

11-15-2018

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Recommended Citation

Huynh, Michelle V. (2018) "The Virtue in Propaganda: A Dramatic Play," *Mānoa Horizons*: Vol. 3 : Iss. 1 , Article 11.

Available at: <https://kahualike.manoa.hawaii.edu/horizons/vol3/iss1/11>

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The Virtue in Propaganda

A Dramatic Play

MICHELLE V. HUYNH

Honors Thesis (English, Theater)

Mentors: Dr. Glenn Man, Dr. Markus Wessendorf, Dr. Elizabeth Wichmann-Walczak, and Dr. Ruth Hsu

We have all learned about the controversies, brutalities, and legalities of the Vietnam War. However, an aspect we never learn about is of the Vietnamese. One may immediately think of the Việt Cộng or Bác Hồ, but there are thousands who are looked over and forgotten—"war babies." This directly translated word from the Vietnamese language describes a small group of minorities who were born of American soldiers and Vietnamese mothers. Being born during the war, many babies were either abandoned or killed because of the prejudice towards the American military. Similarly enough, my mother is a Caucasian woman born in Vietnam during the heat of the war in poor countryside Vietnam. She was luckily found on the streets but faced racism, abuse, and inequality as she lived. Her story and the story of other "war babies" are one of my inspirations behind the play I have written.

Another issue that strikes me is the amount of literature written that showcases the Vietnamese's perspective. Perspective is an important issue to me because society lacks the attempt to solve lingering biases. My full-length play is written to feature the emotions and sentiments of the Vietnamese nationals with the lens focused on these people who consider themselves Vietnamese, but "not Vietnamese enough." As culture and nationalism are hot topics today in many countries, it is essential for us to discuss this in a safe place—the theatre. The goal is to display the emotional story of the conflicted Vietnamese identity.

*"War—a 'necessary evil' (Carter) that may, can, and will lead to peace."
—Anonymous*

As wars, battles, and fights against terrorism are plaguing the modern world, it is just as important to take a step back

to the past and review what the global society can come to if conflicts and tensions continued to progress. One of the most controversial wars in international history was the Vietnam War—an event that did not impact me directly, but certainly has shaped my moral character and sparked my scholastic fervor. Among a myriad of English-language films, plays, and



Currently a graduate student pursuing an MFA in Asian Theatre Performance at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, I started my college career in acting. After noticing the shortage of Asian and/or Asian-American plays (and being half-Vietnamese myself), I knew I wanted to expand into the world of writing to build on this now-growing repertoire. The play I have written acts as an homage to my family and my heritage, and here you will read my artistic stance about the world I have created. I wrote this for my Senior Honors Thesis in lieu of both of my undergraduate degrees: Theatre and English. Now having staged a full reading of this play, I hope to see this fully performed in the future. I also hope to seek a PhD in Asian Theatre with an emphasis on Southeast Asian theatrical forms.

Mānoa Horizons, Vol. 3, 2018, pp. 56–61
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novels produced by many artists, only a handful seek to paint another perspective: the Vietnamese perspective.

Since the end of the Vietnam War, there have been many accounts in works of art and literature that have been influenced or inspired by the infamous fighting. There have been thousands of published literary works depicting the Vietnam War, but the majority of these pieces only explain the war from a Western point of view. Over 10,000 Vietnam War-based books are in circulation in libraries throughout the world, but many depict and explain the war from an American military, political, or social aspect (Hofstadter, 92). For four decades after the war, only a small percentage of modern Western literature has touched upon the actual lives of the Vietnamese people and what they faced during war-stricken Vietnam (Gamble, 224). America did not win the war; neither did the war represent America in a positive or idealistic light. So I understand why Western writers, whether they be of Vietnamese or non-Vietnamese descent, would potentially be reluctant to touch upon a controversial point of American history. However, there has been a surge in Vietnam War-based literature by Vietnamese writers in the beginning of the twenty-first century. The author Viet Thanh Nguyen lists several of these writers, including Bao Ninh, Lan Cao, and Duong Thu Huong (“Vietnamese and Vietnamese American”). Nguyen’s own novel *The Sympathizer* about a North Vietnamese spy has inspired my own ambition to write about the Vietnam people during the war and to add to the growing number of Vietnamese writers whose goal is to enlighten audiences about the incredible stories of their people’s history.

My parents are both first-generation immigrants to the United States, so it is very important that I respect their history because they lived it at one point in their lives. The two-act play that I have written depicts a specific tale of *trẻ em chiến tranh*, “war babies,” a Vietnamese phrase that describes children who are born of an American soldier and a Vietnamese mother. The storyline particularly interests me as it is a topic that the Vietnamese government deems not suitable to address in their policies. The people living in Vietnam view these *lai*¹ men and women walking in their world as society’s outcasts, as they do not carry the same physical appearances as other Vietnamese.

Another reason why I believe this is a story that needs to be told is that my mother is a “war baby.” As my family and I do not know her true ethnicity, we only assume she is Caucasian and Vietnamese. However, every family member has viewed her as only Caucasian because no one knew her birth mother and she was left on the streets when the American soldiers were starting to abandon their posts to surrender to the Democratic Republic of Vietnam² (DRV). Most *lai* children know of

their birth mother, or at least their adoptive family had known who she was. During war time, orphanages in Vietnam only accepted babies and children who had records of who their biological fathers and mothers were. “War babies” were either dropped off at Catholic churches which were struggling to make ends meet, given to financially stable families who were not affected by the war first-hand, or simply left on the ground in hope that someone would save the child’s life. Although, sadly, my mother was the latter, she is considered lucky because the survival rates for *lai* children are at 75 percent due to the lack of nutrition they received while in the womb (Nguyen).

The story of my mother’s survival is one that needs to be shared with Western audiences, especially the American audience, to see the familial strains that the Vietnam War had placed onto Vietnamese families. Of the repertoire of history books I had read growing up in America, I have never seen a section of how the Vietnamese people were affected by the war. Instead, the only aspects historians choose to shine upon were the war strategies and military tactics that the *Viet Cộng*³ used to fight against the American troops. The commentary of the Vietnam War I always heard from my parents were filled with tragedy, suffering, and loss—something that historians in the West do not often address.

The motivation for me to write this narrative is to contribute to the creative and artistic works that depict the lives and culture of the Vietnamese people. Vietnam is a country rich with different attitudes and minds, and historically known for incredible feats on international diplomatic standing. Today, the Communist government’s subjugation of the Vietnamese population places many sanctions on what artists can create and writers can publish. The Vietnamese government deems any conversations about the negativity that the Vietnam War has placed among its citizens as “harmful [and] destructive” (Nguyễn Minh Triết) to the growth of the country. As the country is trying to emerge into the global market as a viable candidate for trade and commerce, the sense of urgency to develop the country to be one of Southeast Asia’s leading economies is present. With this, the country cannot linger on to the past, but must look ahead towards the future. However, if the Vietnamese citizens do not know of their significant past, this does not allow the Vietnamese to appreciate where they are today—which is living in a land that, although divided in political and social visions, has learned how to survive with their idealistic differences and has kept away from war and acquired restfulness from violence.

The process of writing *The Virtue in Propaganda* (*Virtue*) was a long journey as I went through a total of four major drafting periods in a span of 18 months. I originally planned on writing this play with an unbiased view towards the war, meaning I purposefully would not add a winning or losing “tone” to

1 “Lai” is a Vietnamese word describing those who are mixed-race.

2 This was the Communist party of North Vietnam which existed from 1945 to 1976.

3 A military and political movement that fought for the DRV using mainly guerrilla army units during the Vietnam War.

either the North Vietnamese or South Vietnamese. I wanted to incorporate this aspect to my piece because while many Americans believe the DRV was the negative force throughout the war, the Vietnamese people held conflicting views to both the DRV and the Army of the Republic of Vietnam⁴ (ARVN).

As I travelled to Vietnam for extensive research, starting from Hanoi and then working my way down south to Saigon⁵, in hopes of learning more about these biases, I noticed these distinct ideals when speaking with the local Vietnamese and seeing how both societies viewed the war through a twenty-first century perspective. Many people have the pre-conceived notion that Hanoi and Saigon are two similar cities as they are two of the major hubs in Vietnam, but in reality, they are two completely different municipalities with their own set of cultural norms and thoughts. Where the government in Hanoi still mounts billboards of anti-Republic and anti-West propaganda, the local government of Saigon chooses not to participate in this act of publicity and actively takes down signs or vandalize posters that represent radical Communist ideas. Hanoi stands at the seat of government as the city is the official capital of Vietnam, but Saigon is known to many as the “people’s capital⁶.” Despite the contrasting looks and stigmas of the cities, the people share a commonality: Vietnamese living in both the Northern and Southern half embrace their patriotism to Vietnam, but still long to come to the United States, a land where they believe they can attain the American Dream and have an equal opportunity to achieve success.

The United States may have been viewed as the enemy combatant to the Communist regime nearly 50 years ago, but times have changed, and so are people’s views and opinions. Vietnam now views the United States as a close ally when it comes to economical and political affairs, especially since the early 2010s. Because of this shift, I decided to change the main purpose of my play. Rather than centering the plot to create an unbiased opinion of the war, I chose to showcase these two contrasting views between communism and democracy, and let the audiences decide for themselves whether or not there is a “right side” to the Vietnam War, or to any war.

The play opens to a poor, rural house in Dong Nai Province, Vietnam during the year 1974. The audience follows the story of Trinh, a sixteen-year-old girl who is half-Vietnamese and half-Caucasian. Trinh lives with her mother, Tiên, and are often visited by her sharp, yet inquisitive nine-year old-cousin, Lành. Trinh has not been in school for months and decides to

go back after having a talk with Lành. On her first day at school, Trinh is immediately harassed and ridiculed by her teacher, Quyên, for looking “different” in front of the entire class. Quân, a meek classmate of hers, befriends Trinh and talks her into going back to school. Trinh goes back and she is, again, belittled and assaulted by Quyên for “not being Vietnamese.” She leaves only to be lectured by Tiên and Lành when she arrives home. While Trinh is devising a plan to no longer attend school, Tiên is in talks with Thao, a South Vietnamese serviceman, to leave the country and seek refuge elsewhere. Tensions build within their small village as landmines are being placed out in rice fields and the story of Quân being raped by Hùng, a North Vietnamese soldier who has gone mentally insane, breaks out. After hearing about this, Tiên makes an executive decision to take Trinh and Lành out of Vietnam. Thao has given Tiên the exact meeting place to be at, but events occur that leave Trinh separated from Tiên and Lành. This is when Trinh finds out Quyên, having Tiên at gunpoint, is actually a general for the *Viet Cộng* and uses his day job of teaching as a coverup. Trinh also discovers that Lành has run off in the fields by herself to flee from the *Viet Cộng* and there is no confirmation on her status. A long argument between the three occurs, and it is revealed that Tiên is only Trinh’s adoptive mother and Quyên witnessed his entire family being murdered by a fleet of American soldiers when he was a young child. After this, in a fit of rage, Quyên accidentally shoots Tiên—the first woman he has ever killed. Quyên leaves traumatized by this and Trinh, who expected to be killed next, is left alone to experience pain and suffering—just as how Quyên had.

I do not condone war in any manner and I have never viewed war as ever “necessary,” but for the sake of the political progression of Vietnam, it was something that needed to happen. After the fall of the last royal dynasty in Vietnam and the war against French colonization, Vietnam had no basis for how they were going to lead the nation. As tensions between the Soviets and the Americans were painstakingly strained, the Soviet Union viewed this as an opportunity to colonize Vietnam into the practice of Communism. The Americans immediately wanted to step in and claim Vietnam as a Republic. The Vietnamese people never had a chance to decide what they truly wanted, but Communism and a Republic seemed to be the “only” two viable options.

The word “only” is important to *Virtue* as it represents a struggle of duality which is a major theme in the play. During this period of war in Vietnam, a person was either with “them” or “us,” and these two words meant completely divergent things if you were a supporter of the North or the South. The sense of duality is seen as a political matter, but it should also be seen, very imperatively, as a cultural matter.

The main character of *Virtue* is Trinh, a “war baby” and *lai*, born from a Vietnamese mother and an American G.I soldier, but orphaned as her mother died due to labor complications. Growing up on a rural side of Southern Vietnam,

4 This was the Republic party of South Vietnam which existed from 1955 until the Fall of Saigon in April 1975.

5 Saigon is officially known as Ho Chi Minh City. I am purposefully choosing to use Saigon in this article as it is the term that majority of the local population of North, Central, and South Vietnam say when conversing.

6 The phrase “*thủ đô của người dân*” means the “capital of the citizens.”

Trinh faces the problem of calling herself Vietnamese, which is mainly due to the fact that she embodies the physicality and appearance of an American—the so-pronounced enemy to Vietnam—despite only growing up in Vietnam with a Vietnamese family and only speaking Vietnamese. Even though she has remained safe in South Vietnam for nearly 16 years of her life, the situation worsens as tensions between the North and South escalate with the Fall of Saigon nearing and the *Viet Cộng* approaching her small village, planning for a total takeover. The story follows her life as she deals with this push-and-pull of what her identity is and what the Vietnamese identity truly means.

Race is another theme that I explore in *Virtue*. I grew up being *lai* myself so I always faced this constant battle of being “not white enough” in the United States, but being “not Vietnamese enough” in Vietnam whenever traveling to visit my family. This internal conflict led me to think what it really means to be a part of a race—what does it mean to be Caucasian, Asian, or even African, or Latino? Is there such a thing as race or have we built an entire fantasy over where we originate from that is more important than anything else? As the issue of racism intensifies daily in the United States, it is essential that my story questions this idea of what does one’s race or one’s ethnicity hold to the greater good of the global society. Race and culture were two principal issues that Vietnam faced during the war as this was the period of revolutionizing and revamping the Vietnamese culture.

Nationalism, an additional theme to recognize, then plays a huge factor in *Virtue* as Vietnam, a divided nation, did not have a set of cultural rules because it was being deliberated through the violence and bloodshed of war. The counterpart to Trinh is Quyên, a hyper-radicalized North Vietnamese general disguised as a teacher in order to learn about the environment of the villages in the South that will be raided in preparation of the invasion to Saigon. He embodies the ideal Vietnamese “national” as he fights for the betterment of the Vietnamese people.

Quyên is the most complex character of my play, but he is not to be painted as the antagonist or villain. Although he does not want to kill any more civilians, Quyên holds no mercy when it comes to killing any person who supports or fights for the Americans since a troop of U.S soldiers destroyed his entire village and murdered his parents who were innocent bystanders. He has a broken psyche and he holds great resentment in letting his parents die. To him, one needs to “look” and “act” like a Vietnamese person to be considered a Vietnamese national. After meeting Trinh—someone who looks like an American, but holds no cultural ties to America—he begins to face the dilemma of what Vietnamese nationalism is, or what he has conjured it up to be.

The structure of *Virtue* depicts the sense of balance and “un-balance” of the ideals being played out. I decided to juxtapose the interactions of Trinh and her family regarding surviv-

al and freedom against the reading of newspaper articles, radio recordings, and Vietnamese war prayers. By doing so, the audience will be immersed into the world of the Vietnamese. They will hear, see, and feel the same things a family living in South Vietnam in 1975 would. This is what a typical person would go through if living in war-stricken Vietnam. The concern for family members, the judgement of whether or not the media is a mere act of propaganda, and the need to find food were on the minds of the Vietnamese every day. I want the audience to feel as if they are in Vietnam during the war and experiencing it firsthand. I want my audience to be encapsulated by the entire experience.

The drafting process of the play went through multiple revisions, as mentioned, but it changed dramatically with the characters’ arcs. Originally, I began and ended each act with a monologue from four different characters as a way for audiences to understand where each of these characters’ thoughts and opinions were at after the war. Not only that, the climatic scene of the play was very different as almost every character was found dead in the fields. It was a more gory and melodramatic play than the present version. Now instead, prayers spoken from multiple characters as well as the readings of various newspaper articles have replaced the monologue scenes. Furthermore, the death scene has now been changed quite drastically as I have written the scene to suggest that those characters that were found dead previously in the earlier drafts, such as Trinh, are now left with the hope of survival. For example, where the characters of Thao and Hùng were originally found dead, they actually leave the scene with Quyên shooting in their general direction off-stage. Whether or not, they are actually dead, I leave that choice for the director and the audience. Tiên is the only character to have their death seen on stage, but Trinh is now left alive as she is spared by Quyên.

Many questioned my considerable and sizable change of the climax as it could affect my overall purpose of why I wrote this play. The main reasoning behind this is because I personally found that Quyên is the character that has the change in arc. Trinh was originally seen as the protagonist, but with this draft, I truly believe that Quyên is equally the protagonist. In my eyes, a protagonist does not need to lean towards more liberal or heroic ideals. A protagonist is one who has the most change throughout the plot. Quyên changes in his mentality and emotions towards the Vietnamese populace. He has never killed any women throughout the war, but he impulsively kills Trinh’s mother. I see this as his supposed revenge for everything that has happened to his family, especially his mother. Quyên is deeply affected and sobered by his killing of Tien and many would question why Quyên kills Trinh’s mother and not Trinh. I believe Quyên spares Trinh’s life because he has abused and harassed her throughout the play. Although Quyên cannot take back what he committed to Tiên, what he can do is make amends with Trinh—a person he has hated from the very beginning—and leave Trinh alive in hope of survival after

the war. At the same time, Quynh sees this as the ultimate suffering to Trinh as her mother is dead and Lanh is left missing. Now, Trinh is left to fend for herself for the rest of her life alone in a soon-to-be Communist country that does not see her as its own citizen. Again, whether or not this is seen as an ethical choice of Quynh, that is for the director and the audience to decide.

As mentioned, being the playwright, I have been working on the writing process for nearly eighteen months before any thought of production planning had occurred. Once having a full draft written, I luckily came across Christopher Patrinos, a personal friend of mine, and he was so fascinated by the premise of the play. He decided to take on this script to produce it at the Chaminade University Collegiate Theatre Festival 2017 as one of the headlining acts. From that point on, I knew that I had to hand my script over for someone else to decide what scenes are to be kept and which would be cut from the public.

Patrinos still wanted me to have a significant role to the creative process with the entire cast and crew, so he insisted on adding a dramaturge—me. Oftentimes, a dramaturge is forgotten or left out in the production process. The director and the actors are the ones who get credit, but a dramaturge almost never does. The role of a dramaturge shifts from show to show and theatre company to theatre company. A dramaturge is a complicated character, but an incredibly important figure as dramaturgy is the art of figuring out the truth behind the playwright and his/her world, and requires being extremely curious to find those needed answers. The overarching main task of a dramaturge is to help shape a production. Dramaturges are meant to serve everyone in the creative process and should be seen as a creative diplomat (Trencsényi, 115-30).

My experience of being a dramaturge is quite unique as compared to other dramaturges as I was actively working with the director and cast to translate the script into a live performance. Stepping into the role of the dramaturge was a major shift from being the playwright and creator of the world I had built. In a sense, I have always been the dramaturge with the amount of research I had already conducted for the script.

As the dramaturge for *Virtue*, I played more of the historical consultant for the cast and crew. Most of my responsibilities were to assist all the artists in envisioning how it would have been to live in Vietnam during the 1970s and to get a twenty-first century American audience to understand the historical premise of the play. As Patrinos had described *Virtue* as a “play driven by history,” his plan was to make sure that production would be as historically accurate as possible. Most of the production crew did not have a wide knowledge of the history of Vietnam prior to coming on board. This is why it was more effective to involve a dramaturge who would be responsible for the historical aspects of the Vietnam War and the world the characters live in.

It was only during the process of being a dramaturge did I learn the complications of having the playwright so involved in

the creative process for directors. A concerning issue came up during the production meetings between Patrinos and Laura Clark Greaver, the assistant director. Both of them consulted me with the possibility of two major cuts to the original script. One of the cuts proposed was to the first scene of the entire play, which is the prayer montage by all of the characters of the play. The second cut, and the most substantial one, was to the scene of Hùng and Thao conversing with one another about each other’s lives. It also depicts one of the more gruesome acts of the script—rape. In this particular scene, the script implies that Hùng rapes Quân.

The director and assistant director felt the first scene needed to be cut because the Western audience coming to this show would be confused due to the religious context behind it. As a playwright, I understood that my script was up for scrutiny and changes once it is given away to the director. However, as a dramaturge, I did not believe that this particular audience would have been confused from the prayers spoken from the different characters. With this audience being from Hawaii—a place where there is a vast diversity in culture and religions—I felt that the motif would be understood and the prayers would not take away from the overall theme of the play. Without this scene, the image of all of the seven characters coming together to pray for different ideals under the same circumstances adds to the message that all of these characters had one thing in mind, which was peace. Nonetheless, the director and assistant director decided to cut the scene from the production.

The rape scene of Hùng and Quân needed to be cut for a different reason. As this production was a part of the theatre festival, Patrinos felt there would be some issues with showcasing a scene that suggests any type of homosexual assault or rape under a university that holds strong affiliations to Catholicism. Chaminade University of Honolulu is guided by its Catholic beliefs and Marianist traditions, so Patrinos did not want to offend any of the faculty or students that would potentially be attending this show. Patrinos is aware of the Catholic hierarchy within Chaminade University because he is the technical director of Chaminade University’s performing arts department. He was trying to work within that context, especially when his reputation and job with the university may have been endangered. As much as I understood where he was coming from, I was highly against this cut—as both the playwright and dramaturge—because it would leave a large gap within the plot with noticeably less character development from Hùng, Thao, and Quân as to the other four characters in the play. The audience does not learn about the gross viciousness of Hùng, the heroism of Thao, and the innocence of Quân. I believed that this cut would leave the audience more puzzled about the plot than taking out the first scene of the prayer montage. Right after the rape scene, Quân is to be seen in front of Trinh’s house, clearly disheveled, and the audience would know exactly what has happened to him. Now with the cut, the audience is left to wonder what happened to Quân and there is no closure to this

aspect of the plot. Despite my advice, Patrinos chose to side with the Catholic principle and did not want to risk his future with Chaminade University.

This specific exchange I had between Patrinos and Clark Greaver showed the complex nature of having a playwright be a production consultant. Overall, directors hold the ultimate decision on what is to be seen by the audience, but with knowing that my play's themes and characters will be portrayed differently as to how I have envisioned is frustrating to handle when one creates art only to be criticized by other artists. I hold no personal grievances against Patrinos or Clark Greaver because I walked out with more knowledge of how directors think and work. From this incident, I gained so much experience as to how to handle conflicting points of views in the theatrical domain and what concerning issues takes more precedence—what the director *can do* versus what the playwright *wants*.

As a theatre practitioner, venturing into the world of playwriting and dramaturgy changed my life. Playwrights and dramaturges have a huge responsibility to their audience as the theatre is a cultural space where society examines itself in a mirror. Theatre has long been looked at as a laboratory in which we can study the problems that confront society and attempt to solve those problems. By writing *The Virtue in Propaganda* through a Vietnamese point of view, I am hoping to humanize the Vietnam War to reveal the ideological divisions and confusions among the local people, from both North and South Vietnam, who lived through the tragedies of that devastating conflict. The story of *lai* children is one that has not been thoroughly discussed in the West, and neither in Vietnam. Our world is globalizing exponentially with more multiracial families living all over different countries and more multicultural areas developing throughout societies. To much of the world, the Vietnam War is, simply, a thing of the past, but it is up to our thoughtful conscience and good judgement to not repeat history in the making. By raising the problems of race, identity, and nationalism in the Vietnamese experience, the play offers its audience insight into the negotiations and struggles these issues forced upon the population in the human drama of its characters. And perhaps, the play may move audiences to reflect upon these issues within their own lives and country.

The play *The Virtue in Propaganda* may be viewed at <https://kahualike.manoa.hawaii.edu/horizons/vol3/iss1/>

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