



Mourning Headband for Hue: An Account of the Battle for Hue, Vietnam 1968 by Nhã Ca.

Trans. Olga Dror. Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 2014 [orig. 1969]. Pp. xix, 307. ISBN 978-0-253-01417-7.

Review by Gary Kulik, Wilmington, DE (gkulik@comcast.net).

When evidence of [Viet Cong massacres at Hue] was unearthed, as they say, the business went a little underreported in Europe and the United States. It roughly coincided with the American massacre of villagers at My Lai. Since most newspapers are into telling readers what they are used to hearing and think they already know, any suggestion of congruity in the cruelty of desperation would have been the occasion of moral confusion.¹

Mourning Headband for Hue, originally published in Saigon in 1969 as *Giải khăn xô Huế*, was the first book-length account of the Tet Offensive. Its author, a prominent Vietnamese writer, Trần Thị Thu Vân, wrote under the pen name Nhã Ca. In late January 1968, she had traveled to Hue, where she was born, to mourn the death of her father. The North Vietnamese Army and the Viet Cong attacked the next day. She remained trapped in Hue with her family for more than a month, until US and South Vietnamese forces finally prevailed in bloody urban fighting. Returning to Saigon, she wrote a forceful, fearful, poetic account of the devastating impact of war on civilians; its title invokes the white headband worn by Vietnamese grieving their dead. The book attests to the communist forces' horrendous killings of thousands of Vietnamese in the Hue Massacre. Olga Dror's translation now makes it accessible to an English-speaking audience.

Born in 1939, Nhã Ca became a prominent poet and writer in Saigon in the early 1960s. Her themes were "love, passion, and longing" (xvi). Raised a Buddhist, she adopted her pen name after reading the Old Testament "Song of Solomon," also known (to Catholics) as "Canticles" (the approximate meaning of "Nhã Ca" is "canticle"). In 1966, she joined the Voice of Freedom, a radio station broadcasting into North Vietnam. Her first major work, *At Night I Hear Cannons*, was reprinted six times and sold over 100,000 copies.² It tells the story of a family waiting, in the end futilely, for a son and son-in-law to return from the war to celebrate Tet, the Lunar New Year. While decrying the cost of war, its author yet takes no sides.

Olga Dror (Texas A&M), a scholar of Vietnamese history, worked closely with the author to capture her "unadulterated voice from the time of war" (xi). Her long "Translator's Introduction" sketches Nhã Ca's life and work and explains how the special "staccato tempo" of *Mourning Headband* "dramatically and palpably [reflects] life in raw and desperate eloquence in the middle of the battlefield that was Hue" (xviii). Especially valuable is Dror's detailed and fair-minded analysis of contemporary reports of the massacre, the political uses of that reportage, and the rare and little known personal comments on the atrocity from the communist side. The current Vietnamese government has never acknowledged or openly discussed the massacre and there is no serious scholarly study of it.³

1. Robert Stone, *Prime Green: Remembering the Sixties* (NY: HarperCollins, 2007) 209–10.

2. Translated into English in 1993 and self-published by James Banerian. See Dror, "Translator's Introduction" (lviii).

3. Writings that touch on the massacre, all cited or discussed by Dror, include Don Oberdofer, *Tet! The Story of a Battle and Its Historic Aftermath* (NY: Doubleday, 1971); Douglas Pike, *The Viet Cong Strategy of Terror* (Saigon: US Mission, Vietnam, 1970);

Despite Nhã Ca's measured criticism of all three of the contending armies in Hue, *Mourning Headband* was freely published in Saigon and won a national literary prize. By contrast, the victorious communists publicly burned the book and arrested Nhã Ca and her husband, fellow writer Trần Dạ Từ, in 1976, leaving their six children to fend for themselves. Nhã Ca was released from a reeducation camp after fourteen months. Her husband served twelve years. With the help of PEN (Poets, Essayists, and Novelists) International, Amnesty International, and two Swedish prime ministers, the family settled in Sweden in 1988. Moving to California in 1992, Nhã Ca and her husband founded the Vietnamese-language newspaper *Việt Báo Daily News*.⁴

Mourning Headband captures the utter helplessness of Nhã Ca and her family in the face of the shifting tides of war. They hid for long hours in underground shelters, seeking protection from bombs, rockets, and artillery and small-arms fire. They fled hoping to find safety in a Catholic church and in An Định Palace, only to find hunger, desolation, and death—a woman clinging to the long dead, putrefying body of her infant son:

Gardens are suddenly desolate, abnormally gloomy; grass is soaked with dew; apricots are crushed to bits; scattered everywhere are rags, shell fragments, and traces of blood. Streaks of blood on the surface of the road connect one garden to another.... [T]here is no guarantee for us, I have fled all over the place—I left for the countryside and then turned and went back to Hue. In the countryside there are also dead people because of stray artillery shells. When I came back to the city, looking for the safest place, there were also stray, absolutely senseless bullets. (93, 227)

Nhã Ca and her family could not trust any of the contending armies. South Vietnamese forces looted the abandoned houses of Hue, though they once generously offered rations to hungry residents. US troops fired into houses “regardless of whether there were people inside” (179). One American patrol, taking fire, “dragged” a young man, an English speaker from a school in Qui Nhơn, from a house and shot him (251–52). Another incident serves as a chapter title, “A Dog in Midstream”: American soldiers shot at a dog trying to swim to safety in the Bến Ngự River—not to kill but only to torment it. For Nhã Ca, the dog's plight symbolized her “suffering homeland.” She asks “how does our fate differ from that of the small dog floundering in the water?” (10).

The communist forces, however, evoked a special fear. Nhã Ca's younger brother was a teacher and school principal; a young cousin served in the South Vietnamese forces, another with the Rural Development Force. All three risked capture or worse at the hands of the Viet Cong in Hue, who commandeered food, forced young women to assist their wounded troops, gathered people for enforced indoctrination sessions, and held preemptory “trials” leading to summary executions. Nhã Ca correctly identified two of the most feared perpetrators, Nguyễn Thị Đoàn Trinh and Nguyễn Đắc Xuân, former residents who returned to Hue with the Viet Cong to inform on those they believed had collaborated with the South Vietnamese government. They presided at tribunals in the Citadel and at Gia Hội respectively.⁵ By the time Nhã Ca came to write, she was painfully certain of the extent of Viet Cong atrocities: “mass graves ... have grown over with grass. [The bones of] ten thousand ... who were slaughtered—buried in shallow graves in hedges and bushes, thrown down into the bottoms of rivers,

Mai Elliott, *RAND in Southeast Asia: A History of the Vietnam War Era* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corp., 2010); Alje Vennema, *The Viet Cong Massacre at Hue* (NY: Vantage, 1976); D. Gareth Porter and Edward S. Herman, “The Myth of the Hue Massacre,” *Ramparts* 13.8 (1975) 1–4; and James S. Robbins, *This Time We Win: Revisiting the Tet Offensive* (NY: Encounter Books, 2010).

4. An English-language version can be read online.

5. They were identified by Alje Vennema, a Dutch hospital volunteer who also lived through Hue. See note 3 above.

the bottoms of streams—have gradually been collected” (8).⁶

“We usually use the word ‘they’ to refer to the Viet Cong and to avoid the word ‘liberators.’ In fact, would it not be ironic and cruel to use the word ‘liberation’ at the sight of such pain and utter destruction in the city?” (90). This is her harshest and clearest statement of Viet Cong perfidy. Yet, in the end, she assigns blame to neither the Viet Cong nor allied forces, but to her own generation of Vietnamese, who, she asserts, “should bear responsibility for the crime of destroying such a historic city as Hue” (8).

This is not a conclusion likely to satisfy everyone, but it is hers, forged in the darkness of Tết Mậu Thân, the Lunar New Year of 1968. *Mourning Headband for Hue* is Nhã Ca’s searing condemnation of the brutality of war.

—updated 12 Feb. 2016

6. The figure of 10,000 is an estimate. By late 1969, 2,800 bodies had been unearthed in the area of Hue (xxx). Mai Elliott (note 3 above) estimates 2,000–3,000 killed; David L. Anderson, *The Columbia Guide to the Vietnam War* (NY: Columbia U Pr, 2004), estimates up to 6,000 (lix-lx).