

## Teaching Guides to Three Short Stories of Ly Lan

by Lily Chiu

*Lily Chiu has taught literature at the universities of three continents. Here we present her suggestions for teaching stories spanning ten years of Ly Lan’s career, from the early 1990s to the beginning of the new century. We present Chiu’s notes to “The Ghost” and “Sister Hanh” along with links to translations of the stories themselves elsewhere on the Web. “Accident” appears in Word and PDF versions at the Viet Nam Literature Project website, with thanks to the original publishers of Lily Chiu’s translation, the Michigan Quarterly Review.*

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## The Ghost

*Ly Lan translated "The Ghost" with Kevin Bowen. Manoa published it in volume 11, number 2 (1999), and makes the story available at <http://muse.jhu.edu/demo/manoa/v011/11.2ly.html>*

## Commentary

"The Ghost" is set at the beginning of the first Gulf War, in the early 1990s. In more than 15 years since the end of the Vietnam-America war, the art of war has evolved to an "e-game," as the narrator's younger sister calls it. The interest of the story is the perspective of a family which has survived the war, but, as the father explains, has never really understood what it means: "Nobody really knows. You and I have the experience of surviving the war, but only the dead know what war really means." The disconnect between the different experiences of the two wars is signified by the younger brother and his boss' treatment of the Gulf War. The fate of Iraq, the invaded country, holds no interest for America's former enemy; this new war, safely far away, is treated by the younger members as a game, something to place bets upon.

The narrator herself seems to be disconnected from the rest of her family, and indeed the rest of the world, as demonstrated by her reaction to being haunted. Contrary to the reactions of others (Miss Linh, her mother, and her brother), the narrator is not at all bothered by the ghost, and indeed seems to welcome its presence. The identity of the ghost itself is not necessarily important, and the narrator suggests that it could be any of thousands of young soldiers who died without ever knowing a woman's love. What is important is the younger generation's (i.e. the brother's) lack of respect for the ghost and for other dead soldiers who fought in the Vietnam-America war.

## Discussion

- Who do you think is the ghost haunting the narrator, and why is it doing so?
- Why is the narrator not bothered by the ghost?
- What is the significance of the pagoda on the mountain, and of the woman Hoa An?
- How do the narrator's brothers and father treat the idea of war? How does this differ from the narrator's idea of it?
- Why does the narrator say her heart is broken at the end of the story?

## Sister Hanh

Ly Lan translated "Sister Hanh". *Gowanus: An International Online Journal of Idea and Observation* publishes it online at <http://www.gowanusbooks.com/sister.htm>

### Commentary

In "Sister Hanh," Ly Lan chooses as her main character one of the so-called "my lai," Amerasian children of American soldiers and Vietnamese women, who often were orphaned or abandoned and ended up living in the streets. Because they were of mixed blood and parentless or homeless they were regarded as "bui doi," or "the dust of life," denied educational or vocational opportunities. When America offered to accept them as refugees, however, the Vietnamese government refused to allow their departure because the government denied discriminating against them – a requirement for refugee status. In the late 1980's, the U.S. Congress passed the Amerasian Homecoming Act, allowing Amerasians to be admitted to the U.S. as "immigrants" who were entitled to the same benefits as refugees. Since the implementation of the act in 1989, approximately 25,000 Amerasians have been relocated to the United States.

Many of these children were accompanied by family members, and very few lucky ones were able to reunite with their biological fathers. Some of them even returned to Vietnam many years later, as the half-black Amerasian Jack Miller/Moi does in this story. However, when he returns, he is regarded by all as a rich American foreigner, and is forced to play into this role so as not to dispel the hopeful myths that feed his friends' imagination. The dinner he gives at the five-star restaurant is the culmination of all the dreams and hopes of the people of Evening Market Alley, all of which should have been fulfilled by Sister Hanh's wedding party. In giving the dinner, Moi steps into the role of Sister Hanh, and himself fulfills his own childhood dream.

### Discussion

- Why do you think the story is narrated by a *bui doi* child? What is the significance of his two names? What makes him even more of an outcast?
- Why is he treated like a foreigner by the residents of the Evening Market Alley? What is expected of him, and why does he comply?
- What is the significance of Sister Hanh and the fish-egg tree?
- Why does Jack/Moi spend his last dollar throwing a party for his old friends and acquaintances?
- Why does Hanh break off her engagement? Does she reject tradition? What do you think becomes of her?
- What is the "childhood dream" that Jack/Moi came back to Vietnam to find?

## Accident

*Lily Chiu translated "Accident". Michigan Quarterly Review published it in volume XLIV, number 1 (Winter 2005). We present it in Word and PDF files at the Viet Nam Literature Project website, <http://www.vietnamlit.org/lylan/stories.html>*

## Commentary

"Accident" paints a mixed portrait of a single, working woman in contemporary Vietnam. The main character, Cam, is depicted as rather plain and largely indifferent to life, working in a dull job. Because she is still unmarried and already in her thirties, she is considered an old maid by most of her colleagues. Nonetheless, she strikes up a friendship with a neighbor, Thanh, and agrees to go on a date with him. The date is a disaster, and ends with rape. Finding herself pregnant with Thanh's child, Cam must decide whether or not to keep the baby. When she finally decides to abort, it transpires that she is too far along to do so. After informing Thanh of her situation, Cam is compelled by tradition and Thanh's fear of public condemnation to accept his proposal of marriage.

Although the ending of the story seems bleak for Cam, who is forced to marry the man who raped her, a man she knows she cannot love nor respect, Ly Lan leaves several clues that Cam's position is not as helpless as it seems. Unfortunately, many of these clues are indicated through the subtlety of the Vietnamese language, and are therefore lost in translation. One must first realize that Cam does not follow the accepted conventions of language when she speaks to Thanh during their last encounter in the story. According to custom, when speaking to her husband or boyfriend, a woman is expected to refer to herself using the personal pronoun "em," meaning younger sister. Instead, Cam uses the more general pronoun "toi," meaning "I." This choice can be interpreted as a deliberate declaration of independence, Cam's refusal to submit to Thanh's will. Thanh apparently gets the message, and eventually relents by calling her by the polite form "co" (miss) instead of "em," as he had previously done. Thus, even though she "gives in" by agreeing to marry Cam, she still seems to maintain her independence, a fact which is further supported by her insistence on paying her own share of the wedding costs. In the end, Cam is revealed to be the epitome of a modern Vietnamese woman: bound in part by Confucian tradition and cultural standards, but nonetheless able to subvert these restrictions and exercise her autonomy in her own terms.

## Discussion

- What is Cam like as a character? How does she react to the situations she finds herself in?
- Why does Cam agree to go on a date with Thanh? Is she really as indifferent to him as she seems?
- What is the significance of the arguing couple in the restaurant?
- How does Cam react to her rape, and its result? Why does she react in this way?
- Why does Cam accept Thanh's proposal of marriage?
- Do you see Cam more as a victim in this story, or as a survivor?