

## Book Review

**Thơ Kể: Tuyển Tập Thơ Tân Hình Thức Ấn Bản Song Ngữ (Poetry Narrates: An Anthology of Vietnamese New Formalism Poetry A Bilingual Edition). Edited by Khế Iêm in cooperation with Carol Compton (Garden Grove: Tan Hinh Thuc Publishing Group. pp. 269. ISBN 9780977874231.)**

In *Thơ Kể* (*Poetry Narrates*), Khế Iêm in cooperation with Carol Compton presents a representative sampling of New Formalist Poetry (*Thơ Tân Hình Thức*) in Tiếng Việt and English. In comparison to the American movement from which it draws its name, the rather successful New Formalist Poetry movement arose out of a distinct need to address the issue of belonging to an increasingly complex community under the umbrella of Vietnamese-ness. This review argues in favor of the collection's relevance to students, while also exploring some of the key images of the poems that speak in favor of marginalized voices in the cultural milieu bridging the gap between the United States and Vietnam.

Students of Southeast Asia, Vietnam, and literature will be impressed with the ease of exploration evoked by the free verse of the English sections, while readers and students of Tiếng Việt will be impressed with the very nearly *trường ca*, or lyrical style relayed and made accessible. This is not to say that the poems are composed as traditional *trường ca*, but rather that their style is generally metered and can be very nearly sung when recited in a mellifluous fashion. Less advanced readers of Vietnamese may find it useful to read the English translations first, before immersing themselves in the Vietnamese text. Meanwhile, higher level readers would profit from having the English translations ready for reference.

Stretching far beyond the already popular image of the *người tau* (boat people), this collection is dominated by memories of Saigon street life, reminiscent of the experience of figures such as the *người ba lô* (backpacker) who has the need to *đi phượt* (travel by motorcycle while sleeping in the open air) in order to go see the *Quỳnh* (blooming cactus) of the night (163, 205). Major themes

often include a perception of poverty, rain, loneliness, and isolation. In this sense we are seeing an emergent identity of the poetic community that stems from the successes, the trials and tribulations, and the triumphant failures of life in the dusty lanes of modern Vietnam. Here rural Vietnamese-ness, urban depressionism, and international ghosts are the inquirers of these verses, which connect Saigon to Bolsa, the Vietnamese capital of Westminister Country in California.

Silence is another dominant theme evoked by the conception that poets are relating the voice of the voiceless. The questions asked of Bolsa and Saigon are rarely answered, but rather left to hang in between the lines, and in this silence there is a world of imagery; of death, of mothers, of tears, of life, of ciet (small cases used for carrying books popularly used by rural school children), and holier things (29, 129). It is in these translations of images that readers begin to feign an understanding of Vietnamese culture at the margins, where we are finally seeing the voice of người dân tộc (minorities) as having a voice in the construction of contemporary Vietnamese identity.

The Phan Khế translations of the thơ Inrasara, such as in the poem *Poisonous Dreams* (131), place the visceral experience of the lives of the người dân tộc particularly associated with the Central Highlands into a context that is contemporaneous with images of the karmic cycle; “Do It Again!” where the intricacies of things Not Belonging-to-Us and those which Belong-to-Us perhaps retain a sense of Us in the Belonging since they are Not-Us, and we are told to “Seek” them out (65). In reflection, readers might wonder which them or it we are trying to seek. By remembering that this collection heralds poets like the recluse Trần Vũ Khang (145), we might see that we are simply looking at a cross section of authors who view the world through a particularly unique lens.

Thơ Kể represents a promising contribution to Asian and Asian American studies by offering an opportunity for a cultural and linguistic exploration into the contemporary Vietnamese identity. In the construction of this identity, the poetry in this volume not only engages in the romantic imagery of modern Vietnam and California, but also in the very real desperation that is part of the experience of the poetic community. Thus, the poetic community of Vietnamese New Formalism demonstrates that the studies of poetry, Vietnam,

minority rights, immigrant communities, and cross cultural identity are still major issues in Asian Studies. They do so by blending concepts familiar to Vietnamese in the United States, Americans in Vietnam, and other minority identities operating within this cross cultural network.

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