

THE MULTIFACETED VIETNAMESE CULTURE

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One of Viettouch's missions is to connect our global audience with a wonderfully resilient Vietnamese [multi-ethnic cultural heritage](#) by introducing our readers to the storytelling of countless generations of [artists, musicians](#), poets, and writers that has survived several centuries of wars, foreign invasions and occupations, and ideological and ethnic conflicts.

Over time, each generation has told, and will continue to share their diverse and nuanced stories through their body of works that are well beyond the scrutiny of historians and ideologues. Their stories have captured some truths in the lives, struggles, and hopes of the Vietnamese people through time, as they are being told and repeated in literature, the performing arts, oral history, and on [canvass](#). These stories compel our imaginations to transport ourselves to those artists' worlds to share and feel, even for a few moments, the passion and rawness of their experience.

It is always a delight whenever there is an opportunity for Viettouch to discuss some [facets of Vietnamese cultural heritage](#) that have been preserved by countless Vietnamese people within and without Viet Nam. The latest source of my inspiration comes from attending a Vietnamese play and meeting with a playwright and her theatre ensemble.

[Viettouch](#) plans to examine the [multifaceted features](#) of Vietnamese culture in several installments.

The first discussion is about ***The Missing Woman***, a contemporary play written by the acclaimed playwright and director Ms. Nguyen Thi Minh Ngoc from the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam. A conversation with Ms. Nguyen who openly admires a risqué 18th Century poet will follow in the next discussion. Lastly, I will discuss different facets of Vietnamese cultural heritage that have been nurtured and practiced among the Vietnamese American communities.

We hope you will also enjoy Viettouch's exclusive photographs taken from the perspective of our talented intern, Ms. Thy H. Nguyen.



Thy Nguyen-Huu © 2008
Ms. Nguyen Thi Minh Ngoc

THE PLAY ***The Missing Woman*** is a Vietnamese play written and directed by Ms. Nguyen Thi Minh Ngoc, an acclaimed playwright and theatre director from Viet Nam. The play was about a husband (an artist) who discovered that his musician wife had left him. While he was frantically searching for his wife, the women in his paintings became alive. Each woman told the artist a story about her life. The play premiered at the Pan Asian Repertory Theatre in New York, New York for a limited 12-day engagement in April 2008. The run was, however, long enough for this play to be a rare and historical cultural exchange between the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam and the United States of America.

Ms. Nguyen had persuaded some of Viet Nam's top performing artists, Mr. Thanh Loc, Ms. Ngoc Dang, Ms. My Hang, and musician and actor, Ms. Hai Phuong to travel to America to perform in an off-Broadway production for a discerning New York audience. The size of the ensemble required each actor to perform multiple

roles and take on other responsibilities including set production, choreography, and musical arrangement. Ms. Nguyen had revised her original script to add English lines to be narrated by two bilingual Vietnamese American actors, Mr. Leon Le and Ms. Thuc Hanh.

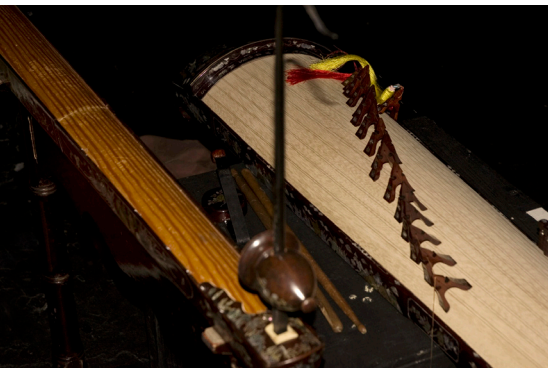
It appeared that the playwright had unintentionally paid homage to distinct cultural features that were uniquely identified with each region of Viet Nam and the Vietnamese Hmong heritage. The Vietnamese actors were southerners, the two Vietnamese Americans were northerners, the method of intoning poetry and the type of theater and operatic arts were southern in origin. The northern style of clothing and headdress dominated the characters' costumes with some exceptions; the painter was dressed in modern clothes and his wife's bright [Ao Dai](#) had an embroidered Hmong style outer garment.



Thy Nguyen-Huu © 2008
Stage props of *The Missing Woman*

Ms. Nguyen had ambitiously framed her story in a contemporary time with dream sequences about some historical Vietnamese heroines. The flashbacks brought the main character (the painter) to each century for him to learn his lesson. The plot and sub-plots unfolded from the parallel male and female perspectives. The blended English and Vietnamese script was well managed by the entire ensemble including the playwright who performed several roles. The blended dialogues and the occasional English narratives helped to clarify some dream sequences that referenced Vietnamese historical women. The play was well paced by a versatile and multi-talented cast. In the play, Ms. Nguyen portrayed the Mother and the spirit of Ho Xuan Huong's poetry.

The story was ably held together by a wonderfully captivating performance of Mr. Thanh Loc as both the thoughtless and clueless painter husband and a convincingly tortured female fox. He was also the choreographer.



Thy Nguyen-Huu © 2008
Dan Bau (a one-stringed instrument)
and Dan Tranh (the zither)

Ms. Hai Phuong played the painter's musician wife who was impressively lyrical on a [Dan Tranh](#) (the zither). She also provided dramatic sound and musical effects throughout the play on the [Dan Tranh](#) (the zither), the [Dan Bau](#) (a one-stringed instrument) and the drum. Ms. Ngoc Dang gave a poignant dramatization of General Trung Trac's lamentation upon learning that her husband, Thi Sach, had been killed during a Chinese invasion; and in her second character, she transformed herself into Tiet Giao (the Fox Woman's lover).

Ms. My Hang portrayed a child and Kieu Nguyet Nga, a woman who was forced to choose between her familial loyalty and her lover. The Kieu character was rather loosely based on an 18th Century poem, ***The Tale of Kieu***, written by Mr. Nguyen Du.

The two Vietnamese Americans held their own in different roles as actors and English narrators. Ms. Thuc Hanh portrayed the poet Ho Xuan Huong and General Trung Nhi, sister to Trung Trac. Mr. Leon Le portrayed the husband of one of the Trung sisters and an everyday husband who had wrongly accused his wife of infidelity.

SOME PERSPECTIVES

Ms. Nguyen took considerable artistic liberties with the historical references by rendering the women as nothing more than bereft and vulnerable creatures left longing or mourning for their men. She had effectively removed some of these women's political and military actions against the persistent Chinese invasions and subsequent occupations.

It was mystifying that Ms. Nguyen had chosen to focus solely on remnants of the Han Confucian perspectives of women and their roles in a Vietnamese society. Historically, the Chinese rulers were successful for several centuries in imposing Confucianism on the Vietnamese elite, and in particular, the general population

in the northern region of Viet Nam. The Han Empire went so far as to order its soldiers to reproduce with Vietnamese women to ensure complete absorption of the Confucian order in the ensuing generations. Geographically, the northern region was readily accessible to countless Chinese incursions and as a result, northern Vietnamese people suffered acculturation far greater than the rest of Viet Nam.

The women depicted by Ms. Nguyen were subservient, fragile, helpless, and pining. It was clear that these selected women were transformed into the stereotypes in any patrilineal society. It was troubling that Ms. Nguyen did not explain to the audience the reasons for some of these women to be singled out in Vietnamese historiography. The audience would have learned that since [ancient times](#) (2000 - 257 BC) traditional Vietnamese cultural practices were predominantly matriarchal throughout Viet Nam. How else could this small nation have produced such an extensive compendium of [women](#) heroines in its bloodied [history](#)?

Ms. Nguyen's Trung Trac, one of the famous Trung queens, spent most of her time mournfully wailing for her dead husband who was killed by the Chinese invaders. It was disconcerting that the playwright had modified [Trung Trac's vow](#) to avenge her husband's death first, and that defending her nation and restoring the Hung lineage became mere afterthoughts. [Trung Trac](#) was a dissident before she was married to Thi Sach whom she had encouraged to join her resistance movement.

The audience would be surprised to find that Trung Trac was trained as a warrior by her parents. Therefore, her first instinct would have been to declare a blood oath to defend her country, the Hung lineage, and lastly, to avenge her husband's death. There were few hints given, if any, to the audience that these women were highly educated aristocrats. These royal women were neither helpless nor without the means to define their destinies. The Trung sisters and their mother, Lady Man Thien (Tran Thi Doan) led their military force to expel the Chinese ruler. The Trung sisters briefly ruled an independent Viet Nam from [40 AD to 43 AD](#) before China re-invaded it. Vietnamese history also chronicled the following women warriors who died trying to defend Viet Nam in the battles of 43 AD: [Phung Thi Chinh](#), Princess Thanh Thien, Cao Thi Lien, General Le Chan, and Hoang Thieu Hoa. Apparently, the Chinese historians were being imaginative when they wrote in their records that it was Trung Trac's deceased husband, Thi Sach, who ruled Viet Nam during 40 AD – 43 AD. Ironically, it was the Chinese invaders who killed Trung Trac's husband.

Ms. Nguyen had made poet Ho Xuan Huong, born in 1772, a lonely and neurotic woman who was a whining mistress to a nondescript married man. It was unlikely that the audience would have realized that Ms. Ho defied the pervasive Chinese censorship by using a [cipher Vietnamese language](#) system (Chu Nom). It was an arcane Vietnamese language used by the intellectual elites specifically intended to confound feudal Chinese authority during their occupation. Ms. Ho challenged Confucian hypocrisy and socio-cultural norms in her poems that were filled with sexual allusions and metaphors.

The audience would have enjoyed knowing that, in contrast, Ms. Ho's contemporary in the 18th Century was a Vietnamese Confucian scholar, Mr. Nguyen Du. He wrote the famous poem, ***The Tale of Kieu***, which depicted a divided Viet Nam torn between loyalty to the Han Empire and independence. Mr. Nguyen Du's allegiance was torn between North and South Viet Nam, which had been partitioned since early 17th Century at the 19th parallel zone. At the time, the two regions were controlled by two Vietnamese families, the Trinh in the north and the [Nguyen in the south](#): the former was loyal to the Chinese ruler,



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The cast from left to right: Mr. Thanh Loc, Ms. Ngoc Dang, Ms. Minh Ngoc, Ms. Thuc Hanh, Ms. Hai Phuong, Ms. My Hang, and Mr. Leon Le

and the latter was not.

Vietnamese history aficionados might find this 17th Century partition of Viet Nam somewhat similar to the 20th Century division between North and South Viet Nam as stipulated in the Geneva Accord of 1954. The renewed demarcation line was set at the 17th parallel zone, which was also known as the demilitarized zone during the bloody Viet Nam war.

On the whole, the play was entertaining and effectively engaging to its core Western audience. It was obvious that the play appealed to the 21st Century audience outside of Viet Nam. Ms. Nguyen's pointed criticism of a patriarchal

society was not lost on the audience. The Vietnamese press had been effusive about Ms. Nguyen's accomplishments, yet remarkably, ***The Missing Woman*** was hardly mentioned among her voluminous accolades.

Ms. Nguyen's reminders were directed at a contemporary Vietnamese society that has somehow lost its ability to respect women's rights in spite of social progress. It was, however, difficult to discern whether Ms. Nguyen's clarion call will be heeded by contemporary Vietnamese women to exercise their intellectualism and to stand up for their rights under a modern patriarchal Viet Nam.

The subtle critique of contemporary Vietnamese society evidently didn't sit well with the Vietnamese consular official in attendance, who felt compelled to announce to the general audience about how much he had always respected and honored the women in his life. It could be a case of "he doth protest too much, methinks" or that Ms. Nguyen was successful in delivering her message to those that mattered most. Either way, Ms. Nguyen had provided an American audience a brief and wonderful opportunity to connect with Vietnamese theatre arts.

Acknowledgements: *The author is grateful to Ms. **Nguyen Thi Minh Ngoc** and her cast members of **The Missing Woman** from the Socialist Republic of Viet Nam for their visit to N.Y. The Viettouch team extends warm thanks to our talented intern, Ms. Thy Nguyen. We wish her much success as she embarks on her new journey. **This series of cultural discussion is dedicated to the memory of the author's parents and brothers whose courage and life's lessons have withstood the passing of time.***

Note: *Viettouch.com provides a diverse collection of information that highlights Vietnamese cultural heritage from various perspectives of the vibrant Vietnamese and ethnic Vietnamese diaspora communities in the United States. The Viettouch team is dedicated and passionate about sharing different facets of Vietnamese cultural heritage with the at-large global community. To this end, we ask that you respect our contributions toward the current and future generations of Vietnamese diaspora by not lifting and altering Viettouch contents for your purposes without permission.*

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