
Linh Dang
University of Rochester, ldang6@u.rochester.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/jsaaea

Part of the Bilingual, Multilingual, and Multicultural Education Commons

Recommended Citation
DOI: 10.7771/2153-8999.1171
Available at: https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/jsaaea/vol13/iss1/6

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.

Reviewed by
Linh Dang
University of Rochester

The Sympathizer sets itself apart from other war novels in the genre. Nguyen (2016) brilliantly designates the main character, a Vietnamese French army captain as his protagonist and narrator. As a spy for the north, and immersed in the south, the unnamed narrator experiences both the expected and unexpected chaos of playing the double agent. With a combination of humor and poignancy, the novel offers full transparency into the lives of those impacted by the war and summons the long overdue undivided attention and empathy of readers’ on the Vietnam War. The multilayered novel elucidates the complex relationships between the Far East and Western culture as well as the divided north and south of a single nation. Everyday relationships continue to be dissected as friendship and family ties are scrutinized.

Readers are immediately acquainted with the verbosity of the educated sympathizer who explicitly contends with himself from the first lines of the book until the very last page. While paradoxical, his set of virtues remains questionable. The narrator is described as the illegitimate product of his beloved Vietnamese mother and scorn French priest father. Despite his disadvantaged upbringing, he manages to acquire an education in the United States and returns to Vietnam where he simultaneously serves as a right hand man to a leader of the South and a spy for the North. His narrative takes the form of a confession, rendering fully exposed and intricate details to make this book a page-turner. Readers quickly learn in early chapters that his two closest comrades, sworn into brotherhood by blood causes one to question the notion of loyalty. Bon is the glorified patriot of the south, determined to avenge his father’s death. Meanwhile, their third brother, Man, is the narrator’s bridge to the north. This unorthodox friendship goes through trial under a series of volatile and bona fide events. The novel takes a transition over to the United States at the tail end of the war. Given an extended duty, the narrator escapes his war torn country and seeks refugee in southern California as he kept a close watch on the general and reports intelligence feeds to Man.

The new, but temporary life calls upon the narrator’s expertise in creative ways where his diverse layers unfold. The sympathizer is capable of committing a range of dark deeds and acts of...
kindness. He attempts to advocate for the Vietnamese on a Hollywood film set but is egregiously dismissed. Soon after, his original devotion of which he was tasked to do goes into effect. The general and his fellow South Vietnamese clan arrange a counterrevolution that is carefully reported to the North by letters written between Man and the narrator. The narrator is subjected to fulfilling his dual roles without raising suspicion. His line of work widened to include the act of murder. The storyline plunges into the deep waters as it takes a shift in setting back into Vietnam where the most unyielding of circumstances are dealt with head on.

Nguyen (2016) unravels a myriad of untold experiences through what feels like a welcomed and entirely candid history lesson. As alluded to in a savvy manner, the Vietnamese perspective lacks a presence in the literature to which this novel serves as a major breath of fresh air. Nguyen and his protagonist both commit to unpacking the Vietnam War in a de-Americanized fashion. The overall narrative is absolutely well fleshed out and anything but subtle in its attempt to deter the commonly oversimplified experiences of the Vietnam War.

**About the Author**

**Linh Dang**, M.A. is a Ph.D. candidate in Educational Policy and an adjunct faculty member of master’s and doctoral-level research methods courses at the University of Rochester. She recently received her advanced certificate in online teaching and teaches both face-to-face and virtual courses. She earned her Bachelor’s degree in Politics with a minor in Asian Studies and a Master’s in Education along with her teaching credentials at the University of San Francisco. Her research assesses the educational experiences of immigrant students, particularly Southeast Asians in the United States public education system. Using an asset-based approach, she investigates both barriers and different forms of capital that shape adult outcomes for this population. She sits on the doctoral student editorial review board of the Journal of Southeast Asian American Education and Advancement (JSAAEA).
Dr. Changming Duan  
University of Missouri-Kansas City

Dr. Sothy Eng  
Lehigh University

Dr. Vincent K. Her  
University of Wisconsin, Eau Claire

Dr. Peter Nien-Chu Kiang  
University of Massachusetts, Boston

Dr. Kevin K. Kumashiro  
University of Illinois, Chicago

Dr. Ha Lam  
Eastern Mennonite University

Dr. Jonathan H. X. Lee  
San Francisco State University

Dr. Monirith Ly  
Royal University of Phnom Penh

Dr. Bic Ngo  
University of Minnesota

Dr. Leakhena Nou  
California State University, Long Beach

Dr. Mark Pfeifer  
SUNY Institute of Technology

Dr. Loan T. Phan  
University of New Hampshire

Dr. Karen Quintiliani  
California State University, Long Beach

Dr. Angela Reyes  
Hunter College

The City University of New York

Dr. Fay Shin  
California State University, Long Beach

Dr. Christine Su  
College of San Mateo

Dr. Alisia Tran  
Arizona State University

Dr. Khatharya Um  
University of California, Berkeley

Dr. Kim Tran  
University of California, Los Angeles, Glendale Community College

Dr. Molly Wiebie  
The University of Texas at Austin

Dr. Sophal Ear  
Occidental College

Dr. Jeremy Hein  
University of Wisconsin, Eau Claire

Dr. Nancy H. Hornberger  
University of Pennsylvania

Dr. Peter Tan Keo  
New York University

Dr. Yvonne Kwan  
San Jose State University

Dr. Ravy Lao  
California State University, Los Angeles

Dr. Stacey Lee  
University of Wisconsin, Madison

Dr. Sue Needham  
California State University, Dominguez Hills

Dr. Max Niedzwiecki  
Daylight Consulting Group

Dr. Clara Park  
California State University, Northridge

Dr. Giang Pham  
University of Massachusetts Amherst

Dr. Malaphone Phommasa  
University of California Santa Barbara

Dr. Kalyani Rai  
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

Dr. Cathy J. Schlund-Vials  
University of Connecticut, Storrs

Dr. Nancy J. Smith-Hefner  
Boston University

Dr. Yer J. Thao  
Portland State University

Dr. Monica M. Trieu  
Purdue University

Dr. Silvy Un  
Saint Paul Public Schools

Dr. Linda Trinh Vo  
University of California, Irvine

Dr. Yang Sao Xiong  
The University of Wisconsin-Madison

Dr. Zha Blong Xiong  
University of Minnesota