Jayavarman VII is the most fascinating personality in Khmer history. When he created this unique beauty, the Creator said to Himself: If this must be the object of comparison, to what other object can we compare it? Nothing can compare with this beauty even if it is a little damaged, for even when eclipsed the moon still has a lovely face. When they saw it, the young men said: Eyes, you can close now, for that charming sight will never leave my thoughts. A graceful, lovely form, which perfumes the winds, clothed in sumptuous garments, is more gracious than the beauty of the god of love. It rejoices the earth like the rising moon, attracted by the mango, the fruits of her beauty, men’s eyes could never turn away from it.\textsuperscript{1}

This quote from Bernard-Philippe Groslier, archaeologist and son of George Groslier, founder of the Museum of Cambodia and the School of Cambodian Arts, was recited by Prince Norodom Sihanouk playing the part of an ailing Cambodian prince in his own 1969 film \textit{Twilight}, to close-up shots of the female torsos among the Angkor temple reliefs. Since the publication of Edward W. Said’s influential \textit{Orientalism}, such hypersexualized portrayals of indigenous femininity have become problematized in academic circles as a manifestation of the West’s exoticization of colonial peoples and lands while creating a hegemonic relationship in the production of knowledge about this “other.”\textsuperscript{2} But Sihanouk’s complicity in this
process complicates Said’s classic account of Orientalism, because Sihanouk, in addition to being Cambodian, had in fact positioned himself as one of the leading anticolonial figures of the decolonized world, not least through the many films he directed. It begs the question, first raised by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in his famous paper “Can the Subaltern Speak?” and later developed by Arif Dirlik into the concept of “self-Orientalization,” of whether exoticizing tendencies may be prevalent not only in Western scholarship, but also in Asian and African peoples’ definition of themselves and their neighbors.

I argue in part that Vietnamese literature too has been guilty of exoticizing Cambodia and Cambodians, a tendency that I term “Cao-Mienism,” based on the old Vietnamese term for Cambodia, “Cao Miên,” which carries many outdated connotations of a mystical, uncivilized, violent, and hypersexual other. Like Orientalism, Cao-Mienism is a product of a long and violent political and historical process. Between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, Vietnamese lords expanded southward in an uneven and contingent process, popularly summarized by the term Nam Tiếng (Southern Expansion), that destroyed the Champa Empire, seized the Mekong Delta from a fast-declining Khmer polity, and eventually brought Cambodia under joint Vietnamese-Siamese suzerainty on the eve of the French conquest in the late nineteenth century. Vietnamese settlers largely subscribed to a narrative of clearing virgin land and taming uncivilized wilderness, ignoring the legitimacy and agency of the peoples they conquered. French imperialism continued to heavily favor development in Vietnam over Laos and Cambodia, which partially explains why the leadership of the Indochinese Communist Party (ICP) in the 1930s and 1940s would be disproportionately Vietnamese. Even though the ICP was formally disbanded in 1945, many Khmer communists, even top Khmer Rouge leaders like Ieng Sary and Khieu Samphan, would continue to spend significant time in Vietnam. Certainly, the behavior, attitudes, and decisions of the Vietnamese involved in Vietnam’s Cambodian Decade (1978–1989) were shaped by myriad factors, including the late Cold War competition for influence between the United States, Soviet Union, and China; the Vietnamese quest for security; and ideological solidarity with their Laotian and Cambodian socialist brothers. But many scholars have argued that the Vietnamese advisors, specialists,
and soldiers of the Cambodian Decade also inherited, to various extents, feelings of ethnic superiority from Vietnam’s legacy of conquest, suzerainty, and regional leadership. The unequal relationship between Vietnam and Cambodia in the 1980s likely served to exacerbate such sentiments. Following repeated attacks on Vietnamese soil by the genocidal Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia, in January 1979, Vietnamese troops and their Cambodian allies toppled the Khmer Rouge, and thousands of Vietnamese advisors and specialists moved in to help set up the pro-Vietnamese People’s Republic of Kampuchea (PRK) government, an era that some scholars term “Vietnam’s Cambodian Decade.” Sihanouk, however, saw the Vietnamese occupation as being a mortal threat to Cambodian sovereignty. The Vietnamese believed that they had come as liberators and teachers for a society brought to its knees by the savagery of the Khmer Rouge era, when up to one-third of the population was subjected to genocide by their own leaders. Many Cambodians traumatized by the rapid descent of their relatively peaceful country into hell on earth did appreciate Vietnamese help, at least initially. But as the war dragged on, a level of friction and distrust between the Vietnamese and Cambodians became inevitable.

Out of a peak troop level of around one hundred fifty thousand at the time of the invasion, some fifty-three thousand Vietnamese had lost their lives fighting the Khmer Rouge–led insurgency by the time the last Vietnamese troops and advisors withdrew in September 1989. Working and fighting for a prolonged period in an alien and often treacherous land, the Vietnamese were charmed by the local women, frustrated by the harsh climate, wary of their foes and friends alike, and awed and mystified by Cambodia’s cultural and historical achievements. Two generations of Vietnamese writers on the Cambodian Decade have had to grapple in different ways with the disjuncture between socialist rationalization of the conflict promoted by the state and stereotypes of Cambodia as an exotic other, at once violent, mysterious, and sensual, that were derived in part from lived experiences.

Despite the extremely high costs of the war in Cambodia to Vietnam, there have been few histories written in Vietnam on the subject. In the government-issued high school history textbooks, Vietnam’s Cambodian
Decade is squeezed into a single page alongside the war with China. An archivist at the Vietnam National Archives Center III explained that while government historians have written an official narrative for the First and Second Indochina Wars, they have not done so for the Third Indochina War. Public access to primary source materials, especially those that deal with substantive debates regarding Vietnamese strategy in the Politburo or the General Staff, remains very limited. High-ranking veterans and former specialists are not always willing to share their experiences—I have been shown the door in the middle of an interview for asking questions that were “too sensitive.” While Vietnamese people of that generation had a habit of writing diaries and memoirs, those of higher-ranking leaders are carefully edited and also subject to heavy self-censorship.

Only as recently as the fortieth anniversary of the outbreak of the war has the Vietnamese government allowed some discussion of the Cambodian Decade in official news outlets, though substantial censorship remains. In this context, literature has a potential both as a repository for and a tool to shape popular memory of the Cambodian Decade in contemporary Vietnam. Hoàng Ngọc Thành, Kim Ninh, and Neil Jamieson have all written extensively on how from the 1950s onward, the Vietnamese communist state exerted increasingly tight control over literature and sought to harness it for the state’s social and political goals. Their works have demonstrated how the study of changing patterns in Vietnamese literature, both in the works produced under government direction and those of writers responding to government censorship, can offer valuable insight into history. As Keith Weller Taylor has pointed out, contemporary Vietnamese writers like Nguyễn Huy Thiệp have often used fiction as a safe medium for social criticism, circumventing the many restrictions around nonfiction publications. Furthermore, many of the writers on Vietnam’s Cambodian Decade had first-hand experience serving in Cambodia in the 1980s, and their works often inhabit an ambiguous space between fiction and nonfiction.

As there is currently no survey of Vietnamese literature on the Cambodian Decade, I intend for this paper to be a first step in filling that gap. The works covered here are not meant to constitute a comprehensive survey but will hopefully be a representative one. I have identified two main strands
running through this literature. The first is a rationalizing or propagandistic strand, which seeks to use literature to educate the public about the horrors of the Khmer Rouge era, the role of Beijing in supporting the Khmer Rouge, the necessity and legitimacy of Vietnam’s intervention, and the brotherhood between the Vietnamese and Cambodian peoples. The second is an exoticizing, Cao-Mienizing strand, which paints a sensual, mystical, and violent picture of the Cambodian landscape and people into the Vietnamese imagination.

I have divided the works into four groups, based primarily on the chronological order of their publication but also on the distinct literary characteristics of each group, thereby also charting the evolution of Vietnamese views of the Cambodian Decade through the years. My periodization does not readily map onto any extant periodization of Vietnamese literature by other scholars but corresponds closely to historically significant developments in the Vietnam-Cambodia relationship since 1978. The first group comprises works written and published in the early 1980s, when the Vietnamese government first felt the need to justify its involvement in Cambodia to the domestic and international public. These works often teach the need for solidarity and mutual aid between Vietnam and Cambodia by reflecting upon the long history of cooperation between the two peoples against foreign powers. The second group contains diaries, poems, memoirs, and stories of soldiers killed in Cambodia, many of which were written in Cambodia in the 1980s but published in the early years of the twenty-first century. They paint the Vietnamese soldiers as vulnerable youths who longed to return home and feared dying and being buried in an alien, mystical land. The third group encompasses several short stories that were written in the 1970s to 1990s but published later in several limited-edition commemorative anthologies of around 1,000 copies each, in a period when Vietnam largely disengaged from Cambodia. These are especially illuminating, due to the diversity of the voices represented and the exceptional artistry and emotion with which they portray complex themes. The final group consists of the current resurgence in literature on the Cambodian Decade in the 2010s, in an era of new difficulties emerging in Vietnam-Cambodia relations accompanying the rise of the anti-Vietnamese Cambodian National Rescue Party. There is a tension
between government-sponsored writing camps that churn out propaganda stories of solidarity between the Vietnamese and Cambodian peoples on the one hand and on the other, novelists who seek to appeal to a wider and younger readership by using Cao-Mienized depictions of Cambodia as a setting for stories with high levels of plot and character development. I conclude that Vietnamese literature on the Cambodian Decade has developed amid this tension, and the image of the Cambodian Decade in Vietnamese popular memory today is a fusion between these two perspectives: both a humanitarian mission in solidarity with Vietnam’s neighbors, and a civilizing mission of an exotic, mysterious, and deadly land. I also warn that both strands of propaganda and Cao-Mienization can serve to perpetuate and legitimize a hegemonic discourse on Cambodia that is detrimental to bilateral relations.

“The poor people, whether Vietnamese or Cambodian, are brothers”

From the Nhân Văn–Giai Phạm Affair in the 1950s up until the Đổi Mới [Renovation] agenda of 1986, the space for creative expression in North and then reunified Vietnam was severely restricted. The Vietnamese government valued art in general, and literature in particular, mainly as propaganda advocating nation-building toward a socialist utopia. Writers and works that strayed too far from established themes and the official agenda, or produced and promoted art for art’s sake, were often castigated for being reactionary and decadent.14

By the early 1980s, as it became apparent that the Khmer Rouge had not been completely defeated and the new PRK government was not yet ready to stand on its own, Vietnamese forces hunkered down for an extended stay in Cambodia. Ingrid Muan’s excellent dissertation shows how in Cambodia, the Vietnamese and their PRK ally employed many of the artists who had been pressed into propaganda service by the Khmer Rouge to produce anti–Pol Pot and anti-American propaganda, providing retraining both in situ with an influx of Vietnamese advisors and via scholarships to friendly socialist countries.15 But disillusionment with the war would not be easily contained at the border. On the home front, Vietnam’s Second Five Year Plan (1976–1980) had largely failed to bring about the rapid reconstruction
and growth that the government had promised after the war. As international economic sanctions and diversion of resources into rebuilding Cambodia brought further strains upon the burdened communist economy, and as the Khmer Rouge guerrilla attacks took their toll on the Vietnamese army, pressure mounted to produce works that could justify to the Vietnamese populace the legitimacy and necessity of the extended Vietnamese adventure in Cambodia, coming on the heel of so many bitter decades of war and poverty.

A quintessential example of this type of literature is the play Cambodia, Blood and Tears [Campuchia, máu và nước mắt] by Trần Vương. It is set beginning in April 17, 1975, on the eve of the Khmer Rouge’s entry into Phnom Penh, with a group of middle-class Cambodians dressed in clothes that reflect their various professions chatting excitedly about their hopes and fears for the future. As the character Chia Luông assures everyone: “Of course everything will be different, very different! But there is one thing that will be the same, because under any system, capitalist or communist, they all will need a doctor to cure diseases like you do and a teacher to teach like me....” But when the citizens go to greet the incoming army with flowers, they are greeted with gun barrels. The play goes on to depict the depopulation of the city and the genocide of the intelligentsia. Eventually, one of the survivors, Ingxâtxon, leads an insurrection when he himself was close to being arrested. They capture a Chinese advisor, with whom Ingxâtxon had a heated argument about whether it was the Chinese or the Vietnamese who were the real threat to Cambodia. The resistance eventually links up with Vietnamese troops who are protecting the Vietnamese border from Khmer Rouge raids, and together they win a major victory. On the battlefield, they find a diary written in Chinese that prescribed the culling of the Cambodian population in order to eventually turn the country into a Chinese province. The play ends with the funeral of the main Vietnamese character and his Cambodian girlfriend, who both perished in the battle, with the Cambodian characters taking turns delivering moving eulogies of gratitude to the Vietnamese people for their sacrifices. Just to spell out clearly the message of the play and avoid misinterpretations, a man speaks up at the end to clarify that the woman had died a virgin and that their love had been pure, reflecting the love between the two peoples.
A less accusatory rationalization of the Vietnamese project is Lê Khánh’s novel *The Story of the Old Worker* [*Chuyện cựu người thất giài*]. The worker in question, Uncle Või, recounts his life story to the narrator around the time of the liberation of Phnom Penh from the Khmer Rouge on January 7, 1979. He recalls life as a coolie in the printing and rubber industries in Cambodia in the 1940s, when his fellow Cambodian toilers suffered together through the grinding work and the malaria, sharing freely with one another what little they had. Uncle Või then describes the difficult days of World War II, when a couple of Japanese officers riding on his rickshaw hit him with a sword and refused to pay due to a misunderstanding. It was only in facing the solidarity of fellow Cambodian rickshaw drivers that the Japanese officers had to pay him his due. In another episode, the Vietnamese workers in his carpentry workshop beat up a Vietnamese manager who was treating the Cambodians poorly and demand that he be fired. With these stories and many others, Uncle Või presents a very strongly Marxist internationalist conclusion: “The poor people, whether they are Vietnamese or Cambodian, are all brothers. And they have the same enemy, whether he is disguised as a Cambodian or a Vietnamese.”

The literature of the early 1980s thus very overtly aspired to inculcate in the reader the official message of the fraternal solidarity of the international proletariat and the evil of the Khmer Rouge regime supported by China, thus serving to legitimize the ongoing Vietnamese involvement in Cambodia. Responding to the hypernationalism of the Khmer Rouge that led to their ill-fated assaults on Vietnamese territory, and mindful of both Cambodian and Vietnamese sensitivities to the large occupying Vietnamese force, these works consciously suppressed nationalist sentiments and identity in favor of internationalist class solidarity. As Evan Gottesman has pointed out, part of the challenge for the new PRK government and their Vietnamese advisors was also to rehabilitate the image of communism after the Khmer Rouge’s excesses with collectivization. The new works trod a fine line between promoting what was still a fundamentally communist internationalist narrative and also clearly denouncing the policies of the Khmer Rouge and harkening back to the solidarity between the two peoples even in the colonial era.
In part due to their use as propaganda, the works in this group enjoyed much wider circulation than later works. The first edition of the anthology containing *Cambodia, Blood and Tears* comprised 5,100 copies, while 10,120 copies of *The Story of the Old Worker* were printed. In comparison, most of the works explored in the following sections had print runs of 800–2,000 copies. Even though the technical notes for *Cambodia, Blood and Tears* specify that the optimal venue is a stage with an advanced lighting system, they also give several suggestions for adapting the play to amateur stages so that it could also be performed for smaller community events outside the major cities.

It is important to note that my use of the term “propaganda” is only to describe why and how these works were actually produced and distributed, and is in no way meant to attribute to them negative connotations or to discount their many artistic qualities. The opening and closing scenes of *Cambodia, Blood and Tears* are incredibly poignant, while *The Story of the Old Worker* manages to capture the vernacular southern voice more succinctly than any other work of the same genre since. In their own very sincere and beautiful ways, these works sought to advance socialist nation-building and encourage fraternal solidarity with the Cambodian people.

“Die in a way that is worthy of your life”

After the last Vietnamese troops left Cambodia in September 1989, the end of the Cold War, and the successful political resolution of the Cambodian problem culminating in the 1993 elections, the Cambodian Decade faded from Vietnam’s popular memory. It was not until the first decade of the 2000s, when there was a new vogue for diaries and memoirs of fallen Vietnamese soldiers in the Indochina Wars, that several diaries from the “volunteer forces” in Cambodia emerged. These works inhabited an ambiguous space between fiction and nonfiction. These accounts challenge the 1980s’ propaganda of the Vietnamese mission in Cambodia by focusing on the actual lived experiences of soldiers, which were clouded over by the specter of death.

Đoàn Tuán, a veteran who had served in Cambodia, traveled around the country to collect the diaries of his fallen comrades and memoirs from other soldiers who witnessed their deaths. The common factor for these
accounts, as recorded in his book *The People I Won’t Meet Again* [*Những người không gặp nữa*], was that soldiers often had premonitions of their imminent demise, and many were even obsessed with death, but all were ultimately unable to avoid the hand of fate. In one account, when a staff sergeant refused to share hand-rolled mapacho [*thuộc lào*] with one of his men, the soldier muttered that “When you die later, nobody will carry your body!” Later that day, the staff sergeant indeed fell to a bullet. In another instance, when the author asked a soldier who often sang songs about peace to write down some of the lyrics, the soldier signed off the piece with the words “so long” [*vĩnh biệt*]. A few months later, that soldier was shot right through his throat while singing. The stories emphasized the futility of trying to cheat fate: a soldier that tried to do so by carrying a special amulet given by Cambodian villagers to make him impervious to bullets ultimately drowned in a flood. Together, these stories paint a portrait of Cambodia as an inhospitable land full of ambushes and mines, where death is the only constant and one’s fate is predetermined by mystical forces beyond one’s control.

Premonitions of death in an alien land permeate the diary of Trần Duy Chiến, another Vietnamese soldier, killed in action in July 1980. In an entry dated May 4, 1979, Trần Duy Chiến pondered the question in stark terms:

> What happens if tomorrow I am met with something unfortunate in this life of a soldier? I will fall down on this faraway land, the Home of Temples and Towers. My body will become one with the earth, will gradually dissipate with time, leaving nothing, not even a trace. Then my good mother will not be able to come to the red coffin to weep for me. Only my friends in their jungle-colored fatigues will be there to look down upon my figure, with long, bored sighs. . . .

> If I die tomorrow? Then this “Diary” will be what’s left of my life. It is a carefree, innocent, and faithful friend whom I love. I have encased all of my heart and mind in here. If one day I am no longer, please set aside the most beautiful dreams for my beloved homeland. . . .

Trần Duy Chiến’s diary was exceptional in that it contained a great number of poems, in which he was torn between the rationalization of the war taught in the compulsory political study classes and the hopelessness of his lived experience. In a poem dated July 9, 1980, entitled “Mother,
Do You Know?” [Mẹ có biết không?], he appears to have accepted the official line:

The path on which we march follows the footsteps of our forefathers
I have grown up seasoned by the sun and rain
Carrying a spirit of hatred on heavy shoulders
Going to kill the enemy to protect the beautiful green
For the beautiful and peaceful country of Angkor
The palmyra palm–lined road is sweet with the united spirit
The Romvong dance growing more fervent and tender

... I go following the call of the Party
Freedom, warm clothes and plentiful rice
For all who are still suffering
I dedicate fully the years of my youth

For the Ancestral Land, for the glorious Party... ²⁹

Just a few days later, however, Trần Duy Chiên resigned himself to the inevitability of death. In the poem “Thinking about Death” [Nghi về cái chết], written in the seven-syllables [thát ngôn] style with irregular rhyming, his interpretation of the best way to die became much more individualistic:

In this life, who will not die once
Die in a way that establishes one’s name
If you die due to diseases, it has been predetermined
Dying from old age is the will of heaven
Only dying before the enemy is glorious
Die without cowering, without fear
Standing tall before the guns of the enemy
I would not regret dying in that way
Dying so that the world will forever remember one’s name
Dying from chance is the will of heaven
Death by suicide is worthy of contempt
Which the world will ridicule for a lifetime
One’s name will be dishonored for a thousandautumns
O reader, one can only die once
Die in a way that is worthy of your life
Let’s be bold even if we have to die
So that people will forever remember and your name may enter history. ³⁰
Because of the nature of the war, many Vietnamese soldiers perished not from conventional battle where they could “stand tall before the guns of the enemy,” but rather from ambushes and land mines, making an honorable death, thus defined, relatively rare. Many of the diaries and accounts from this period express a sense of frustration with this state of limbo, where death was always expected, yet the moment of death was almost certainly a surprise. The glorious images of destroying the evil perpetrators of genocide and bringing peace to a fraternal neighbor under palmyra palm–lined roads and mighty ancient temples gave way, in many cases, to a Cao-Mienized vision of Cambodia as a country where matters of life and death are determined by mystical forces beyond one’s control. It remains unclear to me whether the irony of the Vietnamese having to suffer from guerrilla attacks after having inflicted them for decades upon French and American forces is lost on this younger generation of soldiers. Despite not having the same resources as the government propaganda machine, these works had respectable print runs when they were published—1,500 copies for _The People I Won’t Meet Again_ and 2,000 copies for Trần Duy Chiên’s diary—which means that at least they convinced their publishers that they would be marketable.

“How can we hope to remake these animals into humans again, father?”

For about ten years from the late 1990s on, there was a temporary lull in the Vietnam-Cambodia relationship. In 1998, Pol Pot finally died and Hun Sen’s win-win strategy, essentially an unconditional amnesty and absorption of the Khmer Rouge political machine into the Cambodian state, succeeded in bringing stability to the country. In this period of little bilateral engagement, a group of Vietnamese writers with personal ties to Cambodia sought to keep the memory of the Cambodian Decade alive. Their preferred medium was the short story. The publication and promotion of short stories on Vietnam’s Cambodian Decade in this era owed much to the efforts of two celebrated war veteran writers: Sương Nguyệt Minh (whose real name is Nguyễn Ngọc Sơn) in Hà Nội and Văn Lê (real name, Lê Chí Thụy) in Hồ Chí Minh City. As a soldier, Sương Nguyệt Minh had participated in the border war between Vietnam and Cambodia in 1977–1978, before taking part in the invasion of Cambodia in 1979. Now a colonel in the People’s
Army of Vietnam (PAVN), he has also won many awards for his numerous short stories and novels, including the prestigious Vietnam Writers’ Association Prize in 2010.\textsuperscript{32} Văn Lê had fought in the Vietnam War from 1966 to 1974 before transferring to the Liberation Army Art Magazine [Tạp Chí Văn Nghệ Quân Giải Phóng], only to return to active duty between 1977 and 1982 in Cambodia. He has now served multiple terms on the Poetry Council of the Hồ Chí Minh City Writers’ Association and is also a recipient of many literary awards.\textsuperscript{33} In 2004, the two jointly edited a two-volume anthology of thirty-two short stories on the Cambodian Decade, mainly written in the 1970s and 1980s, in celebration of the sixtieth anniversary of the foundation of the PAVN, with a small print run of just 1,000 copies. While it is unclear how they came to possess the manuscripts, the introduction revealed that in their zeal to get the volumes out, Sương Nguyệt Minh and Văn Lê had actually failed to obtain the permission of the authors to use their works.\textsuperscript{34} Ten years later, Sương Nguyệt Minh and Văn Lê published a new, single-volume edition with only nineteen of the original thirty-two stories.\textsuperscript{35} While this more condensed second edition was much more accessible for the general reader, it does so at the expense of dropping many of the stories written by women, those by writers outside the military, and those by southerners that had been part of the first edition, while ending up with a similarly limited print run of just 1,100 copies. Like the literature discussed in previous sections, the tension between the state-backed project of rationalizing the Cambodian Decade and Cao-Mienism is a common thread running through most of these short stories.

The portrayal of Cambodia as an inhospitable and mysterious land full of death and despair, as explored in the previous section, can also be seen in some of the short stories. In “Heavier Than a Haunting” [Nằng hồn âm ảnh] by Vương Trọng, a Vietnamese soldier was transporting five soldiers killed in battle for burial when the heavy monsoon rains washed away the names on their coffins. Instead of going through the difficult process of identifying the remains, he simply assigned the names randomly. When he returned to Vietnam, the soldier came down with an incurable fever that rendered him delirious and unable to remember the names of the people around him for months, only recovering miraculously on the day that his comrades returned to use modern technology to identify the bodies and
relabel the graves correctly. In this story, the significance of losing one’s name compounds and perhaps even supersedes the disorientation of being killed and buried in a foreign land, even as the fever demonstrates the mysterious spiritual power of those buried there.36

The inhospitality and unfamiliarity of the terrain is a major factor in Nguyễn Chí Trung’s “There Is a Clear Stream in This Dry Season” [Mùa khô này có một dòng suối trong], in which a column of Vietnamese troops inexperienced with Cambodia’s dry season fail to carry enough water supplies and are forced into a desperate battle with Khmer Rouge forces over a watering hole, nearly leading to disaster.37 The wet season presented its own problems: in Major General Hồ Phương’s tale “Little Hương” [Em Hương], a Vietnamese helicopter pilot had to brave a mighty storm and Khmer Rouge ground-to-air fire to deliver critical supplies to an isolated base on top of a treacherous mountain, and bring back the wounded and the dead.38 Even though the Vietnamese had by the time of the Third Indochina War experienced their fair share of high mortality conflict on their own soil, and Vietnam also possesses difficult terrain and monsoonal rains, the superlative terms employed to describe death and the wrath of nature in Cambodia were often employed to reflect a wilder and less civilized alien landscape, which disadvantaged the Vietnamese and favored the native Khmer Rouge.

Many of these short stories also depicted relationships between Vietnamese soldiers and Cambodian women. Cambodian women are often portrayed as sensual, mysterious, vulnerable, and at times subservient, an allegorical figure for the state of the Cambodian nation, in a way that mirrors much of the Orientalist literature in Europe. The story that best embodies this stereotype is “Chân Tha,” which was interestingly written by a woman, Trần Thùy Mai. The narrator, a male Vietnamese soldier, first spotted a young Cambodian girl, the namesake of the story, searching for the remains of her father in a skeleton pile near Angkor Wat. When she collapsed under the heat, he took care of her. The story describes the moment they said goodbye in lucid detail:

I really wanted to hold Chân Tha’s hand to say good-bye, but was hesitant and stood still. . . . Holding hands with a young woman and touching the head of children are the two taboos that all of us soldiers understand. As if understanding my intentions, Chân Tha suddenly took my hand, nestling it
in her own. Surprisingly, she stepped right up to me. I turned dizzy: her round breasts rose from under the wet sarong. Her full body appeared beneath the light of the moon, with her wet hair dripping water down her shoulders. She looked at me intensely, her expression serious and wild. “Lúc Thum [the Big Man] has saved my life, yet I have not been able to return the favor,” Chăn Tha said, in a hoarse and opaque but coherent voice. . . . With the sensitivity of a woman, she understood the yearning desire of a soldier far from home.39

Being a man of upright character, the narrator turns her away and wishes her a good life. Six years later, when his company is passing by a village, they kill a guerrilla fighter who was laying mines on the road, who turns out to be Chăn Tha’s younger brother. She follows the narrator and tries to kill him, but they end up making love for seven days before she warns him that she still needs to take revenge for her brother and he must depart. Two years later, when the narrator is one of the last Vietnamese soldiers to depart Cambodian soil in September 1989, Chăn Tha comes to say goodbye and introduce him to their child, whom she had named Xai Xà Rông (which the author claims is Khmer for “farewell”) after her dead brother. In closing, the narrator mentions that Chăn Tha’s facial expressions reflect those of the four-faced stone statues of Bayon, and he wonders which was her real face.40

While at times the character Chăn Tha embodied the femininity of Cambodia, her love-hate relationship with the Vietnamese soldier was a metaphor for the complicated relationship between the two peoples, another theme which is explored in much greater depth in these short stories than in the works discussed so far. In “The Quiet Sea-Lake” [Biên hồ yên tĩnh] by Mai Ngũ, a young soldier writing home to his father observes that the horrors the Khmer Rouge visited on the Cambodians exceeded that of Hitler on the Soviets, and describes his experience interrogating Khmer Rouge prisoners thus:

One of them admitted to having beaten hundreds of people to death, he confessed with a very innocent tone as if he had just been performing some normal task and not killing people, his facial expression as doltish as an animal. How can we hope to remake these animals into humans again, father?41
Indeed, this was a question that was particularly salient for many Vietnamese soldiers when they witnessed the scale of death and destruction of Cambodia, as well as for the Vietnamese government that wished to legitimize a PRK government that mainly comprised former Khmer Rouge cadres.

While Mai Ngữ’s story seems rather pessimistic about the prospect of redemption, several other stories offer a more optimistic outlook. In “The Story by the Pia-rêt Bridge” [Câu chuyện bên cây cầu Pia-rêt] by Ngô Quốc Dân, a Cambodian girl who was captured by the Khmer Rouge and forced to install mines on a bridge that Vietnamese troops often crossed makes the brave decision to secretly inform the Vietnamese commander of the plot, getting herself severely injured in the process. In “The Borders of a Region” [Ranh giới một vùng] by Nguyễn Bảo, a Khmer Rouge soldier recalled his inner battles when he faced the choice between shooting a young child or being shot himself. When his attempt to fake the killing is discovered, the soldier fires on his comrades and makes a break for the Vietnamese border. These latter tales mirror to some extent the experiences of the Khmer Rouge cadres who fled over to the Vietnamese side and formed the Kampuchean National United Front for National Salvation (KNUFNS), and they serve to rationalize Vietnamese support for the KNUFNS, the PRK government, and its programs encouraging desertion from Khmer Rouge ranks.

Perhaps the story that best captures the complexity of this issue is “The Mother of Oudong” [Bà mẹ U Đôn] by Lê Quốc Phong, one of the few voices from southern Vietnam. In this story, a Vietnamese soldier, Đức, is tasked by an old mother in the town of Oudong to search for her son named Pia-rêt, who had been forcibly drafted into the Khmer Rouge army. After fruitlessly searching all over the country and interrogating many Khmer Rouge prisoners, in a chance engagement Đức manages to capture a guerrilla fighter named Pia-rêt who fits the old mother’s description. When questioned about his origins, however, Pia-rêt repeatedly answers that his birth mother died before he learned to speak, that his name is Cambodia, and that his father was “the great Pol Pot” and his mother was “the heroic Cambodian nation.” Eventually, however, Đức is able to reunite the boy with his birth mother, who is indeed alive but is not the same
woman who originally asked him to search for her son. The sight of his mother enables the captured soldier to dispel the years of political indoctrination. The story ends with Đức resolving to complete his original promise to the mother in Oudong and return her son, an obvious metaphor for Vietnam’s quest to help a lost Cambodia find its way.44

Some of the stories justify a quasi-civilizing mission based on a Cao-Mienized image of Cambodia and Cambodians, thus fusing these two major strands in Vietnamese literature on the Cambodian Decade. Others hint that Cambodia is just too different from Vietnam and that efforts at rebuilding it in Vietnam’s image are both costly and futile. Ultimately, despite the diversity of views on the prospects of redeeming Cambodia, both sides work under the assumption that Cambodian society, and perhaps the Khmer race itself, was so brutalized during the Khmer Rouge era that they have been reduced to the status of animals in need of guidance to return to humanity.

One particularly notable work from this period bucks these trends: Nguyễn Thành Nhân’s novel Away from Home Season. A semiautobiographical account of the war from a veteran’s eyes, Nguyễn Thành Nhân’s novel contains some of the same tropes common to other works of this period, including intense homesickness, love for sensuous Khmer women, dissatisfaction with the climate, and the fear of dying in an alien land. But Nhân’s portrayal of the Khmer Rouge fighters is much more conciliatory than that of the other works, going at length into the personal backgrounds of several captured soldiers and trying to distill their common humanity instead of emphasizing their animal, irredeemable nature. A Vietnamese soldier in the book reflects that “the US soldiers did not understand Vietnamese people, therefore, they were afraid [of] our people or treated us with contempt. For us, we are not so much different from the Cambodians...we have the same basic cultural identity. We understand and love them, and these simple-hearted people understand and love us.”45 Away from Home Season also dares to question some of the core tenets of the official narrative. In a notable exchange between the main character and a monk, the monk explains that “unless the Vietnamese army withdraws out of Cambodia...[the intelligentsia and the politicians] will never stop opposing you and opposing the new government which they consider as
a pro-Vietnamese government.” Nguyễn Thành Nhân is also the only author to portray graphically a war crime committed by a Vietnamese soldier, who at the end of the story is executed by a military tribunal. Unfortunately, the more reflective elements in *Away from Home Season* were the exception rather than the norm for the works of this period, though the willingness to tell stories that deviate significantly from official themes points to a broader trend of greater creative freedom in a period when the Vietnamese authorities took a temporary step back from engaging with Cambodia.

“*They are animals, not humans*”

The 2010s have seen the resurrection of many of the old tensions in the Cambodia-Vietnam relationship from the 1970s. Since the 1991 Paris Peace Agreement, Vietnamese influence in Cambodia has declined sharply, while China’s newfound economic might and willingness to invest in Cambodia has led to a sharp rise in China’s political influence on Cambodian foreign policy. This shifting dynamic has twice been emphatically confirmed this decade, first at the 2012 ASEAN Ministers’ Meeting (AMM) in Phnom Penh, when China pressured Cambodian leaders to refuse to sign on to a joint communiqué backed by Vietnam and the Philippines on the South China Sea territorial dispute, and again in 2016, when the Cambodian delegation vetoed ASEAN’s statement of support for the Permanent Court of Arbitration’s ruling against China’s maritime claims in the South China Sea. This did little to stem the rhetoric of the fiercely nationalist, anti-Vietnamese Cambodian National Rescue Party (CNRP), whose members accuse the ruling Cambodian People’s Party (CPP) of being Vietnamese puppets and routinely call for the reexamination of the border posts and removal of the Vietnamese living in Cambodia. But the CPP is itself not above targeting the ethnic Vietnamese community to score political points at critical junctures. In October 2017, as campaigning for the 2018 elections heated up, the Ministry of the Interior suddenly announced plans to revoke the official documents of seventy thousand illegal residents, mostly of Vietnamese descent, effectively rendering them stateless. But even after the CNRP had been neutralized and forced to dissolve in November 2017, Prime Minister Hun Sen turned the tables on its
leader-in-exile Sam Rainsy by accusing him of making a private agreement to cede land to Vietnam.⁵⁰

Partly in response to these changing circumstances, in August 2009, the General Political Department of the PAVN launched a writing campaign on “The Profound Memories of the United Fighting Spirit of Vietnam-Laos-Cambodia,” which included several writing workshops for veterans who had served in Cambodia as soldiers or military advisors. These workshops have produced two collections of short stories and memoirs, with print runs of over 2,000 copies each.⁵¹ In 2014, the Culture and Information Publishing House also published a thick volume containing, alongside political documents and speeches, a collection of short stories, aiming to “contribute to teaching about the pride in our nation, and to improve Vietnamese-Cambodian relations in the framework of ‘good neighbors, traditional friendship, comprehensive cooperation, strong and long-lasting’ relationship,” with a print run of 1,000 copies.⁵² While at first sight these all appear to be homogenous propaganda projects, the Culture and Information Publishing House collection actually republishes many of the short stories in the volumes edited by Sương Nguyễn Minh and Văn Lê, including such nuanced stories as “Chân Tha” and “The Story by the Pia-rêt Bridge”; whereas the PAVN volumes contain entirely new stories, but they were all written in a much more formulaic, rationalizing manner reminiscent of the works published in the 1980s.

At the same time, four writers have brought the medium of the novel back into the body of literature on the Cambodian Decade. All four of them have military ties and/or experience, and this is reflected in the writing style of all three books, with especially historically accurate battle scenes and at times overly specific descriptions of troop deployments. However, despite modest print runs of between 830 and 2,000 copies each, these writers are also seeking to appeal to a younger and wider audience by playing to the unique strengths afforded by the length of the novel: deeper character development, more complex plot lines, and more detailed setting construction. They have used this liberty largely to paint a more Cao-Mienized image of Cambodia.

While he did not contribute work to the edited volume, the supervising officer for one of the PAVN writing workshops, Colonel Bùi Thanh Minh,
deputy chairman of the PAVN Writers’ Association, was one of these three novelists who writes at the far opposite end of the propaganda to Cao-Mienizing spectrum. His case illustrates how many of the officials who carry out these propaganda campaigns are themselves bored and perhaps even disillusioned with the run-of-the-mill works produced at these camps. In an interview, he revealed his worry from the start that many of the camp participants lacked literary skill and needed personalized tutorials and external motivation to complete their works. His much more exciting novel was published in 2010 as The Final Lair [Sào huyệt cuối cùng], after which he received a contract with the Ministry of Defense to republish the book in 2012 as By the Mekong River [Bên dòng sông Mê]. In an age when the archives of the Politburo remain closed to the public, Bùi Thanh Minh uses literature to imagine how the Vietnamese military commander Lê Đức Anh and Khmer Rouge leaders Pol Pot, Ieng Sary, and Ieng Thithrit may have thought and spoken. But his work does not center on these highest leaders, concentrating instead on the rivalry between two fictional characters: the Vietnamese major, Trần Bá Luân, and the Khmer Rouge field commander, Tà Khốc. In this narrative, The Final Lair employs very strong exoticization of the Khmer other, almost dehumanizing them, from the very title of the book to the very different ways in which the author describes the sexuality of Khmer and Vietnamese people:

Oh no! All of Xi Thon [Luân’s Cambodian admirer]’s female parts are watering. It was as though all of her cells have been awakened. Her velvety white breasts are erect and welcoming but no guest has arrived, making it unbearable for Xi Thon. If only Trần Bá Luân is here this moment, certainly Xi Thon will . . . The Vietnamese are stricter about this than the Khmers. Her Khmer people are more liberal. It is hard to understand why every time she sees Trần Bá Luân, or even to think of him these feelings come rushing back, making it impossible for Xi Thon to pull herself away . . . Talented, smart men certainly are very attractive to women.

That Tà Khốc often uses human bile to cook his dessert is not rare in the Khmer Rouge army, but his maintenance of three women at the same time to serve his sexual needs is perhaps unique. But truth be told, if there were only one she would probably not be up to the task. The Khmers in that aspect are
already stronger than several other peoples in the region, but Tà Khốc is the top among them.\textsuperscript{56}

[Cambodian woman’s voice:] Certainly, Vietnamese youths are so handsome, and their manners are a step higher than hers. Quang [a Vietnamese soldier] is white as a girl, his lips are red, his brown eyes are very kind and warm, different from the Khmer eyes which are sharp and cold.\ldots \textsuperscript{57}

But the construction of the hypersexual, bestial Cambodian other is not the unique purview of Bùi Thanh Minh. The main villain in Sương Nguyệt Minh’s \textit{Wild Region} [\textit{Miệ́n Hoang}] is periodically allowed to narrate from his own point of view, but only to display the brutishness of his character through the vulgarity of his language, his delight in rape and violence, and his selfishly clever personality, in contrast to the kind, calm, and polite Vietnamese soldier. Meanwhile, the propaganda mission is maintained half-heartedy, with small quotes from contemporary newspapers at the beginning of each chapter. These quotes cannot disguise the fact that, like the other two contemporary novels, \textit{Wild Region} swings very heavily toward the Cao-Mienizing end of the spectrum, thus taking a very different artistic direction from the state-backed new collections of short stories that aim to revive the (whether real or imagined) fraternal solidarity of the 1980s between the two peoples.\textsuperscript{58}

While the hypersexualization of the Khmer other is a major theme in the novels discussed above, Nguyễn Đình Tú’s \textit{Bewildered} [\textit{Hoang tâm}] focuses instead on marrying the mystical to the historical, as two narratives, one set in the present day and another set in the 1970s and 1980s, run in alternating, parallel chapters. In the present-day narrative, the main character, Anh, goes on holiday in the mountains in order to cure his persistent insomnia. With the help of a woman from a minority tribe, he comes into contact with various mountain tribes and is eventually cured by a spiritual/mystical force. In the past narrative, Anh was a soldier stationed on the Vietnamese-Cambodian border. After the Khmer Rouge penetrated their defenses and brutally butchered a small village they were supposed to protect, Anh discovered the secret to their success, traveling by boat through flooded fields, after studying an old diary left behind by a Republic of Vietnam soldier. This episode serves both as a rationalization for the
Vietnamese intervention, and a veiled criticism of the restrictive post-
Vietnam War policies of the communist government in South Vietnam. 
When his company had moved into Cambodia, Anh captured a Cambodian 
girl who had lost her family and was hiding from the Khmer Rouge in 
a hidden Buddhist temple; by gaining the girl’s trust he was able to bring 
them all to safety. The climax occurs when Anh’s fellow soldiers agitate for 
the execution of two captured Khmer Rouge, arguing, among other things, 
that “they are animals, not humans . . .” When the commander gave in to 
pressure, Anh was able to secretly allow the prisoners to escape.59 The 
book’s weaving together of a surrealist and a more conventional narrative 
serves to highlight the mystical nature of the setting, while the two major 
events of the historical narrative speak to the complexity of Vietnam-
Khmer relations, as analyzed in the previous section.

Today, even as the Vietnamese government renews its efforts to harness 
the power of literature to paint a picture of rosy bilateral relations past and 
present in an age when Vietnam-Cambodia relations are weathering fresh 
storms, the government is also allowing popular fiction writers the creative 
freedom to deviate greatly from the official narrative. While this can be 
taken as a sign of a more open society, some writers have used their artistic 
freedom to construct a highly exoticized and barbaric vision of Cambodia. 
Some of these novels are published by government presses, and their 
authors have gained professional promotion and earned critical acclaim 
in Vietnam for these works. For example, Wild Region earned Sương 
Nguyệt Minh the Phan Châu Trinh Cultural Fund’s Goodbooks Award in 
2015, and By the Mekong River won Bùi Thanh Minh the Vietnam-
Laos-Cambodia Writers’ Association’s Mekong Literary Prize.60 Clearly, 
this Cao-Mienized narrative of Cambodia is not just being spread by 
unknown writers on the fringe. Rather, its proponents occupy important 
positions in Vietnamese government and literary circles, and their works 
have gained some measure of institutional backing and possibly some 
powerful admirers. It would be a tragedy should the view of Cambodia for 
a generation of Vietnamese readers be shaped by this kind of negative 
representation. If this exoticized vision of Cambodia ever becomes truly 
influential among the Vietnamese decision-making elites, it has the poten-
tial to cause Vietnamese leaders to underestimate their Cambodian
counterparts or privately view them as inferior, undermining efforts at improving bilateral relations and building regional solidarity.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have identified two major threads running through much of the literature on Vietnam’s Cambodian Decade. The first is a quest to use literature as an instrument to explain the circumstances that brought Vietnam into Cambodia and the reasons why it needed to stay, as well as to serve as a reminder to the present-day public of this legacy of friendship. The second is a vision of Cambodia as an exotic, wild, and mysterious land with violent and uncouth men, demure damsels in distress, and, at times, an inhospitable social and meteorological climate for outsiders. Even though at first sight these two strands seem to run in opposite directions—the first emphasizing similarity and solidarity, the second emphasizing differences—many parallels exist. The weakness of the Cambodian nation and the brutality of the Khmer Rouge were used to justify an extended Vietnamese presence in the country, in a similar way, though under very different circumstances, to how European empires have at times justified their *mission civilisatrice* through Orientalist works.

The broad trend is that works published earlier tend to be more rationalizing and propagandistic, later works integrated both strands, and some of the latest novels have gone very far with Cao-Mienizing the Cambodian other while largely jettisoning the propaganda of Indochinese brotherhood altogether. Ultimately, Cao-Mienizing Cambodia can serve to justify Vietnamese intervention in Cambodia in more insidious ways than propaganda about Indochinese brotherhood and mutual aid ever could. Instead of having extended a helping hand to a neighboring country in a time of crisis, the Vietnamese would, under this new interpretation, have intervened to save savage beasts from themselves. Cambodians would be viewed as “four-faced” and ready to turn on their erstwhile allies if a wealthier benefactor were to come along.

This kind of discourse can breed prejudice and distrust, and negatively affect present-day Vietnamese engagement with Cambodia if it continues to permeate through Vietnamese society, particularly if it grows to influence the decision making of Vietnamese leaders responsible for managing the
fragile bilateral relationship. A future project may involve interviewing leaders to assess how much they read and are influenced by these works. What is clear right now is that some of the most prominent authors pushing the Cao-Mienizing narrative are, as noted above, enjoying commercial and critical success in Vietnam and holding important posts in both the military and writers’ associations. Their works and personal views on Cambodia are likely to affect not just the future direction of Vietnamese literature on Cambodia, but perhaps even Vietnamese policy toward Cambodia. Until now, there has been little pushback on these narratives. Perhaps this article might offer the first salvo.

The main aim of this paper is to be a survey of literature written about Vietnam’s Cambodia Decade, not to critique the quality of the literature itself. Nonetheless, as must be apparent to the reader, gravitating too far to either end of this spectrum results in literature that is either too formulaic and repetitive, or outright racist and counterproductive. Neither of these extremes can serve the higher scholastic and artistic purpose of literature opening a window into history, in an age where archival sources remain limited. But this lofty goal may, admittedly, not be one that all of the writers on the Cambodian Decade share.

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ABSTRACT
The generation of soldiers, advisors, politicians, and civilians who participated in Vietnam’s intervention in Cambodia between 1978 and 1989 had diverse, colorful, and powerful experiences. Their impressions and
reflections as immortalized in diaries, songs, poems, plays, short stories, and even novels form the core of popular memory of Vietnam’s long involvement in Cambodia, which I term Vietnam’s Cambodian Decade. I argue that all Vietnamese literature on this period exhibits some combination of state propaganda to justify the Vietnamese presence in Cambodia on the one hand, and exoticization of Cambodia and Cambodians on the other. This latter tendency I term “Cao-Mienism,” drawing the connection between Edward W. Said’s critique of Orientalism and the old Vietnamese term for Cambodia, Cao Miên, which carries many outdated connotations of a mystical, uncivilized, violent, and hypersexual other. I divide Vietnamese literature on the Cambodian Decade into four distinct groups, based largely on the chronological order of their publication, but also on the distinct literary characteristics of each group, thereby charting the evolution of Vietnamese views of the Cambodian Decade through the years. My main finding is that Vietnamese literature on the Cambodian Decade started out largely to serve the needs of state propaganda, but has in time shifted decisively to Cao-Mienizing Cambodia. I conclude by warning that both strands of propaganda and Cao-Mienization remain relevant in contemporary Vietnamese literature and can serve to perpetuate and legitimize a hegemonic discourse on Cambodia that is detrimental to bilateral relations.

**KEYWORDS:** Third Indochina War, Vietnam-Cambodia relations, twentieth-century Vietnamese literature, Orientalism, propaganda, post-conflict memory and affect

**Notes**

1. Norodom Sihanouk, *Twilight (Crepuscule)* (Khemara Pictures, 1969), www.youtube.com/watch?v=15JHdBoO9sM. All translations are by the author.


18. Khánh Lê, Chuyện cừ của ngườĩ thọ giả (Ký niệm Cấm-Pu-Chia) (Hà Nội: Lào Động, 1982), 26–53.


20. Ibid., 175–176.

21. Ibid., 144.

22. Gottesman, Cambodia after the Khmer Rouge, 37–78.

23. Tạp kích, 179; Lê, Chuyện cừ của ngườĩ thọ giả, 244.

24. Tạp kích, 177.


26. Ibid., 46–51.

27. Ibid., 66.


29. Ibid., 278–279.

30. Ibid., 285.


35. Văn Lề, Tia chớp phía chăn trời: Tạp truyện ngắn về cuộc chiến đấu bảo vệ biên giới Tẩy Nam (Hồ Chí Minh City: Trẻ, 2014).


37. Văn Lề, Tia chớp phía chăn trời, 225–245.


39. Ibid., 1:167.

40. Ibid., 1:165–176.

41. Ibid., 1:99–100.

42. Văn Lề, Tia chớp phía chăn trời, 201–224.
44. Văn Lê, Tia chớp phía chấn trời, 155–176.
46. Ibid., 164.
47. Ibid., 178–189.
51. Điều cẩn trọng nhất nói: Tập truyền ký niêm sầu sặc ve tinh đoàn kết Việt Nam, Cảm-Pu-Chia (Hà Nội: Quân Đội Nhân Dân, 2010); Bên tường đài Angko: Tập truyền ký niêm sầu sặc ve tinh đoàn kết Việt Nam, Campuchia (Hà Nội: Quân Đội Nhân Dân, 2011).
55. Bùi Thanh Minh, Sao huyệt cứu city: Tiểu thuyết (Hà Nội: Hà Nội, 2010), 58.
56. Ibid., 93–94.
57. Ibid., 220.