



Literary Landscapes

Literary Landscapes is a monthly column written by Indra Wussow, a writer, translator and director of the Sylt Foundation.



It is cold in Hanoi in March. Many propaganda posters and socialist manifestations appear along the way from the airport to the venue of the conference, the 'Army Hotel', built on the premises of military barracks and run by the Vietnamese army.

Vietnam as a country is already 4 000 years old, with Hanoi being its capital for the past 1 000 years. Travelling through Hanoi, one experiences the contradictions it so easily brings together: the city conserves the legacy of Ho-Chi-Minh, and his dead body, in its gigantic mausoleum, seemingly from an era long gone. Vietnam is the last preserve of a spirit since vanished from the rest of Asia, lost with progress, and buried among masses of people. In Hanoi this spirit has been preserved, paradoxically thanks to a long socialist standstill that embedded it in a crystal ball.

This socialist image is only one layer of the city, which simultaneously embraces the legacy of colonialism and the new era of capitalism, forming a very Vietnamese way of coexistence. Hanoi seems to be a master of prolonging the decay of fleeting time, one manifested not only in the conservation of Ho-Chi-Min's body, but also in the old colonial buildings whose splendour seems long gone, though they have not lost any of their beauty. Although the city cannot stop the march of time, it seems at least to have briefly suspended it.

Hanoi is a place of melancholy and elegance, of Asian gracefulness and decaying splendour. A city that perfectly merges its contradictions: suppleness and persistence, the cruelty of war and the gracefulness of everyday life. This is

the framework for creating a home out of an amalgam of communism, capitalism and colonialism all at once.

These layers of architecture and history are also very much part of Vietnamese literature and explain the areas of conflict in which writers and poets are operating today.

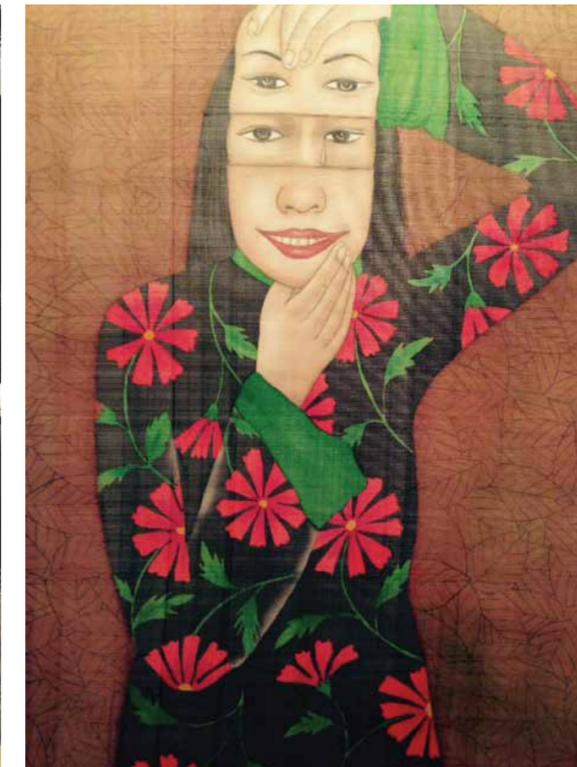
The Vietnamese Writers' Association invited more than 250 writers, poets, translators, editors, publishers and other activists to Hanoi to attend a mammoth conference on literature and its terms and topics. The 2nd Asian and South Pacific Writers' Conference in Hanoi engaged with literature in a way reminiscent of the times of the Soviet Union, with literature as a weapon of class struggle, serving the purpose of those in power. This socialist realism contrasts with those poets and writers who understand the role of literature in another way – and were fortunately part of the festival, too.

Gavin Bowen is a former American soldier in the Vietnam War, a poet of note, and founder of a collective of Vietnamese and American writers. He supports residencies in the US and in Vietnam, enforcing a very important dialogue among former enemies and pushing the borders of how war should be written about. An initiative beyond government control; while there are still soldier writers like the one who wrote about the Vietnamese war against the Cambodian Khmer Rouge.

In a country where all books and art shows still have to be approved by the party and its propaganda ministry, it is not easy to get heard while subject to censorship. But younger poets and writers are challenging the party and its doctrine, and pushing forward into dissident territory.



Hanoi street scene



Hanoi Künstlerin

While the official Vietnam celebrates the revolutionary legacy of its most famous poet Cao Ba Quat, who challenged authorities in the 19th century, his descendants have embarked on a journey to revolutionize Vietnamese literature and push boundaries just as he once did.

Spoken Word and Hip Hop Poetry performed in the back yards of old colonial buildings, and samisdat magazines that are distributed privately and find a vast readership, especially among the young and the educated Vietnamese, are becoming more and more popular, a vibrant part of the literary landscape of Vietnam. Mobile literature is another important tool in a society in which 70% of its people are under 30 years old. It is the first generation whose world is not shaped by war and economic standstill. Poems and texts are sent from mobile to mobile, evading the public space the old writers and poets still inhabit, and offering an intermediate realm in which to negotiate topics that are otherwise ignored, such as sexuality, social injustice or pop culture.

While the Vietnamese Literature Museum still celebrates the writers as heroes of war and revolutionary resistance, modern Vietnamese writers have already transcended this,

forging an exciting literature that is an amalgam connecting all the different historic times and influences, just as Hanoi does. And all the while, Uncle Ho is lying in his mausoleum, dreaming of a burial in his beloved Vietnamese soil. Maybe his dream will one day come true. **CF**

On 7 May at 19:00 well-known Nigerian writer Helon Habila will be a guest of the 'Literary Crossroads' at the Goethe Institute on Jan Smuts Avenue in Parkview.

Literary Crossroads, curated By Pumla Gqola and Indra Wussow is a new series of talks where South African writers meet colleagues from all over the continent and from the African diaspora to discuss trends, topics and themes prevalent in their literatures today.

Theme of this eve is: 'From Faction to Fiction' - how does reality inform the art of writing