

Monkey Bridge. By Lan Cao. New York: Penguin Books, 1997.

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Since 1975, Vietnamese Americans have produced a small but significant body of literature that deals with the postwar immigrant experience. Most of these works are written from a Vietnamese American perspective and are notable for shifting the gaze to a Vietnamese American rather than at the figure of the immigrant. It is also important to note, however, that many of these works are written in the autobiographical mode. Such a trend stands as a powerful testament to the ways in which a mainstream readership (still) insists on the truth-telling and ethnographic voice of the immigrant writer, especially within the US context of a “failed war,” as well as to the ways that the writer responds to the demands of the marketplace.

Lan Cao’s first novel *Monkey Bridge* is distinct from the autobiographical writing that is generally representative of Vietnamese American literature. A fictionalized account of a young immigrant woman’s discovery of her family history, it also traces the roots of her pained relationship with her mother. Spliced together then are two tales, one told in an epistolary form and the other, first person narrative; her mother’s letters serve as a direct link to the past while Mai’s narrative of assimilation grounds the story in the present.

Beginning in 1978 in Falls Church, Virginia, seventeen-year-old Mai Nguyen struggles to understand her mother’s ailments, afflictions that are rooted in the emotional trauma of having left Viet Nam and her grandfather behind. As the narrative reveals, Mai’s relationship with her mother is contentious, strained by generational and cultural differences. For reasons that are not clear to Mai in the beginning, her mother appears to suffer from bouts of paranoia and suspicion; she is most fearful, however, of devastating karmic returns. Because of her growing alienation in America, she begins to see her own daughter as “somebody volatile and unreliable, an outsider with inside information—someone whose tongue had to be perpetually checked and contained.” (41) From Mai’s perspective, she has been given the responsibility of taking care for her mother too prematurely.

The exchange of familial roles is an experience that gives her no choice but to “forgo the luxury of adolescent experiments and temper tantrums.” (35) Feeling overburdened when her mother is in the hospital, Mai sets out to locate her maternal grandfather so that he can return with her and take care of his daughter, leaving Mai free to go to college—guiltless. Mai’s quest to find Baba Quan and find out more about his mysterious whereabouts after the fall of Saigon is thwarted for

a variety of different reasons. Rather, she uncovers her familial past vis-à-vis her mother's journals and thus, painful secrets of illegitimacy and betrayal are unfurled at the end in her mother's elegant writings. Indeed, at the heart of the story is the past life of Baba Quan and his secret identity during the Viet Nam war. As a result, her mother, who is like Viet Nam because she is "obsessed with karma," is filled with guilt as well as fear. (34) For she believes that the bad deeds committed by Baba Quan and her family will follow her to America; thus, she attempts to safeguard Mai with a final act that she hopes will end the cycle of karmic retribution.

Monkey Bridge is a significant book for several reasons. It attempts to look at the politics and poeses of displacement and exile from a distinctly gendered perspective. Moreover, Cao's story tries to move away from the genre of autobiography. At the same time that autobiography can be enabling for immigrant writers as a mode of expression, it is also troubling for some Asian American cultural critics and writers who see it as a commodification of culture. Interestingly enough, however, Lan Cao's book has been called "semiautobiographical" by one reviewer; the same reviewer also warns readers against using Cao's novel as a "textbook on Vietnam" as she "relies on a variety of sources of her information and applies interpretations clearly shaped by an American education."¹ This review crystallizes the desire on the part of a Western readership for truth and accuracy in works by Vietnamese Americans.

But a major flaw of the book is the way in which Lan Cao plays into this desire; it is filled with ethnographic information about the customary aspects of an "exotic" culture: food, ritual, holidays, religion, and mythology. As such, "inexplicable" items such as nuoc mam is overexplained as "salted fish compressed for four months to a year into a pungent, fermented liquid used as a dipping sauce mixed with lime, minced garlic, hot peppers, and a dash of sugar." (65)

Sounding more like a textbook and the first book she co-wrote—*Everything You Need To Know About Asian American History*—Lan Cao writes on the Cao Dai religion at length and imparts details that are aimed to edify a Western readership.

The Cao Dai faith, founded in the 1920s, holds that the divine and singular truth which exists in Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Judaism, and other, local, animistic beliefs, has been subverted by human frailty. Only a few mortals have been able to see through the illusion are therefore included in the list of revered saints for worship: Victor Hugo, Sun Yatsen, Joan of Arc, Louis Pasteur, and Charlie Chaplin, among a few others. Blessed with the all-knowing Cao Dai eye—depicted ornately on a mural in the Great Temple in the province of Tay Ninh—these saints are revered as way-showers with supernatural vision. (148)

Unfortunately, Cao's overexplanations are matched at times by her overwriting, writing that is marred by florid prose. Despite these flaws, however, Lan Cao's novel should be read and taught, as it is ultimately a critical insertion in the canon of Vietnamese American literature.

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Notes

1. James Banerian, rev. of *Monkey Bridge*, by Lan Cao, *World Literature Today*

72:3 (Summer 1998): 692.

