piece, I wrote to challenge societal patriarchy, which causes open, unhealed, intergenerational wounds. In addition, I described the different phases of *nỗi nhớ* in different contexts. However, in the chapter of this book, I use the term *nỗi nhớ* to express emotions, feelings, and oftentimes hopelessness, experienced by the children who have to travel far away from their homelands, as well as by those who are unable to come back to their homelands for political and financial reasons. Further, I prefer to not theorize in this piece. This sounds academic and distant to Vietnamese peoples and non-academic readers if they suddenly run into this space. The more theory and academic words I use, the more I push and distance myself and my peoples far away from our *quê hương*. I thus want to stay true to my feelings, my soul, my stories, my translation. Finally, before discovering what *quê hương* looks like, I ask you to *co*-imagine with me, so we can return to our *quê hương* at the end of this piece.

QUÊ HƯƠNG IS OUT OF REACH

Since I immigrated to the United States (U.S.), often called the land of opportunities, in 2015, I have experienced a mixture of feelings. The complexity of emotions, feelings, misery, insecurity, oppositionality, insider-outsider binary has been weaving, squeezing my heart and my mind, bringing me to moments of silence where I just sit still and face vulnerabilities—by myself. I acknowledge I was privileged to know English when I arrived here; I also acknowledge my privilege of having a shelter to stay during the first few months after arrival and being able to afford a car to drive to work. However, I acknowledge that I had no *quê hương* to go back to. My parents sold our small house in Vietnam before we headed to the United States. Probably, when we decided to leave Vietnam, we decided to cut off our physical and emotional attachments to *quê hương*. The unknown and unspoken meaning of “the land of opportunities” held the utmost power, which pushed us to eradicate our identities, our attachment to come back to *quê hương*. On the day we stepped onto the plane to the U.S. in December 2015, our tears were left behind, hugs were left behind, attachments were left behind—on the soil of Vietnam. We committed to leaving. Our *quê hương* is now too far, far away in space and time—out of reach—to go back.

I think I need to take a break to b r e a t h e...

The melancholy, the loneliness, and the fatigue overwhelmingly control my body and it is making it difficult for my fingers to type on the keyboard.

QUÊ HƯƠNG IS FRAGMENTS OF CULTURAL VALUES

I am whispering, following with its melodic song “*Quê hương*.” This song is such a beautiful lullaby that lures me to sleep, to fly back to a childhood memory—a rice field where farmers were harvesting the fully ripe grains. This song also flies me to wooden cottages where we, Vietnamese kids, were flying colorful paper kites in the sky, the sky of freedom, of childhood, of ice creams. In this memory, we were also playing a *năm mươi* game where one person closes their eyes, then the rest of us find a place to hide. We were laughing out loud, chasing each other until all of us were exhausted. Then we were lying on the hay, smelling the dryness of the grass and the smoke coming from the grass being burned by the farmers at the end of a working day. My friends and I were giggling, looking at the blue sky, telling each other what we wanted to do when we grew up. Then we were given *mía* by the local farmers. *Mía* is a Mekong Delta’s

tropical stem with its green skin outside, but the sweetness could quench our thirst after playing games. Mía soon became an exquisite drink that we, the village children, would often crave. Lying down, having mía, we were singing *bắc kim thang*, a folk song in the South of Vietnam, which tells a story we did not fully understand, but we learned the lyrics by heart since we were little. The memories from the song, the heat in the field, the laughter during and after the game have been always there, staying in a special place within me, my parents, and other Vietnamese immigrants who left the country for whatever reason. These memories will probably stay with us until our last breath. Further, the memories will be shared with our future generations so that they can know a bit about their parents and their ancestors in Vietnam.

The song “*Quê hương*” is still playing, my childhood’s memories are being retrieved and are coming alive; they are flying me to a dreamy land in Mekong Delta, Vietnam. Mekong Delta is beautiful in a way that only children from this region can understand and appreciate. Mekong Delta, in my memories, was peaceful; there were no skyscrapers, there were no luxury cars. It was, and still is, beautiful in its own way.

I miserably love and miss the feeling of when I was a kid, sitting on a small-sized, tightly-woven, bamboo boat, which my grandma called *xuồng*. My grandma was a great paddler; she was skillful at propelling *xuồng*, steering it beautifully so that I could place my tiny hands into the cold water and play with it. My grandma always sang “*Quê hương*” while she was paddling; the sound, the scene, the voice, all of which intertwined and has become an important piece in my heart then and now.

“*Quê hương là con diều biếc
Tuổi thơ con thả trên đồng
Quê hương là con đò nhỏ
Êm đềm khua nước ven sông*”

*Quê hương is a kite
Your childhood is a kite, you fly it in the field
Quê hương is a small boat
Quietly moving but echoing in a river*

Quê hương is fragments of cultural values, of pieces of childhood memories, sounds, voices, images, places that we—Vietnamese immigrants, Vietnamese-Americans, and other immigrants—preciously call “home.” Even though we live in a distant space where we are far away from our homelands, even though we are being isolated and disconnected from our own home language, even though we cannot sit on a boat to play with the cold water or fly a kite in the field, our memories about our homelands, our *quê hương* are not eradicated, regardless of the power of the country that we are residing, i.e. The United States of America.

QUÊ HƯƠNG IS A LOST DREAM

I am writing, continuing to listen to the song. Suddenly, I hear the sound of an airplane in the sky. The sound reminds me of the flight our family had taken in 2015; the flight that (dis)connected us between two worlds: the U.S. and Vietnam. It was such a long 24-hour flight; the flight that brought me to the world that everyone in Vietnam has dreamt of but, at the same time, the flight that took me away from my homeland, my country, my *quê hương*. Before taking off, I got a tattoo with the date we left our country; the same day our family stepped on a Korean airline and left *quê hương* behind, even though I already had my dream job. I had been teaching English as a Second Language for five years in Vietnam, but my dad insisted, “*Đi đi, qua Mỹ sẽ có tương lai hơn!*” (Go, go to America, it will be a better future!). Similar to the pronoun *it* in his sentence, which is unknown and unclear, our future remained the same.

We, as a family, could not define how better the future would be, except for the fact that we all came to this country with a suitcase of hope, of a better future, and a “*work hard and you will achieve anything*” ideology. None of us in the family at that time knew what would await us; we were strangers in this land of opportunities; the land where people would sacrifice anything to come to, even their lives. Our family had been waiting for thirteen years to get a visa to this country. “What is the difference between quê hương here and there?” I myself wondered that before we came to the United States. However, no one has ever asked me if I had Vietnamese dreams. I understand American dreams are powerful, unspoken statements, ideologies, and the reasons why immigrants come for. Nonetheless, we immigrants still have our dreams, too, but ours seem to be silenced and unvoiced in the power of a dominant country where new immigrants struggle to navigate and (re)settle. In the moments of struggles and negotiations in terms of languages and identities, whether staying or leaving, we find different ways to survive and thrive.

QUÊ HƯƠNG IS A REBELLION TO ASSIMILATIONS

Assimilation is a process in which a person who comes to a host country has to give up their own identities in terms of language, culture, original names, and accents. The power of assimilation is huge, irresistible, dangerous, and toxic to each immigrant, whether you agree with me or not. I used to lose myself in the assimilation process.

When I first came to the U.S., the first thing I did was to reject my language. In other words, I chose to only speak the language of this country, American English, so that English speakers would not discriminate against me because of where I came from. I spoke English with pride so that I could hide my identities. I spoke English to assimilate into this country. I wrote and thought about everything in English. I put all my Vietnamese books away, inside a suitcase, to train myself to think and speak “as an American.” The suitcase that I brought from Vietnam, which contained Vietnamese books, dreams, hopes, was replaced with (self) hatred and shame.

I lost myself to the assimilation process—quickly and completely.

.....

But, after a long process of unpacking my identities, I am now learning how to unlearn the assimilation process. By reclaiming my uniqueness, my immigration status, my languages, my accentedness, I am proud of who I am. One of the things I am doing to unlearn assimilation behaviors is to bring my culture into my scholarly work. As you can see, I am attempting to bring Vietnamese music in this piece; I want to add this beautiful cultural piece into academic western literature as well. In a piece I wrote about hugging my mom and how her eternal love teaches me social justice and equality, the very first piece of myself that was published in a western archive, I found the courage to use bài hát ru con, a Vietnamese folk song, as a starting point of my story. This time, I am finding that courage again, holding my breath, attempting to weave “Quê hương” into this space. I feel comfortable, safe, and home-y since parts of my identities will be appreciated here. I am feeling this space will accept and welcome me back to my quê hương, my homeland, my language, my Vietnamese-ness, and Asian-ness. I am feeling that I am coming back to Vietnam; I am sitting on xuồng where my grandma is steering on the water. I am coming back home in this space, and I hope you are coming home, too.

Another reason I attempt to add Vietnamese dân ca (or folk songs) into the western literature is because I truly want to build a bridge to connect with hyphenated Vietnamese people

who are living inside and outside of the U.S., or for those who are living a life between two separate countries, like me. Writing this piece creates a space for people like us to come back to our cultures and appreciate our language and memories. I, therefore, urge you to consider bringing beautiful, unique cultural values into your future pieces of writing. I, therefore, urge you to feel proud of your mother tongues, your heritage, your homeland, your quê hương's language because they are invaluable assets in each of us—regardless of whether you have successfully passed the naturalization test in your host country, changed your name, and/or put a hyphen in the middle of your nationality, Vietnamese-American for instance.

There are words that I want to keep in Vietnamese ways; I refuse to translate them into English. Because if I do, I am afraid, I could not express what quê hương truly is. Because if I do, I would lose my identity, my language, my memories again. This time, if I do, I would lose them forever. I would forever give up my soul and mind to the language of the colonizers. I refuse to do so. I am still a Vietnamese child who was born and grew up in Vietnam. I am, thus, my quê hương. I am, thus, my language.

QUÊ HƯƠNG IS RELATIONAL

Even though there are different interpretations of what quê hương looks like and how is viewed, I have my own connections with this simple phrase. I prefer not to bring demographic statistics in this essay because I am not good at using statistics to tell a story; I am not a quantitative person. However, throughout this chapter, we have *co*-imagined what my quê hương looks like. Our five senses were awakened to taste the sweetness of sugar cane (mía), to hear the laughter of the kids, to smell the liveliness of grass hay, to touch the cold, fresh water in the river, and to visualize the simplicity and beautifulness of parts of my quê hương. I thus hope I could unfold parts of your quê hương by sharing mine. I truly hope that I removed the rigidity and stricture of academics to liberate us from the liminal, physical space of this country and fly us to our own quê hương. Quê hương is no longer a personal sentiment, but quê hương is now relational to all of us who shared parts of our identities, our nỗi nhớ quê hương together.

As we have come this far together, I am curious, “What does quê hương look like in you, who are far away from your quê hương?” You do not have to answer right now, but we will find another space for this question. Now, I need to rest my eyes, my mind, my fingers, and turn on the song “Quê Hương,” or simply just take a meditation walk (Trinh, 2020) so I can get some physical, emotional, and spiritual recovery.

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