

Representing Vietnam in the 1970s: Historical and Cultural Perspectives in *Miss Saigon*

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ABSTRACT

In 1975 the victorious North Vietnamese led their armies into South Vietnam, followed thereafter by the evacuation of American power from Indochina. Since then the fatal battles and barbaric encounters of war have become recurring images in literature and other esthetic productions. The representation of the past involves culture, and the perceptive representation of culture involves historical authenticity. When considered as cultural history, the contemporary British musical *Miss Saigon* is subject to contrary interpretations. From the perspective of Vietnamese national identity, the work is deficient by failing to represent cultural and historical elements that had caused the physical and emotional torture, but as a musical for Western audiences, the work successfully revives romantic stereotypes contrasting stalwart American fighting men and sexually pliant Asian women.

KEY WORDS

history and literature
cultural representation

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And now they've led the farmers here,
 the kerchiefed women in baggy pants,
 the men with sickles and flails . . . all
 staring from a crater berm; silent
 John Balaban.

R. B. Smith, in his illuminating book, *An International History of the Vietnam War*, refers to the Vietnam War as a war that “no one can say when it began” (3). According to him, “there was no formal declaration of war by either side, no dramatic event comparable with the attack on Pearl Harbor or the North Korean advance across the 38th parallel” (3). Smith’s comments and interpretations of the Vietnam War, nevertheless, pinpoint several characteristics of the conflict: (1) the Vietnam War involved the international expansion of Communist power and the United States’ armed opposition to it; (2) the Vietnam War was the United States’ first military defeat; (3) although there was an underlying continuity in the United States’ policy towards Vietnam, the defeat involved not only the physical environment of the battlefield but also the lack of knowledge of Vietnamese culture (3-18).

For many Americans, the Vietnam War was a trauma. Statistics indicate that about 58,000 Americans died in Vietnam, and over 300,000 men were wounded. No records, however, indicate how many Vietnam veterans later died from medical complications connected with the war (Smith 18). The historical experience of American soldiers in Vietnam has generated a complex and radically new consciousness of war, represented through literature, films, and other visual arts. Literary and film productions about the Vietnam War reached a climax in the 1960’s and 1970’s. Robin Moore’s *The Green Berets*

(1965) was the first American novel written about the Vietnam conflict. Two kindred novels published in the seventies, Robert Stone's *Dog Soldiers* and Tim O'Brien's *Going After Cacciato*, won National Book Awards, and Graham Greene's *The Quiet American* represented a major British work on the US intervention in war.

More than any other American war, the Vietnam war provided the context for portraying death, separation and ultimate truth for human survival. Most of the productions used military background in these attempts to portray American morale and personal traumatic experiences as well as the political and ideological conflicts between the different sides. In most cases the realistic descriptions of Vietnamese culture faded away and the geopolitical depiction of Vietnam focused on weapons and geographical experiences instead of Vietnamese social, economical and cultural conflicts.

During the last two decades, literary productions about the Vietnam War have been prolific, but most writers have ignored the complicated international power struggle involved, highlighting instead the collective military experience and personal traumas. Throughout all these works, readers find such themes as the dehumanization of war, the anxiety of individuals and the absurdities of life during the hegemonic power contest. Military technology as the source of both the prowess of American soldiers and the vulnerability of Vietnamese refugees imbues most Vietnam War literature and movies, providing various perspectives for cultural and historical interpretations. These artistic genres provide a platform for demonstrating the differences between the weak and the strong and reinforce the gendered structure in families and professions.

The Vietnam War broke out in 1945 when Vietnam declared its independence from French colonial domination, and the United States supported British and French troops to regain colonial control over the territory. After the French defeat, the United States created a government in Southern Vietnam, while the Vietnamese Communists under the influence of de-colonization trends pervading the whole world, established a nationalist government in Northern Vietnam (Gibson 10). From their perspective a neo-colonialized society in the South would

easily become a source of cheap labor and easy profits for the industrial West.

Vietnam is documented in histories and represented in numerous esthetic productions; each historical and literary production carries a different cultural perspective. A study on various works centering on the same historical event sheds light on the understanding of the past. In commenting on this particular segment of history as related to literary works, I am not proposing simply that history comes first and the literary text should be applied to the history, but rather that literary texts form a part of the history in their attempts to understand forms of public consciousness. In this sense, history could be read differently by different generations, and by people of different cultures, each making its own sense of the historical text. The ultimate issue here is not whether a work of popular literature can be given a multitude of historically specific meanings, but whether we understand the articulation of ideas in a past society and how literary texts constitute the cultural history of the past as well as an address to the present.

Among the esthetic productions of every variety concerning Vietnam, the most outstanding is a British musical, *Miss Saigon* (1989), created by Alan Boublil and Claude-Michel Schonberg, the lyricist and composer. It wins tears from the western audience at each and every staging but arouses controversies among critics and protests from Asian-American spectators. Although *Miss Saigon* is not claimed as a historically based production, in this essay I shall argue that by imposing historical elements on dramatic and visual images, *Miss Saigon*, like a historical film, synthesizes the individual experiences and the collective causes. It captures and represents social memory of the war from western perspectives only. In his *Fire in the Lake* Francis Fitzgerald described the Vietnam War as “a white man’s war being fought by blacks, a rich man’s war being fought by the poor, an old man’s war being fought by the young” (422). According to David Halberstam, the “real key” to understanding the Vietnam War is that “it was all derivative of the French Indo-China War, which is history.”¹ The history in Halberstam’s comment includes the cultural background of Vietnam and the differences between common Vietnamese and Viet Congs

(416-18). Each and every literary production about the Vietnam War has situated its focus in a slice of history, bringing together historical and popular cultural perspectives.

The opening of *Miss Saigon* in London in 1989 was greeted with advanced ticket sales and mostly favorable reviews. When it was staged on Broadway in New York in April 1991, however, it aroused several protests and received controversial reviews concerning the image and identities of Vietnam and the Vietnamese. According to critic Eleanor Ty, for example, “almost all the Asian female characters are prostitutes and male characters Communists” (21). Angela Pao, examining the differences in representations and perceptions in *Miss Saigon*, found the musical full of “love, honor, and death”; as a cultural icon, following the pattern of *Madam Butterfly* molded by Puccini, the work created “intense pathos” and shattering emotional impact.” She pointed out, however, that the Asian authenticity of the principal female role has become one with little intellectual value (28). Sam Chu Lin also commented that the “Miss Saigon Controversy” was just the tip of the iceberg. These critics seemed to be primarily concerned with the images and identities represented. Maria Chang, on the other hand, indicated that *Miss Saigon* is a tragedy of war, which “transcends the barriers of race to affect all members of mankind without exception” (18). Her comments echo the overall opinion of Western audiences that with its coherent structure, entertaining music and tense atmosphere of war, symbolized by a helicopter, *Miss Saigon* is an attractive piece of visual art. Questions concerning dominant ideologies and representation politics that shaped the construction of race, gender and identity, as well as the historiography of the Vietnam War and Vietnam in the 1970’s are not the concerns of the western audience.

Critics like David Andrew Schlossman, Eleanor Ty, and Angela Pao all observed the similarities between *Madam Butterfly* and *Miss Saigon*. Both operas represented an American military officer or soldier, accompanied by submissive Oriental women and both portrayed the two female protagonists’ inevitable tragic endings. Both Puccini’s Japanese Cio-Cio San, and Schlossman’s Vietnamese Kim embody the characteristics of the stereotypical Oriental woman, a type also portrayed

in the famous movie of the 1950's, *The World of Suzie Wong*. These Oriental women reveal exceptional maternal devotion, and their particular attitudes towards life make them objects for romantic love. Their lives, being short and beautiful, are destined to be tragic; furthermore, this short life span, symbolized by the name Cio-Cio, which signifies a butterfly, demonstrates the fact that they do not have any opportunity to construct their own identity. As Angela Pao observes, Kim in *Miss Saigon* also falls into the category of women whom Maxine Hong Kingston termed the women with Oriental "suicide urge and suicide code" (30). Other controversy reports include Hedy Weiss's "Flawed Saigon Still Fascinates," (29) McQueen's "Raising a Protest to 'Rising Sun'," and Craig Whitney's "America's Vietnam Trauma is the Stuff of British Musical" (12). All these reports expose the concern of an Asian-American audience over the historical representation of Vietnam.

It would be pointless to dismiss the musical as just a romance without any connections to history, because the images represented obviously cling to some part of historical episodes. Therefore, central to the interpretation is how this part of history is remembered and how the representation reveals the significant forces that produce social change in a period of wartime. Many films like *The Deer Hunter* (1978) and *Apocalypse Now* (1979) aimed at capturing the chaos and extremity of the war and thus left much of the complex texture untouched. Very few in the audience knew that the French fought merely to maintain the remnants of their colonial empire or that the United States fought mainly to find a non-Communist nationalist leader as an alternative to Ho Chi Minh (12). Few understood how the Vietnamese were affected by the war and were forced to leave their farmland and how many had perished in the war. In a word, authenticity, a basic concern crucial to historical representation, is missing. Visual production has a privilege to impose its historical elements upon dramatic and visual signs. However, when it attempts to represent the causal forces operating in history through dramatic and theatrical elements such as characterization, plot, and spectacle, it has to integrate personal and social factors. The nature of the spectacle and the ways of integration between the fictional and

the historical constitute the representation of identities of a certain culture. The historical spectacle presents the natural terrain, the social manners of the period and the cultural elements directly related to the theme. In *Miss Saigon*, not much historical background is introduced; sexuality and gender relationship, however, are represented through the prism of the collective.

Vietnam is represented by means of a dichotomy between humanity and technology. In the masculine territory represented, women are reduced to merchandise, inhabitants suffer from the loss of their relatives, Saigon has become a site for a carnival-like existence, and Vietnam as a whole, a country full of destructive, relentless and stubborn Viet Cong. The female lead, Kim is described as a young woman orphaned as a child, whose Vietnamese cousin and fiancé, a Viet Cong, would like to sacrifice everything to remold their country. Since Vietnam was politically in turmoil, Kim, a member of the lower class, is not able to construct a happy family through farming. As the play opens, she is represented as an orphaned virgin about to work as a prostitute for a Vietnamese pimp, an engineer. During a short encounter, love develops between Kim and Chris, an American GI who had been frustrated by the savagery and chaotic atmosphere of the war. The construction of Kim as a beautiful, submissive and self-sacrificing Vietnam woman, however, is satirically based on several “mock” experiences. Firstly, she is portrayed as one of the participants in a pageant staged by the pimps and prostitutes, the winner to be crowned as Miss Saigon, an award based entirely on physical beauty. When Chris and Kim fall passionately in love, they hold a seemingly valid wedding, which is interrupted by Kim’s cousin, Thuy, a Viet Cong soldier, and Kim’s presumed fiancé. Although Chris fends off Thuy, this mock wedding does not establish a safe future for Kim. In the tense scenes before the fall of Saigon, when the American soldiers retreat on full scale, Chris leaves Kim alone to pack but is forced to get on the last helicopter, Kim is left in an advanced state of pregnancy with other desperate refugees, and her dream of leaving with Chris mockingly shattered. To Thuy, that Kim bore a child for an American GI was a scandal and he threatens to have the child killed, but Kim kills Thuy

instead. When the political and military situation becomes even more complicated, Kim goes to Bangkok with her child Tam, joins the pimp-engineer and serves in a bar. Eventually, Chris with an American wife comes to locate her. She shoots herself, however, to ensure the child's better future.

As the British producer Cameron Mackintosh said, *Miss Saigon*, was trying to transcend literature through the representation of a romance. The setting of the love story in Vietnam's wartime in 1975, the period when Vietnam had come to be widely accepted as a metonymy for modern warfare and a war with no result, made it almost inevitable that this musical should be perceived as representing a slice of the history of pain. The American exodus parallels chaotic battles, and the indulgence in sex of American GIs is contrasted with the fears and anxieties of the Vietnam people. Each detail in the representation of the Vietnam War and Vietnam people has contrasts to or parallels with the identity of America. The musical, moreover, carries both utopian and dystopian connotations. America as a country of democracy, freedom, and economical and military supremacy is contrasted with Vietnam as a world devoured by Communists, and a place of poverty and desperation. Although in history the Vietnam War demonstrated both the limits of American power and the moral ambivalence of advanced technology (Walsh 185), in *Miss Saigon*, the evacuation of the American army does not extinguish the hopes of Vietnam refugees, who longed for a brighter future for their next generation. Many Vietnamese had stayed and helped to reconstruct their homeland.

In *Miss Saigon*, Vietnam at war is not an imaginative creation of myth. Although the text contains no direct reference to facts and figures on the war dead, as much other Vietnam literature does, Vietnam becomes a site signifying a combination of anxiety and physical indulgence. As an exotic Asian country, Vietnam stands as a place whose culture was unknown to the American soldiers. For them Vietnam is either for fight or for fun. Since the USA media concentrated on the techno-war paradigm, the audience failed to understand the importance of Vietnamese social structure and cultural tradition that were involved. Neither 'liberals' of the Kennedy and Johnson administrations nor

‘conservatives’ of the Nixon administration ever saw the significance of traditional Vietnamese resistance to foreign intrusive powers (Gibson 12). According to J. W. Gibson, “For thousands of years Vietnamese fought against the Chinese; then they fought against the French from the 1880s until their victory in 1954. Most Vietnamese cultural heroes were national warriors” (12-13). In a well-known book entitled *Vietnam*, Mary McCarthy, who had visited Vietnam during the 60s, condemned those naïve Americans who alleged that the war had anything to do with saving the Vietnamese peasantry, and in the *Diary of an Unknown Warrior*, compiled by D. McCullin, a patriotic Vietnamese youth narrates his experiences while protesting US saturation bombing. These documents or narratives demonstrate the discrepancies between Western creative writings and the historical reality on which they are allegedly based. The representations of Vietnam in *Miss Saigon*, typically, lack authentic cultural elements that might have enriched the audience’s understanding of Vietnam.

Alan Boublil and Claude-Michel Schonberg, the lyricist and composer of *Miss Saigon*, attempted to capture the chaotic social situation in a politically unstable world by reflecting the traumatic experiences of war through one part of the subculture of Saigon (Whitney 12). In this dystopian world, life could be short and unstable, and no human relationships lasted long. Men degraded their own women and women sought the fastest ways for material gains in order to survive. Boublil and Schonberg did not elaborate on the basic economic situation of the Vietnamese people, who, for the most part, were actually peasants with little or no land, and for whom, during wartime farming became an unaffordable profession. Rather, in *Miss Saigon*, Boublil and Schonberg created characters representing cultural stereotypes, Chris, an America GI and Thuy, a Viet Cong. As a typical representative of Vietnam Communists, Thuy is simplified as a young man embodying the spirit of the peasant in order to reform the economic situation of his country. The first step for him was to join in the national revolution as a Communist, to fight against the imperialist power. Going along with the stream of de-colonization, Thuy seemed to be a tensed person ready to challenge anything that represented western powers. In order to

represent the contrasts between democratic America and Communist Vietnam, Boublil and Schonberg provided the musical with a high-pitched march from the Vietnam Communists' street pageant. The song, "Morning of the Dragon," always accompanying Thuy, created a grotesque image and had an impressive effect upon the audience. While tactically avoiding direct comments upon political issues, *Miss Saigon* mitigated the responsibility of the U.S. characters for the treatment of the Asian characters (Schlossman 487). The confrontation between Thuy and Chris, therefore, not only represented the fight between rivals in love but also embodied the conflict between the local and exterior forces. Chris, like many other American soldiers represented in Vietnam narratives, did not trust the Vietnamese at all, and Thuy considered Chris's domination over Kim as almost equivalent to the colonization of Vietnam by a foreign power. No effort was made to represent the Vietnamese farmer/Viet Cong as an honest man fighting for independence against a dictatorial government that was cynically backed up as a "democracy" by the U.S.

The perspective is entirely that of the westerners. American technological and logistic superiority in warfare is projected as a sign of cultural and moral superiority. Thuy's irrational interpretation of Kim and Chris's child as a symbol of betrayal, his attempt to kill the child, and later his ghost's relentless haunting of Kim, all provide reasons to bestow upon Thuy as an Asian a negative and violent identity while the cultural background which constructs his personality is missing. Eleanor Ty protests that in *Miss Saigon* "all the Asian women are reduced to the states of Madame Butterfly, comfort women, peculiar objects of desire, destined to serve as mistresses for the First world males" (18). To Ty, the Asian women in this musical have no political existence aside from their sexual identity, "whereas in actuality many Vietnamese women were involved in the day to day struggles of the war. North Vietnam women have been recognized for their part in the revolution for independence. They fought, carried ammunition, and were often involved in road building and guerrilla warfare" (18). However, no one could deny that throughout the whole musical it was the female protagonist who won tears from the audience. Through her

struggles and trauma, the audience could see that the producers attempted to create the “natural” confrontation between two opponents, and to justify the U.S. interference in South Asia. Critics complained that *Miss Saigon* portrays too many prostitutes and represents the Vietnamese as helpless people eager to get away from the “hellish place.” Although the audience cherished the romantic love between Chris and Kim, yet like many films and literary works about Vietnam, *Miss Saigon* becomes a production focusing on the collective sensual impression for the male voyeur. Renny Christopher maintained² that film, even more than literature, is guilty of relying on stereotypical images of Asians by portraying the Vietnamese as primitive in contrast to “America’s civilized technological, clean-cut white boys” (181). However, in *Miss Saigon* Vietnamese women are still represented as “sexually pliant” (208-13), and Vietnam as a place of “stubborn backwardness” (204).

No one could deny that throughout the whole musical, it is Chris who does not fit into the American monomyth of the hero as defined by Jewett and Lawrence: “a man who renounced temptations and valiantly carried out the redemptive task by restoring the community to its paradisaical condition” (xx). *Miss Saigon* is not a work intended to boost American morale, but instead a commercial production in which a mother would sacrifice her own life to ensure her child’s future. Chris is, nevertheless, constructed as an honest American young man whose attempts to assist his beloved one to leave Saigon are futile. He subsequently marries an American woman, but still comes back to locate his former beloved. We never know whether the child has joined Chris, although the audience is already in tears, expecting a happy reunion.

Most American war films show the United States always fighting on the morally correct side, and U.S. soldiers win almost all the battles (Gibson 18). In *Miss Saigon*, the producer uses a gigantic helicopter to represent one of the most typical of American iconographies, a powerful way to represent the discrepancies between America and Vietnam. The helicopter, however, failed to preserve the somatic relationship between Chris and Kim. His failure to rescue her embodied the collective helpless situation of American soldiers. Like many of his fellow

soldiers, Chris paid to learn the meanings of a real war since after he got on the last helicopter provided by the U.S. government, he was blocked from information about Kim. Throughout the whole musical, assumptions about what was right and how the world should be politically operated seem to have faded away. Although in *Miss Saigon* the U.S. had proved its inability to exert its power over the war, the atmosphere for American Dream was nevertheless lingering in the audience. The helicopter had earlier played a part in the 1960's popular culture; in this musical, the helicopter with its potential for surveillance and transcendental power both to send troops and to rescue them, becomes a even more possessive symbol, comprising military authority and refugees' desperation at the same time. As Alasdair Spark has noted, "No sound or image is as evocative of Vietnam as the helicopter" (86). In Spark's examples, the helicopter scenes in *Apocalypse Now* pointed to the character of an air crew's experience, while in *Deer Hunter* the mobility of the helicopter signified US powers in reentering Vietnam: "Glamour rooted in American myth . . . masculine esprit, exhilarating speed were the rewards for men who at the extreme would abstract themselves from the war entirely, except as suppliers of the machines required . . . and the raw statistics for the body count" (98-101). In *Miss Saigon*, the representation of the sight and sound of the helicopter at the evacuation scene signified that American control of the ground in Vietnam had shrunk to nothing, and Kim's dream of flying away with Chris had become bubbles.

The discrepancy between the producers' objectives and the critics' protests lies in the different understandings of the relationship between the representation of culture and the representation of history. Writing of the past requires a sophisticated and balanced process of representation, and any aesthetic work, serious or popular, involves cultural representation. David Andrew Schlossman claims that not many cultural aspects are demonstrated in *Miss Saigon*; even its music is a combination of all kinds of western music like jazz, or contemporary pop music for the sake of commercial effect (480-91). Representation of culture and of past history invokes ideology and power, a power defined by Duncan and Ley as something "that is often institutionalized

by dominant groups" (11). If we admit that the strategies of representation require positioning, then we have to admit the representation of another culture challenges the documentation of history. In the case of *Miss Saigon*, the dominant group would be the western audience subject to commercial promotion. While communicating with the dominant group, *Miss Saigon* serves as advocate or ventriloquist of the status quo.

As a musical created by British producers, *Miss Saigon* could be considered as successfully capturing the tension of war by projecting images of physical and emotional torture. In this microcosm of war, audiences witness desperate lovers in the midst of the evacuation of American soldiers, and a young woman who sacrifices herself to secure a possibility for her child to be rescued to the United States. From the perspective of cultural representation, however, the work fails to capture adequately the physical and emotional torture in the context of the Vietnam War. If a production about past history is devoid of social and cultural connections, if in it history comes to no more than a figment of the writers' imagination with little or no access to the authentic past, the text is legitimately subjected to various controversial interpretations. Failing to revive national identity and pride while representing a part of history with important historical and cultural context missing, the discourse in *Miss Saigon* could only rewrite the romantic stories of Cio-Cio San and Suzie Wong.

NOTES

¹ Quoted from Phillip Knightley, *The First Casualty* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975) 423.

² Renny Christopher has an illuminating chapter discussing the images and representations as well as the relationships between Vietnamese and American Soldiers as represented in Euro-American and Vietnamese exile narratives. See *The Vietnam War, The American War: Images of Representation in Euro-American and Vietnamese Exile Narratives* (Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1995) 111-64.

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