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Nguyễn Huy Thiệp (1950–2021): Four Testaments

Introduction

Widely regarded as Vietnam's greatest postcolonial writer, Nguyễn Huy Thiệp died at the premature age of seventy on March 20, 2021. His oeuvre includes novellas, plays, and essays, but his reputation rests largely on a remarkable collection of several dozen short stories that he unleashed in the wake of *Đổi Mới* [Renovation] between 1986 and 1991. The stories were politically daring: violating the stale conventions of socialist realism, questioning the achievements of the Vietnamese revolution, and revising the reputations of national heroes and villains in communist historiography. They were also formally innovative; some were written in a magical realist style while others exhibited an extreme linguistic minimalism. Given the double-barreled assault that they launched on political verities and aesthetic sensibilities, it is no surprise that Nguyễn Huy Thiệp's stories provoked harsh criticism from conservatives and fulsome praise from a much larger group of progressive intellectuals and educated readers. Censorship, low-level but persistent persecution, and the challenges of fame sapped his productivity, and the final two decades of his life were marked by creative inertia and professional disappointment even while his

Journal of Vietnamese Studies, Vol. 16, Issue 3, pps. 111–128. ISSN 1559-372X, electronic 1559-3738.
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reputation within the country's national literary history solidified. Nguyễn Huy Thiệp has also attracted sustained attention from Vietnamese studies scholars, and he has appeared repeatedly in the pages of the *Journal of Vietnamese Studies*. The inaugural issue of the journal featured an extended interview with the writer, and it has since published essays by Nguyễn Ngọc and Doan Cam Thi that examine different aspects of his life and work.¹ In this issue, we publish original translations of four testaments about Nguyễn Huy Thiệp that appeared in the Vietnamese language press and social media following his passing. The first is the formal eulogy delivered at his funeral by Nguyễn Quang Thiều, a well-known poet and chairman of the Vietnam National Writers' Association. The second piece was written by the novelist Uông Triều, while the third was derived from an interview conducted by Thiên Điều with the progressive literary critic Vương Trí Nhàn. The final piece was written by Nguyễn Huy Thiệp's close colleague, comrade, and confidante Phạm Thị Hoài, one of a tiny handful of trail-blazing writers who together with Nguyễn Huy Thiệp pioneered the first great movement of post-revolutionary Vietnamese literature.

NGUYỄN QUANG THIỀU

Translated by Anthony Morreale

Eulogy Read at the Funeral of the Writer Nguyễn Huy Thiệp

At 4:45 on the evening of March 20, 2021, the eighth day of the second month in the year of the buffalo, Nguyễn Huy Thiệp drew his final breath and departed his home for the eternal beyond. News of his passing, condolences, mourning, and reflections on his place in the national canon spread over both official and social media. The size of the response alone speaks to the deep impression he made on the social and literary life of this country.

Nguyễn Huy Thiệp was born in Thái Nguyên in 1950. His ancestral hometown was Hà Nội. His youth was spent fleeing with his family across the hinterlands of Thái Nguyên, Phú Thọ, and Vĩnh Phúc. He majored in