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Our Friends in the South
Anti-Colonial Universalisms and Sino-Vietnamese Solidarity in the Global 1960s

Benjamin Kindler

Abstract

In 1964, the Foreign Languages Publishing House of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam released a series of letters in English, French, Chinese and other languages as part of its campaign of international solidarity against the US military presence. These letters, having initially been published in Vietnamese for domestic consumption, collected the exchanges between resistance fighters in southern Vietnam and their lovers, friends and families in the north, offering a varied and harrowing portrayal of a protracted guerrilla struggle. Whilst these publications left traces across their myriad sites of circulation, of no country was this more true than the People's Republic of China, where the letters, published as *Letters from the South* (*Nanfang Laixin*), produced a series of powerful cultural afterlives. This study tracks the reception of these publications in China and examines the works that they inspired. The first consists of noted author Ba Jin's multiple journeys to North Vietnam in the first half of the 1960s and his lyrical essays and public epistolary exchanges with leading North Vietnamese writers and poets, in which the publication *Letters from the South* features heavily. The second involves two theatrical scripts that were written and performed in China, also under the name *Letters from the South* (*Nanfang Laixin*). These sets of textual afterlives differed in their specific forms but in combination the two raise questions about translation, border-crossing and geography.

Keywords: China, Vietnam, Sino-Vietnamese solidarity, Letters from the South, 1960s, anti-imperialist resistance, literature, theatre

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> When A Yun now spoke he did so without any restraint. He spoke to me in the manner of a familiar old friend: "When you next come to us, I certainly will not be here in this school. I hope that you and I will meet again in the south!" (Du Xuan 1965: 56)

The heartfelt words with which the Vietnamese host A Yun bade farewell to the Chinese playwright Du Xuan underlines the emotive experience that was Sino-Vietnamese solidarity activism in the Asian 1960s. The promise of a renewed meeting in the south marks a horizon of expectation that encompasses the dense and complex relationships between the projects of national liberation and socialist internationalism that comprised the history of much of the twentieth century: the prospect of a meeting in the south would, on the one hand, necessitate the reunification of Vietnam, a project that reached its victory in 1975, and yet so too, in the vision of A Yun, would such a reunification provide grounds for the further extension of projects of solidarity between the two socialist states of China and Vietnam. The briefness of Du Xuan's account, which forms part of a travelogue concerning his visit to Vietnam in 1965, offers no clues as to the subsequent fate of those he met during this trip, yet history records that the expectations of Sino-Vietnamese internationalism were cruelly dashed. The two states proved unable to sustain their earlier internationalist commitments amidst the increasingly virulent struggles of the Sino-Soviet Split, and eventually their geopolitical differences descended into war in the 1970s.

To engage with this history, then, means to grapple with the difficulties and pitfalls of internationalism, mediated as it was by the persistent challenges of state borders and the polarising tendencies of the Cold War. These difficulties were further exacerbated in the case of Vietnam and China by the ideological weight of the pre-modern imperial relations between the two states, a history which today forms the basis of popular and official perceptions for each of the other. In contemporary Vietnamese discourse, China's complex historical relations with its southern partner are reduced to a dehistoricised category of colonial oppression and Vietnamese resistance. This prevalent nationalist discourse is totally inadequate to the complex permutations of that relationship, and above all to the aspirations of twentieth-century projects of solidarity, which are increasingly subject to erasure amidst post-socialist revanchist projects in both countries.

This article proposes a return to the 1960s as a moment that enables us to think otherwise, celebrating one of the most fruitful relationships of cultural solidarity between two exemplars of Third World socialism. It does so both as a recovery of a lost history, and also as a theoretical intervention amidst the ruins of postcolonial studies, oriented towards a reassertion of the necessity and possibility of a universalist emancipatory politics, rooted in the anti-colonial struggles of past and present. In doing so, it joins a range of scholars in and beyond Asian Studies whose interventions may be summarised in the terms given by Priyamvada Gopal, namely as excavations of historically-existing attempts

to envisage new "cartographies of liberation" emergent in the interstices between nation-state projects.[1] The emergence of such cartographies in the global 1960s was, in fact, no historical aberration. The shared experience of imperialist subjugation over the nineteenth century had already forced Chinese and Vietnamese revolutionaries of the fin-de-siècle to seek imaginaries of political community beyond both the pre-modern tributary system of intra-Asian relations and the emergent nation-state. The publication in 1907 of Phan Boi Chau's essay "Sorrow for Vietnam, Condolences for Yunnan", rendered in elegant classical Chinese, marked just such a vision, in which Phan attended to the border region between the southwestern province of Yunnan and northern Vietnam within the reworking of space under the aegis of colonial railroad expansion, arguing that the political geography of the region rendered it a viable site for a transnational project of insurgency.[2] The 1960s marked, to this extent, a renewal and extension of that pre-history, albeit under changed historical conditions, with cultural activism assuming a new importance in transforming the limits of spatial possibility.

During the period 1963–1966 with which this article is concerned, there were two full Chinese delegations of authors to Vietnam, the first in July 1963 and the second in 1965, both conducted under the personal aegis of veteran Chinese author Ba Jin and encompassing meetings between Chinese authors and their Vietnamese counterparts. These delegations left behind a substantial set of textual traces and accounts, of which Du Xuan's is but one example. Within the tapestry of cultural exchanges between the two countries, this article traces the history and textual afterlives of a particular set of texts whose origins lay with the Vietnamese strategy of "people's diplomacy" – namely, those published in English as *Letters from South Vietnam*.

These collections comprised a series of letters sent by fighters of the National Liberation Front in southern Vietnam to their friends, family and lovers in the north, recounting their experiences of armed struggle and their deep emotions for their loved ones in the north. In no other country did these Vietnamese-led publications shape an emergent culture of solidarity as they did in China. Translated into Chinese, they informed subsequent contacts between Chinese and Vietnamese authors, and in turn also gave rise to a series of Chinese adaptations, specifically in the form of two plays that appeared and were performed for Chinese and Vietnamese audiences. These textual exchanges are therefore of special importance in the way they were co-produced between Vietnamese and Chinese cultural workers. The resulting cartography (to borrow Gopal's term) traversed state borders and allowed the "south" to be understood as a

1 Beyond Gopal's evocative phrase, recent years have also witnessed other scholars seeking a vocabulary through which to re-state the possibility of a militant universalism. Examples include "transnational nationalism" (Prashad 2008), "new humanism" (Liu 2014) and "anticolonial worldmaking" (Getachew 2019).

2 For a further discussion of the importance of Phan Boi Chau and Vietnam in early twentieth-century Chinese anti-colonial thought, see Karl 2002 (Chapter 6).

porous space of struggle as well as the temporal horizon of expectation anticipated by Du Xuan's interlocutor, in which Chinese and Vietnamese revolutionaries might hope – one day – to meet again.

In what follows, this article begins with the arrival in China of the Vietnamese publications published in English as *Letters from South Vietnam*, with close attention to the permutations of translation that informed a capacity to produce new spatial imaginaries. It does so in particular by examining the function of these texts in interactions between Chinese and Vietnamese cultural workers, specifically the reportage of Ba Jin, which used the epistolary form to stage intimate relations of solidarity with his Vietnamese interlocutors. The article then shifts to the Chinese stage adaptations of these texts as an attempt to envisage the possibilities of pan-Asian liberation struggles from a Vietnamese subject-position. The article ends with a consideration of the process of erasure in the post-socialist period of the late 1970s, in which the spatial possibilities embodied in an expansive notion of the "south" were supplanted by a re-ethnicisation of the political subject centred around the figure of the overseas Chinese.

Letters from a familiar land

The privileging of culture as a mode of international political mobilisation under the conditions of the Cold War formed a core component of the strategy of "people's diplomacy" that was employed by both the Democratic Republic of Vietnam and the People's Republic of China to gain international support amidst widespread conditions of non-recognition on the part of other, non-socialist states. In 1964, Ho Chi Minh embraced people's diplomacy as a wide-ranging ensemble of practices that would also express and embody "the people" as an expansive political subject. He thus argued that diplomacy was "not only an area of concern for embassies and consulates-general [...] but also for such organised activities as foreign trade, culture, youth, women, and trade union agencies, all of which are equally responsible for diplomacy" (Nguyen 2003: 133).

As one particular dimension of this strategy amidst the intensification of American military intervention in Vietnam, the Vietnam Foreign Languages Publishing House (FLPH) undertook the publication in 1964 of two volumes, which appeared in English as *Letters from South Vietnam*, and in Chinese as *Letters from the South* (南方来信), the two Chinese volumes being published in January and June of that year. Issued in French and Arabic as well as English and Chinese, this set of publications embodied the cultural dimensions of "people's diplomacy" in the way they sought to engage in the international solidarity movement by drawing attention to the implications of American intervention. These translated collections were themselves collated from a prior

collection published for domestic consumption under the title *Từ tuyến đầu Tổ quốc* (*From the Borders of Our Motherland*; Hanoi: Van hoc).

Across the different versions, these collections comprise a series of letters sent by supporters and fighters of the National Liberation Front in southern Vietnam to their friends, family members and lovers in the north, recounting their experiences of armed struggle, their hopes for the future and their deep emotions for their loved ones in the north. Consistent with the international inspiration behind these collections, a lengthy introduction added to the versions published for audiences outside of Vietnam emphasised that the journeys of the letters themselves had necessitated pathways of transmission that went beyond the borders of the two Vietnamese states. The introduction recounted that the letters had passed through the countries of the presumed readers of the collections on the way to their Vietnamese recipients. The English introduction records as follows:

> From South Vietnam, letters arrive in Hanoi by hundreds, and from the four corners of the earth by thousands. To avoid the barrier of the Ben Hai river, which is "but a span", many of them had to cross frontiers, scatter in the world, pass through Asia, Europe, Africa, or America – by train, by sea, or by air; in short, they had to follow thousands of roundabout routes before reaching Hanoi, as birds flew to their nests through storm and rain. (FLPH 1963: 5)

The attention to these convoluted pathways of transmission, in combination with the letters themselves – which are often intimate and lyrical in their contents – is central to the effect of the collections, insofar as it has the function of interpolating the non-Vietnamese readers into the subject-position of the assumed recipient of the letters themselves. Yet this effect is not the same across all the versions of these publications, as there are differences throughout the English and Chinese versions of this introduction which shed light on the circulation of these publications in China as compared to other locations. In the remainder of the introduction, for example, readers are informed in the English version that "one can form a mental image of the distressing life in the occupied areas". The Chinese version maintains the same formal organisation of the introduction, whereby individual paragraphs correspond to their equivalents in other language versions, but its rendering of the anticipated effect of the letters differs in striking ways from the English. A more literal rendering of the Chinese that corresponds, in structural terms, to the English just quoted, would therefore be:

> […] reading these letters, we can naturally place ourselves [置身于] amidst the life of terror in the areas controlled by the American-Ngo clique; and we come, without having to think about it, to stand by the side [身边] of the masses of people in the south. (FLPH 1964: 3–4)

The Chinese injunction to the reader therefore differs from the English in its vision of an almost literal spatial emplacement amongst the Vietnamese people.

In this rendering, the emotive force of the letters lies not only in the capacity to produce an "image" of life in southern Vietnam, but also in the shift in spatial location that is both willed on the part of the reader but also testament to the autonomous emotive force of the letters. The letters themselves follow the same order in the Chinese as they do in the English, and, whilst often being somewhat longer in Chinese, with the addition of asides and more literal translation of the corresponding Vietnamese texts, otherwise do not differ to the same extent as the divergences in language that emerge from the foreign-language preface.

To the nuanced differences in the language of this preface, however, must be added the title of the collections, as the Chinese rendering makes no explicit reference to Vietnam (as distinct from the English title *Letters from South Vietnam*) but rather maintains the general descriptive category of "South", such that the Chinese title can be directly rendered as *Letters from the South*. The cumulative effect of these differences in translation was decisive for the possibility of an expansion in spatial imagination beyond the limits prescribed by the English version. The "south", in other words, would come to demarcate not only the southern part of Vietnam and its division from the north, but also Vietnam itself as a "south" in relation to China, and Chinese readers as, therefore, the intended recipients of these letters sent from the south. These divergences were not without their political foundations. The strategy of "people's diplomacy" was heavily oriented towards raising support in those countries that were not allied with Vietnam. It may be surmised, then, that the intended audience of *Letters from South Vietnam* consisted of the anti-war movements in Britain and the United States, in order that those movements would put pressure on their respective governments. The People's Republic of China was an outlier in this regard, in that there was no necessity to seek the support of the Chinese government, as a socialist state which extended material support to the Democratic Republic of Vietnam from the 1950s onwards.

The publication of *Letters* in China was therefore not a marginal cultural intervention but attracted enormous attention and an enthusiastic reception on the part of readers. Subsequent to the initial publications under the aegis of the Vietnam Foreign Languages Publishing House, both volumes of the letters were re-published by the Chinese Authors Publishing House in May and July for volumes one and two respectively. In 1965 there was added a "rural edition" which incorporated selected letters together with annotations and woodcut images to support readers with lower rates of literacy in the countryside (Rural 1965). Individual letters and extracts from the collections were, moreover, carried in a range of journal publications, allowing the text to gain a wider dissemination beyond the two volumes organised by Vietnamese cultural institutions.

A lengthy report published in the major periodical *Art and Literary Gazette* collected the responses of varied cultural workers to the first volume, including luminaries such as Xia Yan, Shao Quanlin and Zang Kejia. It is significant that these responses were themselves in the style of readers' letters to the journal, anticipating the use of the epistolary form as a basis for constructing solidarity. Their responses were effusive, but they also speak to the real theoretical problems at stake, namely, how to make the distinct anti-imperial histories of the Chinese and Vietnamese national liberation struggles commensurate with one another. Shao Quanlin therefore began his account by suggesting that the effect of the letters was to compel an act of memory through which the contemporary Vietnamese struggle became thinkable in terms of a Chinese historical and political precedent:

> The scenes described in this book make me think of the cruel destiny and heroic struggle of the Chinese people before liberation from the rule of the American-Jiang clique. How similar are the paths of struggle through which the peoples of our two countries have passed! (Shao 1964: 7).

The Chinese poet Zang Kejia, who during this period also wrote a poem under the title "Letters from the South" responding to the Vietnamese texts, similarly noted:

> As far as Chinese readers are concerned, this book gives us a great sense of intimacy and arouses emotional sympathy [共鸣]. This is because, beginning with the first Chinese revolutionary war, through to the liberation of our country, we underwent more than twenty years of struggle. We too were the authors and recipients of letters in this way. (Zang 1964: 9)

The problem evoked by these authors of how to locate the grounds for a concrete universality across time and space would recur in the process of adaptation of *Letters from the South* for the stage, as we shall see. Yet the immediate context of reading the letters as Vietnamese-led publications produced its own afterlives in the form of the written word, namely in the way that the epistolary form – the exchange of letters from north to south – emerged as a textual device that could be adapted to stage new relations of solidarity explicitly modelled on the practice of *Letters from the South*.

This is true above all of those individual writers who travelled to Vietnam as part of the two delegations of writers over 1963–1965. Of these participants, the leader of the delegations, Ba Jin, has a special significance, first and foremost on account of his specific use of the epistolary form as a way of staging solidarity. It cannot be ignored, however, that his role in Sino-Vietnamese solidarity in the 1960s overlapped with a much longer history stretching back to the pre-liberation period, in which Ba Jin was a leading proponent of Esperanto and closely involved in anarchist causes around the world, as well as with the

1950s, in which Ba Jin wrote a long series of reportage texts based on his journeys to North Korea.

In the 1960s, Ba Jin sought to craft two separate reportage collections based on his experiences in northern Vietnam, each of which drew together essays and reflections that had been published across different periodicals in the wake of his trips.[3] Of these, the first was published in September 1964 under the title *On the Banks of Hiền Lương Bridge*, whereas the publication of the second, planned for 1966 under the title *The Indestructible Bridge*, was interrupted by the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution in that same year. In his earlier collection, *Letters from the South* emerges at the level of form, namely in the consistent choice of an epistolary mode in which Ba Jin corresponds with poets in northern Vietnam, as well as the level of content, in which Ba Jin discusses the text itself, and its significance as a material token of solidarity between himself and his interlocutors.

The short essay "A Precious Gift", then, is of special significance.[4] It takes the form of an extended letter to the Vietnamese poet Nguyễn Xuân Sanh, whose poem "Longing for the Sea" was featured in the October 1964 issue in the journal *World Literature*, this issue being a special edition comprised entirely of poetry and fiction from Vietnamese authors (Ruan 1964).[5] Ba Jin's extended letter was originally published in June of 1964, following his return from his first delegation trip to Vietnam. The point of departure for the letter is the arrival of a gift from Nguyễn, namely, the French edition of *Letters*, Ba Jin being fluent in French as a result of his earlier histories of internationalism. Ba Jin reports, in the opening lines of his letter: "Yesterday I received the copy of *Letters from the South* that you sent (the French edition). This book eternally shines forth light and is indeed a truly impressive gift" (Ba Jin 1964: 429).

The suggestion here that we might, with Ba Jin, conceive of the translated volume in the mode of a "gift" is of some significance, and one that has not gone unnoticed by other scholars attending to practices of translation (Venuti 2010). The specific contents of this gift exchanged in the interactions between Ba Jin and Nguyễn is that it does not fall into the aporia of giver and recipient, which Derrida locates as the basis of the impossibility of any genuine gift, but rather generates a transformation in political subjectivities by which Ba Jin is able both to express gratitude and also to relinquish his subject position as an

3 Across the socialist period, reportage had a special significance for projects of international solidarity. For a brief summary of international socialist reportage in China, see Laughlin 2019.

4 Of particular interest is the fact that this individual essay was also translated into Vietnamese as part of a collection entitled *Thanks to China, Our Comrade-In-Arms Of The Same Trench* (see Vietnam Centre and Sam Johnson Vietnam Archive, https://vva.vietnam.ttu.edu/repositories/2/digital_objects/214384).

5 The journal *World Literature* had a central role across the 1960s as a site of translation through which Chinese readers were introduced to writings from across Asia, Africa and Latin America. Significantly, the focus of the journal's content on these areas marked a distinction from its earlier incarnation in the 1950s, when it had been comprised almost entirely of material from the Soviet Union and the canon of Euro-American literature. For a useful discussion of this journal, see Liu 2014.

external recipient who is outside of the context of struggle from which the gift *Letters from the South* may be said to emerge. Later in the same letter, and subsequent to a chain of anecdotes concerning his time in Vietnam, he then declares:

> These things that I saw and heard and of which I speak to you today, I have spoken about briefly, and merely in part, but only because I want you and other Vietnamese authors to know that I have carried your hearts with me back to Shanghai, and that my heart and yours have already melded together, your feelings have also become my feelings. Therefore, what an excited heart I bore as I read and re-read *Letters from the South*. That this book, written with blood, life and unwavering commitment, moved me to such an extent, you can surely imagine. (Ba Jin 1990: 435)

Ba Jin's description of his heart having melded together with those of his Vietnamese hosts marks a felt experience of total solidarity that exceeds not only the binary of recipient and giver with respect to the gift that motivates his letter, but also the limitations of mere sympathy as a political response to the Vietnamese liberation struggle. His vision of totalising commitment is therefore synonymous with that vision in the Chinese version of the international preface, in which the letters are said to generate for Chinese readers the possibility of placing themselves amongst the Vietnamese protagonists.

There is, in this context, a certain irony behind the fact of Ba Jin using a translated text as the point of departure for an epistolary mode of solidarity, which is that other forms of translation (like for example the oral translation between Ban Jin and his Vietnamese hosts) occupy only a semi-visible place in his texts. This relates in turn to the ambiguities of the epistolary form itself, which – while directed to a Vietnamese author and assuming a relationship of personal familiarity and political intimacy – was also published in a public form for Chinese readers, first in a periodical, and then as one of many essays and reportage texts making up the collection *On the Banks of Hiền Lương Bridge*. The letter provides no clues as to the necessary processes of translation which enabled it to be read by Nguyễn Xuân Sanh as its putative recipient, and the fact that Ba Jin's interactions in Vietnam naturally depended on a ready staff of translators is only occasionally rendered evident across his different texts. The impulse towards political intimacy embodied in the epistolary form therefore requires the erasure – strategic, to be sure – of those practices of translation that rendered conversation between Chinese and Vietnamese authors possible, even while a translated text provided the conditions for a mutual process of recognition. Yet the problem of oral translation, its visibility and central location in projects of political solidarity, re-emerges in more visible form in the text immediately following "A Precious Gift", which is simply entitled "Vietnamese People". Whilst not in an epistolary form, this text makes explicit that Ba Jin travelled in the company of a Vietnamese "translator comrade", never named. Ba Jin recalls:

> The translator comrade who travelled with me also worked at the Vietnamese Foreign Languages Press, and he told me that, through a process of collation and editing, people collected a series of letters into a book, and used a name that was both simple and appropriate: *Letters from the South*; he said that the translation work of the Chinese edition was already complete, and that printing was underway. (Ba Jin 1990: 451)

Listening to this comrade's account of the letters, Ba Jin turns again to the imagery of his previous text: "although I was listening carefully to his words, I nonetheless clearly felt that there was a long, long red thread that bound his heart to mine, and which coiled round these two hearts" (ibid.). It transpires that it is this very translator comrade who also sends Ba Jin the Chinese edition of *Letters From the South*, after the French edition dispatched by Nguyễn Xuân Sanh. Here, then, translation is rendered visible, but its locus remains primarily textual. It may be said, therefore, that the shifting visibility of translation is one of the points of tension within the staging of solidarity that emerges in Ba Jin's texts.

To this tension must be added the gendered content of this project of solidarity. Across his accounts, Ba Jin consistently tended towards images of heroic Vietnamese women combatants. The truth-value of these images can hardly be doubted, and yet they shed light on the extent to which the self-positioning of Chinese writers as inhabiting a porous zone of anti-colonial politics did not take place on gender-neutral grounds but rather generated the projection of the "south" as a feminised space. In a further collection of reportage essays published in 1965, then, of which Du Xuan's text was a part, the opening essay by Han Beiping, entitled "Recipients of Letters from the South" (from which comes the title of the collection as a whole) recalls, upon meeting some Vietnamese from the south, that "oh the south is a part of the whole of Vietnam, and yet today, she is divided, suffers destruction, and yet continues to fight" (Han 1965: 9).

If, with respect both to the problem of translation and the gendering of Vietnam, these texts contain their moments of tension, then neither can the emergent project of radical universalism be forced back into the familiar postcolonial critique of universalist politics that provides the alibi for the homogenisation of a particular identity or subject-position. The power of the exchange of letters marked by Ba Jin, consisting of both the exchange of the textual artefact *Letters from the South* as well as Ba Jin's epistolary exchanges with his counterparts in Vietnam, is that it provides the condition for a mode of political practice that exceeds the fixed categories of Vietnam and China, or Vietnamese and Chinese, consisting instead of the formulation of a new political subjectivity that cannot be reduced to a state logic or any narrow form of the particular. The capacity of the gift, in other words, is a generative one that replaces any notion of a fixed (that is, temporal) identity with a shared project based on a common claim to the future, and the possibility of making connec-

tions between the struggles of past and present. The universalist possibilities of Ba Jin's texts would become yet more visible when *Letters from the South* took to the dramatic stage.

Staging the people's war

The initial encounters with *Letters from the South* and the epistolary solidarities engendered by Ba Jin's reportage literature provided the conditions for a further extension of Sino-Vietnamese solidarity that would be drawn into Chinese cultural life before, in turn, gaining a new international presence. In 1964–1965, two distinct Chinese theatre companies – the People's Liberation Army Cultural Troupe Theatre Brigade and the Shanghai People's Art Theatre – each released spoken-drama plays under the title *Letters from the South*. The version produced by the Liberation Army was first released in the major theatre journal *Scripts* in September of 1964, while that of the Shanghai People's Art Theatre made its appearance the following year in the journal *Harvest*, with both plays also being released in single editions in 1965.

These plays were adapted from the materials contained in the Vietnamese-authored publications, but were, in fact, by no means the total extent of Chinese dramatic productions focused on Vietnam during this period. There was a veritable explosion of plays taking up the Vietnamese national liberation struggle. In order to summarise the extent of dramatic developments that emerged over this period, the April 1965 issue of the journal *Theatre Gazette* published a lengthy editorial under the title "Develop Theatrical Propaganda in Support of the Anti-American Patriotic Struggle of the Vietnamese People" in which they argued that theatre workers in China would:

> [...] actively use our own weapons – the theatrical arts – to expose the criminal invasion of the American imperialists, and to extol the great patriotic and internationalist revolutionary spirit of the Vietnamese people, through which they protect their homeland and protect the interests of all the peoples of the world. (Theatre Gazette 1965a: 2)

There followed a telegram sent on behalf of the Chinese Theatre Workers Association to their Vietnamese counterparts in which they pledged to continue their work in support of the Vietnamese struggle. They drew particular attention to the fact that "since August of last year, the play *Letters from the South*, which represents the struggle of the southern Vietnamese people against American imperialism, has been performed throughout our entire country" (All-China 1965: 3).[6] The choice of this particular journal issue to release such a telegram and various statements of commitment from Chinese playwrights was by no

6 Of the plays that were released under the title of *Letters from the South*, this telegram can only have been referring to the version drawn up by the Liberation Army, as the second version, that of the Shanghai People's Arts Theatre, was only released in 1965.

means a coincidence. It followed from and made explicit reference to an appeal launched at the second session of the third national congress of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam under the title of "A Letter of Appeal to all the Countries of the World" in which the Democratic Republic made further use of the strategy of people's diplomacy by calling for international support for an end to the conflict on the basis of the provisions set out by the Geneva Accords, which provided for an independent and united Vietnam through elections.

More impressive still than these statements of public support was the evidence of the sheer diversity of performances on the subject of Vietnamese national liberation that were performed by Chinese local and national theatre companies over this period. Some indication of this diversity is provided by a roster of plays and performances under the title "A New Theatre Roster Depicting the Anti-American Struggle of the Vietnamese People". This listing gives insight into the fact that, beyond spoken-word drama, plays based on the Vietnamese struggle also encompassed various local operatic forms, including *yueju* and *pingju*. Many of these plays were, in turn, printed in full as part of a special extra edition of *Scripts* carrying the title "Scripts Special Issue Firmly Promoting the Patriotic Anti-American Struggle of the Vietnamese People". The account of these performances emphasised that the plays concerned were varied in their sites and conditions of performance. Theatre workers and amateur dramatists were said to "extensively perform many plays supporting the struggle of Vietnam against the United States, on the stage, in squares, and on street corners" (Theatre Gazette 1965b: 9).

This aside gives some insight into the circumstances under which these plays were performed. Several of the plays performed over this period were single-act plays. Being based on local operatic forms and therefore encompassing notions of theatrical mimesis different from that of modern spoken-word drama, these single-act plays would have been accessible to audiences at street-level performances. They included, for example, a play entitled "Battle under the Coconut Trees" in which a member of a guerrilla unit is said to use clever tactics of deceit to lure enemy troops out of their positions in order that this guerrilla unit might capture their leader (ibid.).

The two plays that appeared as *Letters from the South* were not-small scale agitprop dramas, however, but full productions in the modern theatrical tradition. Of the two plays, the earlier play, created and performed by the Liberation Army, was by far the more prominent, and so comprises the basis of the analysis here. The earlier play is, moreover, distinguished by the theoretical depth of the discussions surrounding its production, which explicitly pose the problem of universalism. In a careful article entitled "Supporting the Anti-American Struggle of Our Vietnamese Brothers", two of the playwrights behind the text, Fu Duo and Ma Rong, explained the circumstances behind the creation

of the play itself. In this account, the aspiration was initially to formulate a dramatisation of the Huong Dien Massacre in 1955.[7]

Only after having encountered the publication of *Letters from the South* did the playwrights decide to take contemporary events as their site of dramatic intervention. They reportedly succeeded in crafting the play within less than a month, after which the play underwent multiple revisions in response to audience reactions. Yet more important, however, were the ways the playwrights confronted their own relationship with the Vietnamese struggle, and, more specifically, what they took to be their "insufficiency of life" (Fu / Ma 1965: 27). "Life" here signifies a theoretical category of Chinese socialist cultural production, in which entry into the social relations of production that constituted the life of the masses was understood to be a precondition for cultural production and the effectiveness of the cultural worker in portraying the cultural subject of socialism. Whilst noting that their lack of direct experience of the Vietnamese struggle posed certain problems for creation, the authors nonetheless asserted, in a passage that bears quoting at length, that:

> The Vietnamese struggle has many points of commonality with our own past struggle against the Japanese, so that it is possible to appropriate [调动] the life of the past era of struggle to make up for the insufficiencies of the present. Amongst the writers, directors and performers who participated in the creation of *Letters from the South*, there were many comrades who had also participated in the Anti-Japanese War, the War of Liberation, the War to Aid Korea and Resist America. Their past accumulation of life was therefore of great use in the creation of *Letters from the South*. For example, with respect to the life of struggle, of being oppressed and invaded, and of fighting against oppression and invasion, and the feeling of burning hatred against imperialism and its running dogs, we are in a position of commonality [共同性] with the Vietnamese. For this reason, we arrived at an image [of dramatic characters] upon reading the collection of letters, *Letters from the South*. (Fu / Ma 1965: 27)

Each of the formulations in this brief excursus are rich in theoretical significance, and demonstrate the ways in which Chinese playwrights were acutely conscious of the stakes of forging a new anti-colonial universalism through dramatic practice. Above all, their comments mark a site of productive tension. On the one hand, these remarks demonstrate the drive to formulate a dramatic text whose contents are those of the historical present, consisting of the contemporaneous events of the Vietnamese national liberation struggle. On the other hand, the dramatists show their awareness the necessity of mobilising other times and places in order that those present events might become legible and sensible to Chinese playwrights for whom the Vietnamese struggle remains adjacent to rather than synonymous or synchronous with their own political experience.

7 The Huong Dien Massacre of July 1955 witnessed the execution of unarmed peasants by forces of the South Vietnamese government in the village of Huong Dien in Quang Tri Province.

The "appropriation" or "mobilisation" of the experience of the Chinese national liberation struggle as concretised in the Anti-Japanese War thereby takes on the form of a radically presentist reading of those experiences and events. The effect is that these events and histories are dislodged from the status of a history whose temporality is simply that of the past and re-introduced into the present as the foundation of an anti-imperialist form of cultural practice. So too, in the same gesture, is the specificity of the Vietnamese struggle rendered capable of historicisation in order that it might be interpreted through the struggle of other times and places. A practice of anti-colonial comparison is therefore the basis for an assertion of "commonality" through which the Chinese and Vietnamese struggles are rendered commensurate rather than simply equivalent to one another.

The chain of comparison that unites these struggles is not the only means of marking the extent to which the Vietnamese struggle may be understood in terms of the history of struggles in China of which the actors and directors are said to have direct experience. The dialectic functions in the opposite direction as well, by instantiating the anti-colonial character of the Chinese revolutionary process. Nor was this relationship of commensurability a naively imagined one, as it also related to the concrete history of devising rural-based tactics adequate to the waging of an anti-imperialist struggle, as actualised in Mao's theory of the People's War. The posing of the People's War as a shared anti-colonial political practice provides the major motivating force for the text of the drama, to which we now turn.

As with many of the theatrical texts relating to Vietnam, as well as the content of *Letters from the South*, the suffering of southern Vietnamese peasants in the strategic hamlets provides the point of dramatic departure for the entire play. The first acts begins with a depiction of the petty abuses and demands meted out to Vietnamese peasants by American officials and their local agents in the strategic hamlets, including the imposition of strict curfews and controls on movement, as well as periodic demands for alcohol and money. Beyond this point, however, the play demonstrates a considerable range and mobility in its use of locations. There is, therefore, a formal contrast between, on the one hand, the spatial range of the play itself, and, on the other, the spatial restrictions placed on the diegetic characters.

This is true above all for the villagers who are, with the exception of those involved in the guerrilla underground, spatially restricted to the militarised confines of the strategic hamlet. The guiding thread is the character A Ha, who, as a female member of the resistance movement, displays considerable bravery throughout almost every act and emerges as a classic emblem of revolutionary fortitude. Her dramatic construction as a character poses suggestive parallels with other instances of heroic female characters in Chinese socialist

culture at this point in time, including, most famously, *Red Detachment of Women*.[8] In this context, gender is not an impediment to a universalist politics but part of its foundation, in which a vision of anti-imperialist womanhood and militancy underscores a commonality between Vietnamese and Chinese histories that is, again, irreducible to a state logic.

With the exception of the fifth act, A Ha is present in each part of the play. In spite of the seriousness of the subject matter, the play also displays borrowings from other cultural forms that allow for moments of excitement and even humour. The majority of the third act, for example, is given over to an urban setting, and more specifically a bar, which plays host to an elaborate espionage scene in which A Ha is forced to don sunglasses in order to avoid being caught by the South Vietnamese police. Yet the larger ideological subtext of the play consists of the recurrent utilisation of a figurative language of the human and non-human. The significance of these repeated gestures is that they allow the play to contest the appropriation of a discourse of humanitarianism within neo-colonial projects and in turn gesture towards a radical humanism centred on shared projects of Asian liberation. The invocation of a humanist critique emerges during the first act of the play through the figure of Fourth Older Uncle, who, like A Ha, is also a member of the guerrilla underground. Upon sneaking back into the village after having been captured and almost put to death, Fourth Older Uncle reports the cruel acts of American soldiers and local police. The police are said to have:

> [...] poured petrol on the bodies of the people and set them alight. There was a pregnant woman whose body was on fire, and the police pushed and pulled her this way and that, purposefully toying with her. Afterwards that woman fell down, and an American beast went over and gave her a kick for good measure [...] these beasts who extinguish humanity all they did was stand there and laugh! (Sha et al. 1964: 23–24)

The horrific power of this scene relies on the double audience listening to the narrative, whereby the immediate audience internal to the diegesis, consisting of the gathered villages including A Ha herself, provides the site for the positioning of the audience of the dramatic performance, in effect interpolating the audience as members of the village community to whom the story is addressed.

The articulation of a language of protest based on the denigration of the human being, or an incipient radical humanism, remains central to the remainder of the play, though not without certain ironies along the way. In the bar scene that comprises act three, for example, once A Ha has made her speedy escape, there follows a long exchange between Wen An, a dissolute intellectual who seeks to expose the crimes of the South Vietnamese government but is denied access to a free press, and Ruan Jin, who purports to be a former classmate in sympathy with Wen An. Ruan also laments that "I only wish that I could over-

8 The popularisation and dissemination of the image of the female militant in both China and Vietnam has gained close attention in scholarship, see for example Chen 2011.

throw this society that eats people!" (Sha et al. 1964: 33). The irony of this scene comes from the fact that Ruan Jin is himself eventually revealed to be a collaborator whose deeds result in the arrest of both Wen An and A Ha. Nonetheless, the deployment of the formulation of a society that eats people is significant not only as a generalised restatement of a humanist critique of a society under occupation, but also because it introduces a suggestive anachronism or a displacement of the straightforwardly mimetic qualities of the text in relation to the purportedly Vietnamese setting. This formulation, in other words, was specific to the Chinese conditions in which the text was written, having an unmistakable affinity with Lu Xun and the May Fourth tradition of humanist critique, including that of Ba Jin. If this anachronism marks a certain slippage within the text and to that extent a failure of cultural fidelity, so too does it further displace that critical humanist language from a predetermined historical position and allow for an articulation of the commonalities between these historical moments, that is, the Vietnamese moment of the 1960s that serves as the diegetic setting, and the legacy of Chinese radical humanist critique of the 1920s, from which that particular language of critique originates.

The force of humanist critique that motivates the text is, however, most visible in the final scene, which stages the impending dispatch of A Ha to a prison encampment on Con Son Island. The scene provides the basis for a prolonged exchange between herself and the American advisor, Carter, in which Carter uses a language of humanitarianism to convince A Ha of the benefits of collaboration, which deserves to be quoted in full:

> *Carter:* I am a humanitarian, and, what's more, I am a sincere Christian. My pastor told me that it is not permissible to infringe on the happiness of others in the slightest way, and so, even whilst my officers put forward the command to execute you, I am determined to allow you to live. Yet, happiness always comes with a price, and so only if you are willing to tell me the names of the leaders of this demonstration. [...]
>
> *A Ha:* Friendship! I ask you, you who have used napalm to burn our coconut groves and rice paddies into a wasteland, is this your friendship? You have sprayed chemical weapons on our banana trees, in our wells, you have caused tens of thousands to die of sickness, and you call this friendship? Your planes, your warships, your tanks, have smothered the holy skies, seas and land of our motherland, you have made our mothers lose their sons, you have made young women become widows, and you have made children who have just begun to call for their parents become orphans, and you call this friendship towards Vietnam, towards the peoples of Asia!
>
> *Carter:* Madam, how utterly barbaric of you!
>
> *A Ha:* The ones who are truly barbaric are not us, but you! Not only do you carry out butchery and plunder in Vietnam, you also carry your evil fire to Laos! You have occupied the holy territory Taiwan of the People's Republic of China! You have settled down in Japan and South Korea and refuse to leave! You seek to build your military installations everywhere, and occupy the whole world! But let me tell you: the peoples of the twentieth century have awoken, and the epoch in which you can ride roughshod

> over us is gone and shall never return! The millions of enslaved peoples of the world have taken up arms, and dawn has emerged in the East! Our motherland shall be united, and your blood debt shall be repaid, Mister Colonel, your final days draw near!
>
> (Sha et al. 1964: 44–45)

The staged confrontation between A Ha and the advisor predictably ends with a last-minute rescue and the capture of the advisor, but the interest of this closing scene is that it presents a series of claims on the political possibilities of humanism that otherwise remain only latent throughout the play. The claims of humanitarianism and Christian sympathy on the part of Carter combined with the attempted ruse by which A Ha will secure her release in exchange for endangering her comrades offers an articulation of humanism in its colonial guise, one that becomes yet clearer in the form of Carter's rebuke, posed in the form of an accusation of barbarism. The way in which A Ha displaces this accusation is by means of a reversal, in which the accusation of barbarism is thrown back at Carter himself.

This is perhaps the most important moment in the whole play, but one that can only be understood by appreciating how categories of civilisation and barbarism function within the colonial ordering of states in ways that define the human in racialised terms, whereby the removal of peoples from the category of the human provides the alibi for acts of violence. The reversal, in this context, characterises imperialist violence not only as perpetuating a state in which colonised subjects are deprived of their humanity, but rather where the colonisers are deemed barbarian or less than human, because their function as purveyors of violence removes them from the dignity proper to a human being.

In A Ha's closing rebuke, the strategic reversal gives way in turn to a geographical vision that, crucially, includes China and Vietnam but also expands to encompass the rest of Asia. The reversal within the course of the diegesis creates the conditions in turn for a certain reversal in terms of the placing of China within a vision of pan-Asian anti-colonial emancipation. In this vision, the prospective liberation of Taiwan becomes intelligible from the perspective of a Vietnamese revolutionary within the context of the play. In other words, this future political task, one that belongs to the project of Chinese national liberation at the same time as it emerges as a site of pan-Asian dreams of emancipation, is rendered as one political project amongst many, situated alongside the expulsion of American military forces from South Korea and Japan.

The position of the theatrical audience thereby becomes one of grasping the Chinese national liberation project through the eyes of the other, with whom they are engaged in shared combat: that is, the Vietnamese national liberation project. Yet in doing so, it also fractures the very boundaries between self and other in ways that compliment Ba Jin's texts. The effect is to engender an intersection of political subjectivities that render the political vision set out by A Ha in the closing scene of the play intelligible as a horizon of shared possibility.

The defining feature of this horizon is a political gesture of militant universalism in which humanism has been wrested away from its location in a colonial project and instead linked with a project whose spatial and temporal dimensions extend far beyond any delimited Chinese national space.

The universalist dimensions of this play emerge yet further from its second-order adaptations. The play underwent adaptation into a Peking opera version, also under the title of *Letters from the South*, and into a *pingju* under the title *Flames in the South* (Wu / Cheng 1965: 6–7). More suggestive still, however, was a Japanese adaptation directed by Nakamura Shun'ichi under the title *Letters from Southern Vietnam*. This play was adapted from both the Liberation Army version and that produced by the Shanghai People's Art Theatre, both of which Nakamura witnessed during his vision to China in 1965 (Xinhua 1965: 44–45).[9] The circulation and adaptation of a Chinese theatrical venture thereby came to trace precisely the vision of pan-Asian solidarity and anti-colonial humanism so eloquently articulated by A Ha herself.

Narrowing of the world

The political moment in which the culture of Sino-Vietnamese solidarity reached its height in 1965 was cut off by the advent of the Cultural Revolution in 1966. In that year, Ba Jin was preparing to release a further collection of reportage texts under the title of *The Unbroken Bridge*. The events of the summer, combined with Ba Jin's being targeted as a proponent of the "black line" in art and literature, prevented that project from ever coming to fruition. There had also, more optimistically, been plans for the shooting of a film based on the play. In spring of 1965, the August 1st Film Production Company was preparing to shoot a film based on the play developed by the Liberation Army. Fu Duo undertook a visit to Vietnam to assist in the adaptation process. Yet this project was also overtaken by the pace of political events, with all film production ceasing for several years after 1966 (Li 2018: 138). The events of that decade placed increasing limits on the possibilities for cultural solidarity. In particular, the intensification of the brutal war effort of the United States inside Vietnam, combined with the Sino-Soviet split, forced Vietnamese revolutionaries into an increasingly difficult balancing act in order that they might continue to draw aid from both China and the Soviet Union.

The reunification of Vietnam in 1975 marked the end of a protracted struggle. That this moment of reunification was followed by Mao's death and the end of

9 I have as of yet been unable to discern further details about the Japanese adaptation beyond those reported in the Chinese press. However, Japan did have its own version of the original letters published under the title 南ベトナムからの手紙 (*Letters from South Vietnam*), translated by the Japanese-Vietnamese Friendship Association.

the Cultural Revolution in 1976, however, marked a moment of crisis for the international communist movement, rendered yet more visible in 1979 with the outbreak of war between China and Vietnam. This moment, in which global projects of cultural solidarity and socialist internationalism began to come undone, witnessed one of the few references to the history of *Letters from the South* in the Chinese press since the frenzy of publication and circulation that had emerged over the period 1964–1966.

This article, published in the *People's Daily* in late 1978 under the title "Thinking of 'Letters from the South'" recalls the alleged abuse of an overseas Chinese citizen in Vietnam, Huang Jie. The author describes that "beyond our rage, we cannot help but think of a book that always shook the hearts of the Chinese people – *Letters from the South*. *Letters from the South* was a small booklet translated by our country. It collected many stories of Vietnamese revolutionaries undergoing torture in the prisons of the American imperialists and the Ngo Dinh Diem clique, and of their heroic struggles" (Li 1978). The passing reference to the book *Letters from the South* having been translated by China serves to obscure the actual circulation history of this set of texts, namely the fact that it was first translated under Vietnamese auspices as part of the international solidarity movement, and that the culture of solidarity that emerged in response to this publication was, therefore, co-authored between the two countries. More suggestive still, however, is the implication that the techniques of abuse and torture which were employed against Vietnamese revolutionaries in the past, as recounted in *Letters from the South*, were, in the late 1970s, being deployed against overseas Chinese in Vietnam. The author went on to recount, therefore, that

> […] because they possess a shocking capacity for mimesis, they have actually gone so far as to use some of the cruel methods that were employed by the American imperialists and Ngo Dinh Diem against those overseas Chinese who faced life and death and trials and tribulations together with the Vietnamese people. Such talent, such despicable talent! (Li 1978)

The articulation here of overseas Chinese undergoing suffering in Vietnam is the key to understanding the transmutations of an internationalist vision at this historical juncture. The assumption of an assumed relationship of ethnic belonging and commonality between the authors of this article in mainland China and the figure of the overseas Chinese in Vietnam renders the overseas Chinese distinct from a larger Vietnamese community, with the overseas Chinese being a target of concern and the eventual alibi for the failed Chinese invasion of 1979.[10] The solitary reference to *Letters from the South* represented by this article is significant for the way it represents the receding of an earlier culture

10 From the late 1970s onwards, the return of the overseas Chinese became a recurrent trope, especially in Chinese filmmaking. Examples include *Romance on Lushan* (1980), *The Herdsman* (1982) and *Good Morning, Beijing* (1990). The staging of a re-ethnicisation of the political subject in these films anticipates the "Sinophone" turn in contemporary literary studies.

of internationalist solidarity from the field of historical vision, but so too does it underline the way that the retreat from anti-imperialist politics was substantially enabled by the return of the overseas Chinese in the cultural politics of the late 1970s and 1980s. An anti-imperialist front based on a commonality of struggle was supplanted by an emergent vision of racialised Chineseness, one that persists to this today as the ideological foundation of an increasingly Han-chauvinist capitalist Chinese state that demands the loyalty of "ethnic Chinese" around the world. The retreat of visions of anti-colonial universalism in the post-socialist People's Republic has, as its complement, the resurgence of an increasingly racialised trend of Sinophobia in contemporary Vietnam.

Yet memories endure. In a moment of casual conversation, when discussing this research project, my doctoral supervisor recalled that her own reading of *Letters from the South* as a young woman in the 1960s marked her first moment of encounter with the Vietnamese struggle. To recover, against our present condition, histories of cultural production that sought to re-imagine space and time and to re-orientate the world itself becomes, in this context, a pressing moral imperative. The history of Sino-Vietnamese solidarity emerging from *Letters from the South* comes to us as a letter from a time and place radically other than our own – that of the Asian 1960s – and it falls to us to decide how we read such a letter in our own time.

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