

Passion, Betrayal and Revolution in Colonial Saigon. The Memoirs of Bao Luong

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Author:

Hue-Tam Ho Tai

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Susan Bayly

Historians with an interest in personal and public memory know a great deal about the challenges entailed in attempting to document the affective contours of past and present lives. Achieving knowledge of women's subjectivities in settings of perilously contested modernity demands particular skill, especially when using texts and other memory objects that may have originated as commodities or political tools, as well as sites of intimate self-making.

Such research has often brought historians into alliance with anthropologists, especially in projects focusing on the negotiation of personal and official truths in revolutionary and colonial or postcolonial contexts. While India specialists like Veena Das have been major contributors in this area, the Harvard historian Hue-Tam Ho Tai has done much to establish Vietnam as another potent site for the study of lived and remembered 'critical events'. She was the editor of *The Country of Memory. Remaking the Past in Late Socialist Vietnam* (1), which was much acclaimed, its mix of historical and ethnographic treatment of such materials as prison diaries and museum displays providing powerful insight into Vietnamese experiences of war, revolution and 'late-socialist' marketisation.

In her new monograph *Passion, Betrayal and Revolution in Colonial Saigon*, Hue-Tam Ho Tai adds yet more to our understanding of the ways in which revolutionary and postcolonial states may be thought of as 'countries of memory', that is as sites where recollected and imagined pasts can be sources of both empowerment and danger for those engaging with personal or official memory projects. The book's focus is the enigmatic life of Professor Tai's remarkable kinswoman, the early 20th-century Vietnamese

revolutionary Bao Luong (1909–76). In her 1920s youth, Bao Luong was a contemporary of some of the leading lights of Indochina's early Communist-led anticolonial resistance movement: a photograph of her as a teenage prisoner flanked by menacing French policemen is on display in the 'Women in History' gallery of Hanoi's Vietnam Women's Museum.

The book invites reflection on a wide range of issues relating to the study of personal and collective life experience in turbulent times. Among those Professor Tai may wish to comment on through *Reviews in History's* reviewer-author dialogue format is the question of what challenges she faced in the handling of materials connecting her research goals to a personal and familial past. This is one of the most striking features of what she describes as her 'experiment in hybridization', a bold attempt to tease out something personal and vividly atmospheric from such documents as colonial interrogation records and press reports, together with Professor Tai's own memories of Bao Luong's later life, and above all a set of especially rich though problematic sources: the memoirs – both manuscripts and much-modified published versions – written by and about Bao Luong many years after the events they recount, including her experiences of imprisonment and torture at the hands of the French colonial authorities.

So the book is an attempt to capture something of its protagonist's youthful subjectivity by mixing passages of explanatory contextualisation with vividly narrativised reconstructions of Bao Luong's revolutionary experiences. These are presented as direct renderings of her speech, thoughts and impressions, despite the many barriers obscuring anything one might think of as unmediated individual voice or testimony in these materials – apart, that is, from Professor Tai's sparse but compelling comments on her own interactions with Bao Luong in later life, as well as the processes through which the memoirs were produced and transmitted.

It is fascinating to be told about Professor Tai's memories of Bao Luong, whom she knew in her Saigon childhood in as an embodiment of rustic pre-revolutionary 'good family' conventions, gleaned only fragmentary hints from other close relations that her decorum-conscious aunt had once led the life of a resistance activist and feminist role model. Particularly tantalising here is Hue-Tam Ho Tai's account of her aunt actually involved in the act of producing the handwritten personal memoir on which most of her account is based.

A key point of interest for me is the intriguing comparison between Prof. Tai's descriptions of Bao Luong's initially unshared acts of memory production 50 years ago, and the emphatically non-private sharing of narrativised family information I encountered in the course of my own recent Vietnam fieldwork. Working with Hanoi intelligentsia households, I found that the telling and retelling of a kindred's life stories could serve as a means of affirming and reproducing the distinctive qualities of agency defining such families as enduring moral units, their stock of remembered familial information a kind of resource that could be of significant value in the negotiation of a dangerously insecure world.⁽²⁾ What Professor Tai's study reminds us is that there are equally important things to learn from a focus on the critical moments of decision-making which arise as previously unarticulated memories and personal histories are translated into public voicings and narratives.

Acts of composition and text production pervade the whole book in ways that alert us to the capacity of both the voiced and unvoiced word to serve as refuge, mask or aesthetic object. I would have preferred a presentation strategy providing clearer indications of where the book's passages of conversation and narrative derive directly from Bao Luong's memoirs, and perhaps also a fuller account of how Professor Tai made her decisions to amplify her text with material drawn from additional sources, including memoirs by other family members as well as the police reports Professor Tai says she used to cross-check and clarify her story. It would be especially good to have her reflections on the use of Bao Luong's interrogation records, some clearly containing details extracted under torture. I admire Professor Tai's sensitive handling of these difficult sources. But I wish that space had permitted the provision of extracts from these documents, thereby conveying something of the terms in which they represented Bao Luong herself, and the revolutionary milieu in which she was operating. Indeed given their obvious value as sources of insight into the grimmer forms of colonial discursive practice, one would welcome discussion of how they come across as reportage texts in their own right, for example what can be learned from the specifics of their language use, and the no

doubt brutal distinctiveness of their narrativisation and knowledge production techniques.

A further question here is to do with the conventions and models that may have shaped the various writing projects undertaken by Bao Luong and the other individuals whose published and unpublished works are mentioned in the book. We do learn important things about the nature and construction of the Bao Luong memoirs, including the role played in their composition by the editors who evidently did much to elicit and reshape the texts before they appeared in published form.

Apparently these Vietnamese publishers made much the same choice Prof Tai did, that is to leave out both Bao Luong's numerous poems, and the extensive passages of political comment and philosophical reflections contained in her original manuscript. This in itself is interesting: does it reflect a view of the excluded material as either too unremarkable or alternatively too much out of step with the politics of the times for inclusion in a state-controlled media publication? Or does it indicate the view of those responsible for publishing the versions of the memoirs that appeared intriguingly both during and long after the 1962–73 anti-US war, that as a woman writer, Bao Luong's reflections were thought to be of interest only on issues to do with her inner life and immediate experiences?

On this as on other issues arising here, what is evident is that this a book providing much food for thought on the dilemmas of translation in its many forms and variants. Indeed in many ways the book is a fascinating instance of convergence between the two forms of translation defined by Maria Tymoczko as distinct though interpenetrating embodiments of intercultural work: those of the interlingual translator, and the various acts of glossing and framing that can be identified as translation-like in the work of the postcolonial literateur.[\(3\)](#)

Thus one such translation challenge that we can see being intriguingly grappled with in *Passion, Betrayal and Revolution* is that of translating between genres. I have in mind here the problems entailed in transforming personal 'ego narratives' into source texts, especially if one bears in mind the many ways in which diaries and memoirs are known to be constructed in settings both within and beyond those of the 20th-century socialist world, i.e. as everything from ostensibly private confessional texts to public documents ghostwritten as instruments of didactic exemplarship and propaganda.[\(4\)](#)

There are also the challenges faced by all translators in moving between divergent linguistic realms. Many Vietnamese language conventions are well known to defy idiomatic English rendering, as in the case of the jocular wordplay and allusions to proverbs and poetic couplets that convey both tone and meaning in everyday speech and prose. Professor Tai's decision to exclude her remarkable protagonist's poetry and political reflections from her text is perfectly understandable, but since one imagines that these might be sources of additional insight into Bao Luong's imaginative life and knowledge of the wider revolutionary world, it would be fascinating to know what Professor Tai herself thought of these sections of the memoirs. Were they polished or artless? Do they bespeak a sophisticated voice and political sense, or are they dull and conventionalised, perhaps merely a recapitulation of established models for the expression of patriotic aims and sentiments?

Readers may find these exclusions all the more tantalising since Professor Tai repeatedly tells us that the youthful patriots whose emotion-charged interactions are described in the book spent much of their time engaging in sessions of versification and couplet-capping. To have had more comment about how such games are played, and what the many references to such exchanges might suggest about both the source texts and the world in which they were produced would have made her recreation of Bao Luong's thoughts and experiences all the more informative.

I would thus have welcomed fuller discussion of what light Professor Tai thinks the memoirs' references to poems and poetic exchanges throw on the way these autobiographical writings came into being, that is as the memoirs of a woman writing in late middle age about events occurring 40 years in the past. This might have entailed expanding in more depth on her intriguing suggestions about the text's complex array of aims and purposes, one of which would appear to have been Bao Luong's wish to proclaim her own vision of key scenes from her youth in terms tacitly challenging what others had said and thought about her, reconstituting

the dramatic events she had lived through as occurring in a world where brutal deeds were framed and moralised through experiences of ardour and creativity.

The book contains compelling vignettes of such moments, as in the evocation of a female revolutionary cell's night-long debate about the use of poetry to spread the message of resistance to an unlettered populace. This is of great interest as an account of young cadres actually engaging in the kind of collective cultural work more commonly represented in the study of socialist societies as a matter of initiatives undertaken from on high by hegemonic 'cultural producers'. Yet even a few fragments of the actual poems alluded to here would have enhanced these glimpses of the intimacies and political enactments of a revolutionary's life in this distinctive early 20th-century Asian milieu.

As to other significant language issues, those unfamiliar with Vietnam may be puzzled or even irritated by such renderings as the use of 'Miss' in the book's graphic prison scenes to translate the mode of address apparently recorded in the memoirs as having been used by Vietnamese guards in speaking to a young female torture victim. In fact, although the author does not say this explicitly, one can infer something of the translation choices that were made here, reflective of the many subtle ways Vietnamese speakers use personal pronouns such as those roughly translatable as 'young sister', 'respected young lady' or 'dear little one' to signal degrees of formality, warmth or sympathy between individuals.

These points relate to a further aspect of a translator's challenges: how to show that one's inevitable excisions and compromises have been duly but not over-anxiously reflected on. In this case too, Hue-Tam Ho Tai offers some stimulating reflections on these issues. But I believe that readers would have been glad of even more such discussion, not only of such things as the implications of some of the source texts' specific person-reference usages, but also a more general account of what kind of Vietnamese the source texts are written in. Given that the key source deployed here is such a rich example of an ex-revolutionary commenting on her early life in the form of an extended personal memoir (one that is all the more interesting because of its complex history of having been significantly modified for publication), one's appreciation of the hard work done by Professor Tai to bring her project to fruition would have been even greater if she had been allowed the space to comment in greater detail on some of these issues – for example, whether the Bao Luong memoirs compare or contrast in interesting ways with other past and more recent examples of postcolonial and post-socialist 'ego narrative' publication.

One might take examples from the numerous diaries and memoirs now being published in Vietnam, many of them strikingly unlike the narrowly formulaic 'self-narratives' of the high-socialist era. A notable case in point is the worldwide publishing sensation generated by the appearance both in Vietnam and internationally of the diary of Dr. Dang Thuy Tram, a young woman medic killed by US forces in 1970. The remarkable reaction to the Tram volume has been discussed as an instance of the apparent depoliticisation of the Vietnamese diary genre, its author widely represented as a universal embodiment of 'love and perseverance amidst deprivation', making her a persona in tune with Vietnam's new life of incorporation into the affective regimens and unequal power relations of a globalised world's mass-market knowledge practices.[\(5\)](#)

Of all the translation dilemmas facing the author, however, probably the most challenging will have been that of making intelligible to a present-day anglophone readership the acts and reflections of a teenage female revolutionary of the 1920s, given the enormous leap of imagination this calls for in today's post-ideology 'end of history' era. In meeting this challenge, *Passion, Betrayal and Revolution* has much to offer as an attempt to reconstruct the emotional tones and textures of a revolutionary's life. Readers will undoubtedly be moved and gripped by Professor Tai's graphic narrativisations of such events as Bao Luong's daring stowaway journey to China, there to be initiated into activist life among the followers and rivals of Ho Chi Minh's Canton [Guangzhou]-based Revolutionary Youth League. Equally compelling is its account of the horrors of colonial prison life in French-ruled Indochina, significantly amplifying what we know from Peter Zinoman's work [\(6\)](#) through its recreation of the distinctive world of incarcerated women in the early nationalist era.[\(7\)](#)

What will probably excite the greatest interest, however, is the book's handling of the many-layered puzzle

of Bao Luong's involvement in the web of conspiracy and double-dealing surrounding a lurid 1928 killing in colonial Saigon in which one of her senior male comrades was killed by his fellow cell members. This was the notorious Barbier Street murder, around which a Rashomon-like array of divergent accounts has subsequently taken shape, thus inviting comparison with the cases of multiply narrativised violence explored in works such as Ann Stoler's *Carnal Knowledge*.⁽⁸⁾

In the case of the Barbier Street events, we are offered an equally striking study of the conflicting representations that may be projected onto a colonial society's 'critical events' along the frontiers of contested racial and sexual politics. And, intriguingly, since this was a world of bewilderingly complex movements between real and assumed identities and self-representations, the revolutionaries themselves were evidently active agents in this process, first concealing the killing's real or purported motivation by representing it as an apolitical crime of passion, then proclaiming it in court as a principled act of people's justice.

Yet the fact that the murder may in reality have entailed both the elimination of a renegade comrade by his fellow cell members and a power struggle between rival resistance factions abetted by a paid police informer makes it clear why the case has remained a sensitive matter in post-independence Vietnam. And what the book also makes apparent is that the whiff of treachery and sexual impropriety surrounding the case left Bao Luong in the unhappy limbo of an ex-revolutionary who could not be hailed as a patriotic heroine because of the enduring afterlife of her comrades' and colonial prosecutors' representation of her as the killing's Jezebel-like axis. What thus emerges very strikingly from the Bao Luong story are the powerful tensions they reveal between a Communist movement's claims about female activists as emancipated sharers in revolutionary life, and the often painful reality of their situation as expendable objects of male comrades' desires.⁽⁹⁾

The question of the various changes the text underwent as a result of editorial interventions is something Hue-Tam Ho Tai does address in her account, including the difference between its politically suggestive initial title and the patronisingly gendered heading under which it appeared when it was reissued some years later. Here too, had space permitted, I would have welcomed more analytical comment on these intriguing complexities, and also perhaps a greater degree of comparison. Given her expert knowledge of Vietnam's pre-independence political milieu, it would have been good to have had Professor Tai's reflections on how these aspects of the Bao Luong story and its representations compare with accounts of women's lives and writings in other revolutionary and insurgent contexts. There are many such possibilities, for example early Maoist circles in China, or the Indian, Algerian or pre-independence Indonesian anticolonial settings explored by scholars such as Frances Gouda, from whom we learn a great deal about the ways in which revolutionaries could both embrace and contest home-grown and Western understandings of female qualities as either inspiring or dangerously antithetical to the ethos and lifestyle of the dedicated freedom fighter.⁽¹⁰⁾

In the introduction to their edited volume entitled *The Intimate Archive*, M. Dever, A. Vickery and S. Newman observe that the exploration of 'self-representational writing' makes possible 'the contemplation of the fragmentary nature of the biographical subject as well as the fragmentary nature of our sources', particularly with regard to the frustrating elusiveness of women in the more conventional archival sources available to historians.⁽¹¹⁾ In her compelling and often harrowing book, Professor Tai shows us that 'self-representational writings' can be much more than mere demonstrations of our conventional archives' deficiencies. *Passion, Betrayal and Revolution* adds very considerably to our literature on the power-laden processes of remembrance and 'ego narrative' in contexts both exemplifying and transcending those familiar to scholars of Asia's distinctive colonial and insurgent revolutionary contexts. I am confident that it will be a widely read work inspiring comment and debate within and beyond Vietnam history and anthropology, and I hope that my comments will stand as an expression of my enthusiasm for the many ways in which it surprises, challenges and enlightens.

Notes

1. *The Country of Memory. Remaking the Past in Late Socialist Vietnam*, ed. Hue-Tam Ho Tai (Berkeley, CA, 2001).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. S. Bayly, *Asian Voices in a Postcolonial Age. Vietnam, India and Beyond*. (Cambridge, 2007).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. M. Tymoczko, 'Post-colonial writing and literary translation', in *Post-colonial Translation Theory and Practice*, ed. S. Bassnett and H. Trivedi (London, 1999) pp. 19–40.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. See for example Jochen Hellbeck's accounts of Soviet diaries as a distinctively modern form of productive expression, with diarists enacting and sharing with others the struggle to cultivate a new revolutionary selfhood through the dynamic processes of 'ego narrative' (e.g. Hellbeck, 2004, 'The diary between literature and history', *The Russian Review*, 63, 621–9). For Vietnam, Duy Lap Nguyen documents the writing of both diaries and poetry by young army recruits as tools in the production of an equally transformative 'libidinal economy'. ('The *Kiem Thao* and the uses of disposable time in the National Liberation Front', *Public Culture* 20, 2, 375–94, 387–9). See also Peter Zinoman's chapter in *The Country of Memory* on the formulaic production of 20th-century Vietnamese prison diaries for purposes of official memory creation.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. This is despite the fact that Dr. Tram was in no sense a dissident or secret critic of her country's war effort, notwithstanding the misleadingly sentimentalised title used for the book's US edition, *Last Night I Dreamed of Peace*. See Vo Hong Chuong-Dai, 'Memories that bind. Dang Thuy Tram's diaries as agents of reconciliation', *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 2008 3:2, 196-207, 201; further aspects of the Dr. Tram phenomenon are discussed in this Journal's special 2008 forum issue.[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Peter Zinoman, *The Colonial Bastille* (Berkeley, CA, 2001).[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. The scenes of Bao Luong struggling to survive as a political prisoner of comparatively privileged upbringing among bullying 'subaltern' female convicts compares intriguingly with K.Visweswaran's account of the far milder travails of middle-class nationalist women in India's colonial prisons. See 'Small speeches, subaltern gender', in *Subaltern Studies No. 9. Writings on South Asian History and Society*, ed. S. Amin & D. Chakrabarty (Delhi, 1996), pp. 83–125.[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. I have in mind here Stoler's gripping account of the case of a Franco-Vietnamese youth indicted for assaulting a German sailor in colonial Haiphong: this too is a fascinating clash of narratives and represented identities, with the defence representing the attack as an act of patriotism inspired by the boy's expatriate French father; in the prosecution's account, he was a miscegenated 'native' of dubious paternity who had endangered colonial moral order in presuming to lay hands on a white man.[Back to \(8\)](#)
9. See S. Quinn-Judge, 'Women in the early Vietnamese communist movement: sex, Lies and liberation', *South East Asia Research*. 9, 3 (2001), 245–69.[Back to \(9\)](#)
10. F. Gouda, 'Militant masculinity and female agency in Indonesian nationalism, 1945–1949', in *Colonialism and the Modern World. Selected Studies*, ed. G. Blue, M. Bunton and R. Croizier (New York, NY, 2002), pp. 200–18.[Back to \(10\)](#)
11. *The Intimate Archive. Journeys through Private Papers*, ed. M. Dever, A. Vickery and S. Newman (Canberra, 2009).[Back to \(11\)](#)

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