



Magnificent *Journeys*

BY MICHAEL CASTELLON

Dang Thuy Tram

Doan Ngoc Tram left her home in Hanoi with her three surviving daughters and boarded a 31-hour flight to Lubbock. Her pilgrimage to West Texas was almost 35 years in the making.

Eighty-one-year-old Doan Ngoc Tram must have felt the way many people do as they look out an airplane window while on final approach into Lubbock. Early October has a unique light that lasts through the daytime hours, beautifully painting this rugged and barren countryside. Her trip to the Vietnam Center and Archive at Texas Tech would be the farthest she had ever traveled.

Her eldest daughter, Dang Thuy Tram, a North Vietnamese surgeon, was killed during a battle in South Vietnam in 1970. She was 27 years old. Now the daughter's legacy has been reborn through her own words and is becoming the voice of many young people throughout Southeast Asia as they wrestle with national identity. The story of Tram's diaries and how they ended up at Texas Tech is quite a saga.

BEGINNINGS

Much of what we know of Dang Thuy Tram is found in her journal entries. This skilled doctor and prolific writer wrote intensely of her loyalty to her fellow countrymen while sometimes criticizing the Communist party. Her neat, delicate handwriting tells a story of a young woman trapped in a world of heartache, bureaucracy and loneliness. The diaries, measuring about 5 inches by 6 inches, were meticulously constructed using pieces of cardboard from medical supply containers.

In an entry dated 1968, she writes:

"My dear parents, the daughter that you have loved since she was small has not stopped living, but has a very practical life with many aspects: love, hatred, faith, and sadness. It's a life filled with blood, tears, sweat, and also victory despite the thousands and thousands of hardships. Do you believe that I can get through this?"

Her diaries were found near her body.

"Please come to me and hold my hand when I am so lonely, love me and give me strength to travel all the hard sections of the road ahead," she writes

in her last entry, dated days before her death.

Dang Thuy Tram would never have imagined the role her field diaries would have on two nations and former enemies. Her diaries have captured the hearts of an international audience. They became a bestselling book in Vietnam. Almost 350,000 copies have been sold.

Her diaries would never have been found or preserved unless the most perfect factors lined up and clicked together. Personal belongings typically have a short life span in a war-ravaged and humid jungle. But while fate and destiny were a recurring theme in what she wrote, so would they be in the story of how these journals would be discovered and preserved.

DISCOVERY

The story of how her diaries found their way to the Vietnam Center began on a battlefield in 1970.

Fred Whitehurst discovered them. An American G.I. and intelligence officer, Whitehurst's job was to comb battlefields in search of documents that might be of value to military intelligence. Papers deemed relevant would be preserved, while

personal materials would be destroyed.

His Vietnamese translator advised Whitehurst that Tram's memoirs were very special and not to be destroyed alongside piles of other documents that had been deemed worthless by military intelligence. Protocol at the time would require such documents to be destroyed, usually in a flaming barrel.

"Fred, you can't burn this, it already has a fire in it," the interpreter told him.

Whitehurst asked his translator to write out a very rough English translation. After reading it, he kept the diaries and spent 35 years trying to locate the Tram family.

Now an attorney in North Carolina, Whitehurst turned Tram's writings over to the



Nhat ky Dang Thuy Tram, (Dang Thuy Tram's Diary), tells a dramatic account of life, love and unrest in war-torn North Vietnam.

“THIS IS MY
SISTER'S SPIRIT,
MY SISTER'S
SOUL.”

– DANG HIEN TRAM



Tram's family honors her memory.

PHOTO BY NEAL HINKLE

Vietnam Center at Texas Tech in March 2005, hoping scholars there might be able to locate the family. Researchers found Tram's family within a few months, sent them a digital scan of the documents on CD and invited them to see the diaries in person.

Doan Ngoc Tram says it was a habit of every member of her family to keep personal diaries.

"When we [saw the CD] we recognized Dr. Tram's handwriting right away," she says. "We knew the diaries existed but we didn't know where. We couldn't have imagined we would have seen them after all this time. We thought they were gone forever."

"Inviting the family to Texas Tech to hold and view the diaries was a symbol of goodwill between the United States and Vietnam," says James Reckner, director of the center. "It also serves to heal some of the wounds suffered by those after the war. We wanted this occasion to bring us closer together."

HEALING

On Oct. 6, Doan Ngoc Tram entered a room in the Vietnam

Archive, then fell to her knees and sobbed at the sight of her daughter's diaries, which sat elegantly at a table beside a picture of a smiling Dang Thuy Tram. The elderly mother clutched the handmade books to her chest and wept as her daughters held her. It was the closest she had come to hugging her late daughter in almost 40 years.

For at least an hour she sat and held the diaries to her body, running her aged and delicate fingers across its pages and binding. She hugged her daughters and walked around the room viewing pictures of Dang Thuy Tram, whose absence was achingly felt and obvious to the 40 or so spectators present.

"I thought it was her. I wanted to hold her but I couldn't," she says through an interpreter. "It was like she was there with me when I held the diaries for the very first time."

Her family agrees.

"It is a very holy story," Dang Thuy Tram's sister, Dang Hien Tram, says while holding back tears. "This is my sister's spirit, my sister's soul." <

To see the entire diary, go to: www.vietnam.ttu.edu/vietnamcenter