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INTERVIEW / Memories with warm machine guns: Disrupted lives, patriotic songs, torches for the war and names signed in blood. Robert Templer visits the writer Bao Ninh in Hanoi

Robert Templer • Friday 03 June 1994 23:02 BST • Comments






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BAO NINH set off to war, at the age of 17, against a background of patriotic songs and poetry. Today, these are sounds he would rather forget. 'At the recruiting station they had singers and poets, working up the spirit of those signing up. There were two types of people - those who really carried torches for the war, full of anti- American spirit, signing their forms in their own blood. And then there were those like me. We were told to go and we went. We weren't particularly afraid. We knew we had to fight.'

Behind Bao Ninh's prosaic view of his entry into the Vietnam War lies some resentment at its glorification, at the performers who sang as the 500 teenage soldiers of the Glorious 27th Youth Brigade went off to fight the South Vietnamese and the United States. Only 10 returned. The Sorrow of War is the first Vietnamese novel to break away from that spirit, to crack the heavy mould of Hanoi's state-sponsored literature, where all soldiers are heroes, where young girls cheerfully perform clunky propaganda plays and deaths are noble - the written equivalent of the portraits of square-jawed, sturdy peasants and workers that are still hoisted onto billboards in Hanoi.



Bao Ninh is the first Vietnamese to win an overseas prize, apart from some fraternal East European awards; but he sees his novel as breaking little new ground, despite the vast interest and acclaim aroused by its descriptions of despair and bitterness, even suicide and drug taking among North Vietnamese troops. 'I wanted to make a statement about war and I wanted to define a new concept of literature but one that also goes back to our tradition of writing, a more humanist tradition that we had over 1,000 years but we have lost. For the past 40 years our literature has been more in the tradition of the Soviet or Chinese models.'

'Vietnamese literature is falling behind the rest of the world,' he says, expounding a pessimistic view that a rich tradition might not be saved in a country that expects writers to conform to a narrow model. Although he refuses to comment on the merits of the dominant socialist-realist style, Bao Ninh would clearly like to see a literature separated from politics, separated from a system that has treated him warily despite his support for the government and his enthusiasm for the

Published in 1991 under the innocuous title *The Destiny of Love* (sorrow and war are rarely allowed to go together, even today), the novel caught a mood of greater openness about the war itself, and also about post-war Vietnam - the country sank into an era of poverty and repression after 1975. It is this period that seems to have been truly formative for Bao Ninh: the disappointment struck home after his return to a monotonous life, when Vietnam 'failed to achieve the things we had planned for after the war. We never reached the goal we had fought for.'

Vietnam found itself unable to apply the same energy it had used in fighting to lifting the country out of poverty, and soon after reunification the country was embroiled in yet more wars and a smothering relationship with the Soviet Union. They were Vietnam's Brezhnev years - a time of suspicions, dreary political incantations, food shortages and yet more fighting against China and Cambodia.

In 1986 Vietnam cautiously began a programme of 'Doi Moi' or 'renovation'. But words still have to be chosen carefully, and some subjects must be avoided. Bao Ninh greets difficult questions with a grin, some fingering of his droopy moustache and the good-humoured evasions common in Hanoi. 'People just don't want to have their lives disrupted any more,' he says, recalling his arrival in Saigon and - with a look of regret - the terrible fear he provoked in a family by entering their house as a victorious young North Vietnamese soldier armed with a machine gun.

Now he is a 42-year-old writer, husband and father living in a small flat in a crumbling concrete block just outside the centre of Hanoi; he writes at night and is regarded by his neighbours 'as just an ordinary guy who does some extraordinary things - I stay at home all day and strange friends come to see me.'

A growing reputation abroad is a source of gratitude and pride, but also wariness. He does not wish to be seen here as too far out of step with other novelists. 'Success can become a prison for writers. Perhaps when other Vietnamese authors have their books translated it will be easier.'

The book is haunted by a recurring nightmare of awful, lurching violence. At one point Kien and Phuong, the tormented lovers at the centre of the story, come upon a wrecked classroom. 'How could they destroy a school,' says Kien. 'Don't they respect life any more?' Phuong, who has just discovered how cruel and degraded war can be, replies: 'Maybe it was our soldiers. Soldiers do this sort of thing. War

Kien and Phuong go on to mourn the innocence and love that has been torn from them. But Ninh himself now expresses no sense of loss at his years spent fighting, no bitterness at the ease of life of many young people today in Hanoi, who think foremost of money, clothes and motorbikes. 'Those years were great,' he says. 'I never felt they went out the window, they weren't wasted.'

On the surface, people tend to show little emotion about the war, shaking their heads silently at the memory of the brutality but saying little. 'Most Vietnamese don't want to make too much fuss but they don't want to forget either. We have very deep, quiet memories.' Vietnam would not accept war now, he says. 'People here can't stand to watch pictures of the wars in Bosnia or Somalia on television.' But the official line on the war tends to recall glorious victories. At recent celebrations to mark the battle that ended French colonial rule in Vietnam 40 years ago, speakers called on the people 'to revive the spirit of Dien Bien Phu' - not against imperialism but in the fight for market shares and export contracts.

'I don't like this sort of thing much, but I suppose it can create some sort of echo in society,' Bao Ninh says with a weariness that suggests an immunity to propaganda. 'I just really don't want to be patronised by the same people who were the singers and poets when I went off to war.'

(Photograph omitted)

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