

Crossing Bridges into the Pasts: Reading Lan Cao's *Monkey Bridge*

Te-Hsing Shan*

Abstract

To Vietnamese Americans, the past has much to do with the Vietnam War, a “failed war” in the eyes of most Americans. However, whether the stories and experiences were told from the right or the left, they were, almost without exception, from an American perspective. What motivated Lan Cao to write *Monkey Bridge* was a desire to provide an alternative view of the Vietnam War and its consequences from a Vietnamese, or rather, a Vietnamese American perspective. This paper offers a case study by focusing on Cao’s critically acclaimed debut novel which appeared more than two decades after the Vietnam War ended. Part I characterizes the author as a 1.5 generation Vietnamese American and highlights her attempt to negotiate personal and collective pasts via novel writing. Part II discusses the mother-daughter relationship in the novel and how each tried to make sense of what had led her to the situation she found herself in by way of their different narratives. Part III elaborates on the daughter’s role as a cultural translator and her strategy not only of survival, but also of success in the New World. Part IV further discusses how the mother and the daughter confront the past in their respective ways—not only to make sense of it, but also to reconcile themselves with it.

* Research Fellow and Director, Institute of European and American Studies, Academia Sinica,
E-mail: thshan@sinica.edu.tw.

Part V points out that the whole narrative reaches another dimension by bringing in the concept of karma from Buddhism and the possibility of transforming karma by reflecting upon and coping with trauma. And Part VI emphasizes the monkey bridge as a metaphor to connect past, present, and future. By crossing these bridges, people come to know what has been hidden and repressed. With this new knowledge and understanding, a new present and future will emerge, hopefully, for the better.

Keywords: Lan Cao, *Monkey Bridge*, Vietnamese American Literature, Trauma, Karma

“From afar, or even up close, the [monkey] bridge is nothing more than a thin, unsteady shimmer of bamboo. It could take outsiders, or the uninitiated, by complete surprise, when they realized that this, this uncommanding structure, lacking completely in width and strength, was what they were expected to place their entire body weight on. And, more than that, propel themselves forward and across.”

Lan Cao, *Monkey Bridge*

You see, karma is what you make it
What you take and what you leave
For others in the end.
Karma begins even before
You know how to speak
But doesn't end with words alone.

Russell Leong, “Forty-ninth Day”

1. Unending Possibilities, Ever-renewing Restlessness

“Perhaps he had indeed, as I feared and fantasized, died a violent death,” the 17-year-old narrator Mai Nguyen conjectures on the reasons why her maternal grandfather Baba Quan failed to meet her mother Thanh at the designated place in Saigon on April 30, 1975, the very day the Americans evacuated Vietnam after years of bloody fighting. She continues, “Perhaps my mother had had the misfortune to witness it the day of their rendezvous and had had to leave him unattended. Perhaps she had been overcome by fear and had remained a safe distance away, unable or unwilling to risk her life to help her father fend off danger. The possibilities were unending” (Cao, 1997c: 213-214). Near the end of Lan Cao's debut novel *Monkey Bridge*, the reader, together with the narrator who lived in the “Little Saigon” of Falls Church, Virginia, USA, remains in suspense. It is not until the next chapter, viz., the penultimate chapter, that Thanh reveals the truth to her daughter via the last letter she wrote before

committing suicide. The story ends with the narrator turning the page on a bitter and haunting chapter of her family history and looking forward to her new life as a student of the Class of 1983 at Mount Holyoke College, “[a] college for women, the challenge to excel” (Cao, 1997c: 260). It seems that the past has to be negotiated and put to rest one way or another before there can be a new beginning, hopefully, for the better. And, it is a past that is envisioned differently by different people and, thus, has to be negotiated differently.

To Vietnamese Americans, the past has much to do with the Vietnam War, a “failed war” in the eyes of most Americans.¹ As a result, “Vietnam” has long been a synonym for “war” and has been conceived as nothing more than a battlefield and an exotic place where the Vietnamese were “perceived as helpless peasants, barbaric warriors, or cheap prostitutes” (Võ, 2003: ix). Stories and reflections concerning the Vietnam War were first repressed and then gradually appeared in the U.S. As Cao observed in her interview with Susan Geller Ettenheim:

I arrived in the U.S. in 1975 and watched over the years as Americans attempted to deal with its experience in Vietnam—first, by suppression and

¹ It is indicated in *Everything You Need to Know about Asian-American History*, co-authored by Cao and Himilce Novas, that “[i]n 1964, there were reportedly 603 Vietnamese in America, most of whom were students, teachers, and diplomats, whose stay overseas was temporary” (1996: 207). However, the Vietnam War was brought to such an abrupt end that “[t]he Vietnamese exodus to the United States in 1975 had no parallel in Vietnam’s history,” with many people departing empty-handed and with “no knowledge of the language, customs, and culture of the country to which they were fleeing” (Tran, 1992: 274). More than 86,000 South Vietnamese arrived in the U.S. within a span of a few days (Truong, 1993: 30). According to Bruce B. Dunning, “[b]y the end of 1979 [four years after the Vietnam War ended], nearly a quarter of a million Vietnamese refugees had been resettled in the United States” (1989: 55). And by 1985, “643,200 Vietnamese had taken refuge in the United States” (Cao and Novas, 1996: 207). The number of the Vietnamese Americans has been steadily increasing ever since. In addition to providing historical facts concerning the Asian Americans in a question-and-answer format, *Everything You Need to Know about Asian-American History* serves as a significant subtext to *Monkey Bridge*. Besides, Dunning’s study of the adaptation of the Vietnamese American arrivals from 1975 to 1979 can also be seen as a sociological subtext of this novel.

amnesia over the experience so that Vietnam was taboo, almost an illness with the name Vietnam Syndrome; then later by selectively allowing certain voices to be heard, so that eventually U.S. vets could begin to tell their stories; followed by other voices, such as stories of families of vets and how they coped with the vets' and the country's experiences. (Cao, 2001: 1)

However, whether the stories and experiences were told from the right or the left, they were, without exception, told from an American perspective, while “[t]he Vietnamese side, whether from the North or South, remained unheard.” What motivated Cao to write was “the desire to add another side to the story” (Cao, 2001: 1). For, as Renny Christopher laments, “Of the seven thousand or so books published by 1990 in the United States that deal with the American war in Viet Nam a little more than a dozen are by Vietnamese exile writers” (1995: 25). Consequently, one of the main motivations for Cao to write this novel is to provide an alternative view of the Vietnam War and its aftermath or “after-image,” as it were, from a Vietnamese, or rather, a Vietnamese American perspective. There is no denying that this war is *the* major concern of the writings on/by the Vietnamese Americans.² It comes as no surprise, then, that the Vietnamese Americans' reflections on and narrations of this collective memory and trauma constitute an indispensable part of Vietnamese American literature. Quoting Jacques Lacan and his emphasis on the unique function of literature “in unraveling the repressed unconscious, the reservoir of signifiers and language of the real,” Qui-Phiet Tran asserts, “[t]o understand the complexity of Vietnamese Americans' psyches, we should therefore turn to their literature” (1992: 273). As for the significance of *Monkey Bridge*, David Cowart observes, “this story seems more resourcefully than most to integrate or incorporate or subsume the American perspective in the perspective of the ‘other,’ the colonized, who turns out, after all, to be the face in the mirror” (2006: 159). This paper offers a case study by focusing on Cao's critically acclaimed debut novel

² For a general background of Vietnamese American literature, see Monique T. D. Truong (1997) and Michele Janette (2003), especially Janette's “Selected Chronological Bibliography of English-Language Vietnamese American Literature” (2003: 280-283) and note 2 (284). Although published in 2003, Janette's article does not include Vietnamese American literature after 1995, whereas *Monkey Bridge* was published in 1997.

which appeared more than two decades after the Vietnam War ended.

So far as this novel is concerned, there are various ways to negotiate the past. To Cao, writing this semi-autobiographical novel is a way to negotiate her past. Born in Vietnam in 1961 and airlifted from Saigon before it fell into the hands of the Communist regime in 1975, Cao fits the definition of the 1.5 generation of Vietnamese Americans: “[i]mmigrants and refugees born abroad but educated and socialized in the United States . . . , a generation straddling two countries and two cultures” (Cao and Novas, 1996: 198). This generation is characterized by both an eagerness to assimilate into the American way of life and an alienation from their original culture and family structure (Cao and Novas, 1996: 199). It is often after they have firmly established themselves in American society that they begin to look back upon the country and culture they left behind. Numerous interviews indicate that Cao herself is a typical example of this generation. After having received her J.D. from Yale Law School in 1987 and acquired a teaching position at Brooklyn Law School in New York in 1994, she came to think seriously about her roots and visited Vietnam in 1996. And, like Amy Tan, Cao conceived the idea of writing a novel when her mother fell seriously ill.³ Tan dedicated her debut novel *The Joy Luck Club* with the following words:

*To my mother
and the memory of her mother*

*You asked me once
what I would remember.*

This, and much more.

In a similar vein, *Monkey Bridge* is also dedicated by a daughter to her mother and

³ Cao began writing this novel on her frequent flights between New York where she worked and Washington D. C. where her ailing mother lived. In her interview with Martha Cinader, she said, “the emotional impetus was really provided by my mother’s sickness, but the Vietnam story part of it . . . became sort of embedded in the mother/daughter story as well” (Cao, 1997b: 1).

can be read as the author's act of remembering in the face of a critical moment of her mother's life—also a crucial point of her own life.⁴ As Homi K. Bhabha puts it, "Remembering is never a quiet act of introspection or retrospection. It is a painful re-membering, a putting together of the dismembered past to make sense of the trauma of the present" (1994: 63). In her article on Cao, Mirinda J. Kossoff confirms, "The remembering was painful at times, but, Cao says, 'I've become very good at compartmentalizing. Whenever certain memories come up, I have nightmares. Then I deal with it and move on to the next task'" (2003: 2). Therefore, to re(-)member and to re(-)present her past in this semi-autobiographical text is simultaneously to delve into the personal and collective memory and trauma of the Vietnamese Americans and to offer a Vietnamese perspective on the war and its consequences or "karma," according to Cao's understanding of this Buddhist term.⁵ And her way of negotiating the past is by no means a simple and straightforward one. There are different versions of the past, lies and truths alike, to be addressed. Rather than the Past, what *Monkey Bridge* represents is a multi-layered and multi-faceted past, or rather, "pasts" that have to be negotiated in diverse ways.

2. Interlocking Voices, Intertwining Stories

As Shirley Geok-lin Lim points out, Asian American literature focuses on themes such as race, gender, and family. She further points out, "Parent-child relationships are not merely signified as a set of themes but also as patterns of narrative strategies—points of view, plots, characters, voices and languages choices" (2000: 21). *Monkey Bridge* is no exception. While the mother-daughter relationship looms large, the legendary grandfather, Baba Quan, played an important part in determining the course of events. In her interview with Martha Cinader, Cao points out, "The grandfather is . . .

⁴ That somehow confirms Ian Duong's judgment of the significance of this novel in its attempt to "look at the politics and poeses of displacement and exile from a distinctly gendered perspective" (2000: 377).

⁵ The word "karma" appears repeatedly in the text. Kossoff observes that Cao's is "a sense of karma as consequence" (2003: 3). For a more detailed discussion of this motif in the novel, see the section on "Writing Trauma, Transforming Karma."

a big catalyst in this story because he really provides the movement forward of the story. . . . It also is a story, through the grandfather's story, about identity, what happened to him, who is he, why did he disappear, and the mystery behind that" (1997b: 2). The whole narrative centers around two sets of narratives told by the mother and the daughter, respectively. The narrative of the daughter/narrator occupies a large proportion of this 13-chapter novel, whereas the mother's narrative, set apart in italics, appears either in the form of journals (parts of Chapter 4 and Chapter 9) or a very long letter (the entire Chapter 12). Each set of narratives stands for each person's effort to make sense of what had led her to the situation she found herself in, "a painful re-membering," indeed. And the themes of exile and home predominate.⁶

With regards to the daughter, she mainly confronts her mother's stroke and gradual recovery, her effort to locate and rescue her maternal grandfather in Vietnam, and her application for a good women's college, which would provide an opportunity for her to further assimilate into American society. Paradoxically, all these endeavors stood in close association with and sharp contradiction to each other. She wants to rescue Baba Quan because it would release her mother from the latter's sense of guilt and, hopefully, hasten her recovery from stroke. However, Thanh does not seem enthusiastic about her daughter's efforts. It is not until Mai read Thanh's last letter that the daughter comes to know a more complicated picture of her grandfather and the reason why he did not join Thanh to be airlifted from Saigon. Furthermore, college would provide Mai with an opportunity to leave her home and the Vietnamese community and to be equipped with a good education to better integrate into the mainstream American society. However, attending college would also mean that the close ties between mother and daughter would have to be severed, which definitely makes Thanh unhappy.

In contrast with the daughter's aggressive attitude to find the truth, to contact and rescue Baba Quan, and to leave home for college, the mother appeared to be rather old-fashioned, resistant, and superstitious. Her physical and mental weaknesses, together with her inability to converse in English, make Thanh much more reliant on her daughter in the New World. In short, the relationship between mother and daughter undergoes a

⁶ In contemporary Vietnamese American feminine writing, Qui-Phiet Tran observes, exile and home constitute "two principal themes" (1993: 71).

drastic change. As a result, the sick and ill-adjusted mother and the aggressive and resourceful daughter reverse roles. No longer the one in command, Thanh has to accept her present situation and forge a new relationship with her daughter. But, this position by no means reduces her intense love for Mai which she most explicitly expresses through her journals and her final letter. It was not until after reading her mother's final letter that Mai realizes what Thanh had been covering up all along in an attempt to shield Mai from a frightening tragedy in their family history.

3. “Traduttore, traditore”?—Or, the Role of a Cultural Translator

This reversal of roles in the U.S. is more than clear throughout the story. Yet it is best illustrated by the episode of changing apartments. The incident is a dramatic representation of cross-cultural encounters in which the daughter played the part of a “cultural translator,” or rather, a living demonstration of the Italian proverb “Traduttore, traditore” (“Translator, traitor”). Thanh is extremely dissatisfied with the apartment they rent when they first move into the apartment complex in Falls Church, Virginia. To her, the giant antenna on the building across from their apartment seems to point directly toward their living room and “its long wiry spike became a deathly sword that threatened to slash our fortune and health in two” (Cao, 1997c: 21). So Thanh demands that the rental office manager give them another apartment. While this kind of thinking might seem reasonable or at least understandable in the context of the Asian concept of *feng-shui*, it would appear superstitious and ridiculous to the American manager with whom they have to negotiate. With her “thirteen well-bred years of Confucian ethics” and her inculcation in “family etiquette” and “near-automatic obedience” (Cao, 1997c: 21), Mai has to carry out her mother's command and solve the problem without appearing ridiculous to the American manager.

In other words, playing “the roles as a daughter of an Asian homeland and a stepdaughter of U.S. American society” (Newton, 2005: 138), as it were, this thirteen-year-old young immigrant is caught between her duty to her Vietnamese mother and the American way of thinking and reasoning. Mai was quite aware of the peculiar in-between status she occupied: “My dilemma was that, seeing both sides to everything, I belonged to neither. I had become the intermediary . . .” (Cao, 1997c: 88). In order to

carry out her mission, what she manages to do is circumvent the apparent difficulty by telling a lie: a snake was seen in their bathroom and triggered her mother's phobia. By purposefully mistranslating her mother's message into a popular psychological term—"Psychology is the new American religion," as the American Uncle Michael told her (Cao, 1997c: 22)—Mai is able to achieve what her mother wants of her without having them appear as a couple of superstitious and unreasonable aliens in the eyes of the American natives. Paradoxically, after their successful negotiation with the manager, the triumphant mother whispers to her daughter, not without a sense of pride, "Remember this lesson: you have to stand up to the Americans if you want anything in this country" (Cao, 1997c: 23).

Short as it is, this episode is quite significant in demonstrating the strategy not only of survival, but also of success, for a young Asian immigrant in a land of opportunities where she found herself a stranger. Straddling two cultures and facing their respective demands, Mai adopts what she called her "New World tricks" (Cao, 1997c: 21) in order to make themselves at home in a new apartment. When Thanh proudly proclaims their success, what she does not realize was that in order to fulfill a daughter's filial duty, Mai had to play the role of a translator/traitor so that she could get what she was asked to accomplish. Instead of sticking to the surface meaning of the message and offering a literal translation of what Thanh said, the purpose-driven Mai takes liberty with what her mother said and adopts what she judges to be the best means of fulfilling her mother's wish.⁷ Mai's strategy proved to be an effective trick for a young Vietnamese refugee both to survive and to succeed in the U.S. Ironically, this episode somewhat justifies Thanh's suspicion of Mai as "somebody volatile and unreliable, an outsider with inside information—someone whose tongue had to be perpetually checked and contained" (Cao, 1997c: 41). Yet, it was precisely as an unchecked and twisting tongue

⁷ As Mai said elsewhere, "Inside my new tongue, my real tongue, was an astonishing new power. For my mother and her Vietnamese neighbors, I became the keeper of the word, the only one with access to the light-world. Like Adam, I had the God-given right to name all the fowls of the air and all the beasts of the field" (Cao, 1997c: 37). However, what she did not realize then was that Thanh, with her knowledge of the family secret, could also be justifiably called as "the keeper of the word" or "the keeper of the Old World" through whom the Old World information and secret were filtered and revealed.

of this “outsider with inside information,” or rather, “an insider with outside information,” that this filial daughter carries out her mission successfully and fulfills her mother’s wish. Therefore, this episode vividly demonstrates a young female immigrant’s “cross-cultural position” and her endeavor “to form a transcultural identity by learning to navigate and to accept diverse cultures” (Newton, 2005: 128).

Nevertheless, this does not mean that Thanh and the Vietnamese of her generation did not know how to adjust themselves to the new environment, though their adjustment could hardly match that of the younger generation. The very recognition that “you have to stand up to the Americans if you want anything in this country” (Cao, 1997c: 23) showed their awareness of their situation in exile. And they did try to make the most not only of their traditional cultural resources, but also of their New World situation. For instance, Mrs. Bay, Thanh’s old friend, advised her fellow refugees to take advantage of “a truly uncluttered beginning, the complete absence of identity, of history” by resorting to their “liars’ wisdom” in order to make a new start in the New World, since many of them had lost their identification papers during the war (Cao, 1997c: 41). As Michiko Kakutani points out, this lack “has conferred on them the ability to invent themselves anew” (1997: C13). Moreover, the practice of the traditional Vietnamese *hui*, pooling money together by the community members to accumulate necessary funds for urgent needs, and the idea of starting a new business manufacturing and distributing pickled vegetables with a FDA license were clear indications of their adaptability to a new environment. The almost ritual-like regular feasts also provided these immigrants with renewed strength to face their fate in the U.S. In other words, without clearly knowing it, these diasporic Vietnamese elders were cultural translators/negotiators themselves.

To a certain extent, Cao herself has become a cultural translator through this novel, which claims to be the first Vietnam War fiction written from a Vietnamese perspective. A mediator between Vietnamese and American cultures, Cao can be seen as an “outsider with inside information” or “an insider with outside information,” depending on the perspective from which she is judged. Like Mai, here is a female 1.5 generation Vietnamese American trying to carry out her mission as a cultural go-between, probably not without twists or distortions.⁸ As a result, one of the attractions of *Monkey Bridge*

⁸ For instance, in his book review, James Banerian cautions the American readers against “using the

is the seemingly ethnographic information offered by this “native informant,” so to speak. The vivid descriptions of Tet (the Vietnamese New Year), various religious rituals, legends, myths, food, scenery, etc., are but some of the most conspicuous examples.⁹ While these descriptions enliven the narrative to a great extent by adding Vietnamese local color, at the same time they enhance the author’s self-appointed role of a cultural intermediary. As one book reviewer points out, “Vietnam comes alive with a beauty and mystery rarely seen in novels published here” (Steinberg, 1997: 64). In short, Cao actively engages in the Vietnamese American discourse and, via her intervention, produces a literary reconfiguration of the Vietnam War and its consequences.¹⁰

4. Different Perspectives, Multiple Pasts

What made Thanh and Mai refugees in the U.S. were their personal and collective doings in the past. Consequently, they had to confront the past in their respective ways—not only to make sense of it, but also to reconcile themselves with it, if they

novel as a textbook on Vietnam” (1998: 692).

⁹ This is not unlike a guided tour through an ethnic enclave and Cao’s description of Vietnamese food verges on what Frank Chin calls “food pornography,” defined by Sau-ling Cynthia Wong as “making a living by exploiting the ‘exotic’ aspects of one’s ethnic foodways.” Wong further translates it into cultural terms as “reifying perceived cultural differences and exaggerating one’s otherness in order to gain a foothold in a white-dominated social system” (1993: 55).

¹⁰ Stressing Cao’s strategy of “guerrilla irony,” Janette interrogates the idea of reading *Monkey Bridge* as “culturally representative” (2001: 50n1). While Janette’s argument against authenticity stands to reason to a certain extent, it should not blind us to the fact that even Cao herself claims to write about the Vietnam War from a Vietnamese perspective, thus somehow serving the role of a native informant. In other words, the claim to authenticity or the idea of essentialism should be treated provisionally, contextually, and held in check, for sure, but not totally disregarded. Otherwise, epithets such as “Vietnamese” or “Vietnamese American” would be self-deconstructing. Moreover, the opening sentence of Janette article on “Vietnamese American Literature in English, 1963-1994,” with its strong assertion, bears this out, “*Fortunately, it now goes without saying* that in order to understand America’s involvement with Viet Nam, and/or Vietnamese American culture, *it is crucial that we listen to Vietnamese and Vietnamese American voices themselves*” (2003: 267, emphasis added).

wanted to find their peace of mind in the New World. On the personal level, both Mai and Thanh had their respective pasts to confront. On the collective level, their pasts were part and parcel of a much more large-scale history known as the “Vietnam War” to the Americans and “the ‘American War’ or the ‘Second Indochina War’” to the Vietnamese (Cao, 1997c: 126-127).¹¹

Mai's main concerns are two-fold. From the standpoint of a young Vietnamese refugee in the U.S., she wants to find out what happened to her grandfather on the day of the rendezvous with her mother, to bring him over to the U.S. in order to reestablish their family in the New World, and to be free to pursue whatever goals a prospective American college student might have. In other words, her past is not something bygone and, thus, absolutely separate from her present and future. On the contrary, her past is related to her present and future as much as her present and future are related to her past.¹² As a Vietnamese immigrant teenager in the U.S., all Mai's efforts look both backward to a past in a prolonged bitter war and forward to a harmonious and promising future when all the surviving family members will be rid of the shadows of war, and she will go to college and start a new life.

In comparison with Mai's efforts, Thanh's efforts to delve into the past are much more complicated. To a great extent, Mai serves as a prompter from the present through whom her mother's painful and repressed past is invoked and, by means of writing, communicated to the next generation. In fact, there are numerous interlocking pasts with which Thanh is intimately related and has to cope: a hidden and repressed past before she was born; a past that characterized her childhood first as that of a girl of a poor peasant family, and then a lucky adopted daughter of the richest and most oppressive landlord Khan in the region; a short happy past when, with her adopted father's financial support, she was one of the very few privileged girls to attend a boarding school run by a French convent; a past as a wife of a philosophy professor

¹¹ From the perspective of the thousand-year-old Vietnamese history, this was just another war, in addition to their internal conflicts and their wars against such intruding imperial/imperialist powers as the Chinese, the Mongols, the Frenchmen, and the Japanese (Cao and Novas, 1996: 199-202).

¹² This explains the five lines from T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* quoted by the author as the epigraph to this novel. See the final section for a more detailed discussion.

from another rich family, embracing great expectations of what might lie ahead of her as a progressive intellectual's wife and then falling into the role of a traditional housewife in a patriarchal Vietnamese society; a shocking and haunting past in which she was caught between the warring parties in a large-scale war she was helplessly trapped, and between the secret long-standing family feud of her peasant father and her landlord father; and, finally, a recent past in the U.S. where she suffered from a stroke and constant nightmares, from which she was trying to recover both physically and mentally.

In an attempt to help her mother, Mai very much wants to know what happened to Baba Quan, where he was now, and how to get him out of the red Vietnam. Her plunge into the past nevertheless meets with coldness from her mother whose physical recovery was evident. For out of her motherly love and intention to protect Mai against a cruel and almost unbearable burden of the past, Thanh tries to cover up a secret trauma in the family history. It is not until in the last letter that Thanh reveals the whole secret to her daughter. The truth immediately explodes the heroic image of Baba Quan as a brave Vietnamese peasant awarded a medal by both the Vietnamese and American officials for having risked his life to save an American Special Forces unit trapped in a maze of landmines.

The whole family secret and national tragedy are, as it were, encapsulated and represented by Thanh's scar and two different versions concerning what resulted in this physical testimony of an unforgettable memory. Nothing less than a constant visible reminder and painful inscription of the past, the scar is interpreted in two different ways: one "covering" or "re-covering"; the other, "uncovering" and "recovering." The first interpretation or story told about the scar, which was also symptomatic of Thanh's mental trauma, was that it was caused by the kitchen fire which broke out when "she had been preparing caramelized pork" and "caught on a silk scarf loosely wrapped around her neck" (Cao, 1997c: 3). Thanh's reaction to this scar somehow puzzles her daughter, for "she seemed to accept it as such [a permanent injury] without question" (Cao, 1997c: 3). This "domestic" interpretation of the mischief and the detached response are, in fact, Thanh's disguise in order to conceal the truth beneath the scar and to minimize its impact on Mai. In other words, the truth of "The Accident" (Cao, 1997c: 3) is covered up over and over again by the mother in an attempt to protect Mai.

However, just as Thanh's mother, on her deathbed, reveals to Thanh the identity of her real father as none other than the landlord Khan and the reason behind this family secret (“*You do what is necessary to save your family*” [Cao, 1997c: 234]), Thanh decides to tell the truth about this physical scar to her daughter by writing a letter before she ends her own life. To Thanh, this act of uncovering is a necessary step toward facing her past squarely and recovering from the trauma of two generations. It is through this act of uncovering that Mai is conferred with the truth behind her mother's scars, physical and mental. And, with this in mind, Mai is able to go beyond her attachment to Baba Quan and look forward to a new life in an American college with “the openness of an unexplored future and the safety of its sanctuary” (Cao, 1997c: 260).

5. Writing Trauma, Transforming Karma¹³

The narrative reaches another dimension by bringing in the concept of karma from Buddhism. With Vietnam's historical connections with China, Buddhism, together with Confucianism and Taoism, has been an integral part of Vietnamese thought. The idea of karma appears in the beginning of the narrative when Mai tries to discover why her mother calls out to Baba Quan over and over again while under the influence of sleeping pills at the hospital (Cao, 1997c: 8). Mai realizes that her explanation (“karmic movements and the collapse of Heaven” [Cao, 1997c: 8]) would be unacceptable to the people at the American hospital, and the theme of the generation gap, which often appears in immigrant narratives, is also set here. In the eyes of the Americanized daughter, Thanh is superstitious to believe in “the infinite, untouchable forces that made up the hidden universe: hexes and curses, destiny and karma” (Cao, 1997c: 24). And the word “karma” is Thanh's “very own singular mantra” whose “sacred formula” is beyond Mai's comprehension (Cao, 1997c: 10). Inconceivable as this term appears to be,

¹³ The Vietnamese have long been familiar with Buddhist concepts, among which “karma” is a very important yet complicated one. The following discussion restricts itself to the concept of karma as it is represented in the novel. Banerian criticizes that “[e]ven her elucidation of the dynamics of karma maintains an intellectual distance and lacks the passion of true conviction” (1998: 692-693). A close reading of the story, however, will show that it is much more complicated than that.

Thanh is able to give it a down-to-earth interpretation: “karma means there’s always going to be something you’ll have to inherit” (Cao, 1997c: 20) and it is not unlike genetics in Western science.¹⁴ As a daughter, Mai readily applies this interpretation to the close ties between herself and her mother: “My mother was my karma” (Cao, 1997c: 20). To Thanh, her daughter was so “ignorant to detect danger” that she had to be with Mai all the time “to deflect” the powers of “hexes and curses, destiny and karma”; yet to Mai, the real situation should “have been the other way around” (Cao, 1997c: 24), since her mother did not speak English and had fallen seriously sick.

Anyway, the karmic ties between mother and daughter were so closely knitted that “[t]he shared facts of our lives continue to thread their way through our flesh. There is no escaping it, the fact of mother and child, as synchronous and inseparable as left and right, up and down, back and front, sun and moon” (Cao, 1997c: 170). It is not until the truth of the family tragedy is eventually revealed that Mai understands what a heavy burden her mother has been carrying all along, from Vietnam to the U.S.—instead of being the daughter of Baba Quan, Thanh was actually the daughter of the rich landlord Khan and witnessed how Baba Quan killed her real father in a cemetery immediately before a large-scale American bombardment. Only after reading her mother’s final letter does Mai understand Thanh’s extraordinary traumatized past and why her mother was afraid of “*the karma that has pursued our family like a hawk chasing its prey*” (Cao, 1997c: 251). All this overwhelming karma—manifested mainly in hate, guilt, and fear—began with “one wrong move” (Cao, 1997c: 25) when the poor peasant family decided to get rid of their debt by having Thanh’s mother seduce the rich childless landlord.

Fatalistic as the concept of karma appears to be, there are still possibilities for improving karma, either personal or collective. Regarding karma as “*the antithesis*” of the American concept of Manifest Destiny (Cao, 1997c: 55), Thanh argued that “*Karma*

¹⁴ In her final letter to Mai, Thanh thus wrote about genetics and karma: “Genetics and karma . . . [are] as intertwined as two strands of thread from the same tapestry” (Cao, 1997c: 169-170) and “karma . . . is nothing more than an ethical, spiritual chromosome, an amalgamation of parent and child, which is as much a part of our history as the DNA strands” (Cao, 1997c: 170). In this way, children will inherit “the parent’s karmic history” (Cao, 1997c: 170), a thing which Thanh desperately would not want to see happen to her beloved daughter.

is based less on rights and entitlements than on moral duty and obligation, less on celebration of victories than on repentance and atonement" (Cao, 1997c: 56).¹⁵ This sense of "moral duty and obligation" as well as "repentance and atonement" allows for the creation of something positive. Although a believer in karma—as she had witnessed it at work throughout her life (Cao, 1997c: 169)—Thanh nevertheless wants to shelter Mai from the family's karmic history. In other words, as hereditary and inescapable as it appears to be, karma can still be guided in a positive direction to generate good outcomes, if sufficient efforts are made. The text itself offers several examples to demonstrate this positive side of karma.

Telling stories about things Vietnamese, Mai says, "My mother, like the country itself, was obsessed with karma. In fact, the Vietnamese word for 'please,' as in 'could you please,' means literally 'to make good karma'" (Cao, 1997c: 34). As reflected in their daily life, Thanh would buy canaries and hummingbirds "one hundred at a time" from the market and set them free in their garden one by one, considering this "a good deed designed to generate positive karma for the family" (Cao, 1997c: 34). This is one of the Buddhist practices of benevolence towards all sentient beings to free them from all kinds of fears and sufferings. Moreover, in a collective and ritualistic way, Tet, the Vietnamese New Year, is also a good sign of commencement: "shedding the burdens of the past year. . . . A new karma would be ushered in with the new year" (Cao, 1997c: 73).

As love begets love and hate begets hate, Baba Quan's various acts result in differing consequences so far as Mai's family is concerned. By murdering Khan, he leaves an indelible scar in Thanh's psyche, a trauma from which his daughter is never able to recover. However, it is also Baba Quan's act of compassion and courage in rescuing an American Special Forces unit, including Michael, at the risk of his own life, that establishes a bond between Michael and Mai's family. As a result, Michael first gets Mai out of the war-torn Vietnam and then helps evacuate Thanh from Saigon. In

¹⁵ It is interesting to note that Thanh contrasted karma with Manifest Destiny, a concept used to explain, or rather, explain away, American westward expansion. As "*a nation of pioneers*," the American history textbooks address this issue with "*a sense of conquest and pride*," not like the Vietnamese who study their southward expansion "*with sorrow and shame*" (Cao, 1997c: 55-56). The idea of American expansionism is criticized here.

other words, the very same Baba Quan who laid in ambush and killed Khan in cold blood is also the one, who although a Vietcong, risking his life to save a group of American GIs. If “one wrong move” leads to a series of disastrous consequences, then one right move might similarly generate a series of fortunate consequences. It is in this dynamic that Thanh’s hope lay—out of “*the raw messiness of faith and retribution*” Baba Quan “*saved Michael, and Michael in turn saved us. I comfort myself with the hope that, after this harvest of the heart, perhaps amends had indeed been made*” (Cao, 1997c: 252). In short, in love and courage resides hope.

If, as Thanh put it, “[l]ove and hate rivered through his [Baba Quan’s] veins and blasted through his flesh” (Cao, 1997c: 251), then good and bad karma also carry his daughter through the ups and downs of her life until Thanh finds herself and her daughter refugees in the U.S. To Thanh, as a mother, all she tries to do is shield Mai from the tragic truth of her family and, thus, from the family’s bad karma, while receiving whatever good karma there might be. As the mother put it, “*How to best love and protect you from the karma that divides and subdivides like a renegade cell in the malignant darkness of our lives. What I think about incessantly is how to shine a torch of hope through the turbulence that has settled like dust in our lives*” (Cao, 1997c: 229). It can be clearly seen that Thanh and Mai love each other in their respective ways. And when the loving mother finds the burden of the family karma too overwhelming, she chooses to sacrifice her own life in order to set her daughter free.

6. Bridges Connecting and Re-membling Past, Present, and Future

In her interview with Pauline T. Newton, Cao indicates that she is “always much more interested in bridges [than in niches]” and “tend[s] to be more interested in . . . making connections no matter where I am” (Cao, 2005: 176). This interest in bridges finds its expression in *Monkey Bridge*. The narrator first learns of the monkey bridge and the stories concerning her family, not from family members, nor any native Vietnamese, but from Uncle Michael, a former American GI who was rescued by her grandfather and befriended by her parents. There are basically two stories of monkey bridges directly related to Mai’s family. According to Michael, monkey bridges are

The rows of spindly pedestrian overpasses that hovered thirty meters or so above a web of canals, like a Venice in the tropics. The villagers called them “monkey bridges,” because the bridge was a thin pole of bamboo no wider than a grown man’s foot, roped together by vines and mangrove roots. A railing was tied to one side, so you could at least hold on to it as you made your way across like a monkey. (Cao, 1997c: 109)

In Michael’s opinion, “Only the least fainthearted, the most agile would think about using this unsteady suspension they call a bridge” (Cao, 1997c: 110). Yet it was exactly in this unlikely place that Mai’s father first met her mother, who appeared like “an apparition in white pantaloons’ . . . floating with remarkable lightness across the bridge” (Cao, 1997c: 110). In other words, it was on the monkey bridge where a man and a woman with opposite backgrounds first saw and were attracted to each other (Cao, 1997c: 179). In contrast to the romantic, other-worldly side of the bridge, there was also a legendary and heroic side. When Michael’s Special Forces unit confronted danger, it was Baba Quan who came across a monkey bridge and guided them out of the hidden landmines. In addition to being an exotic pedestrian overpass, a monkey bridge is also a connecting and meeting place: it connects both shores; moreover, it is also the place where Mai’s father and mother first met, and the means by which Baba Quan came across and rescued Michael.

The first meeting between Mai’s father and mother on a monkey bridge brought them together and, to Thanh, “forever altered the course of my fate” (Cao, 1997c: 180). Moreover, it was on the resulting wedding day that Thanh accidentally learned of the secret between Baba Quan, her mother, and the landlord Khan. This revelation set in motion a series of heart-wrenching events that haunted her ever after. On the other hand, the meeting between Baba Quan and Michael also showed how mysterious and inscrutable fate might be: in saving his American enemy, Baba Quan also saves his daughter and granddaughter. Without exactly knowing it, Baba Quan’s right and wrong moves alter forever the course of Thanh’s and Mai’s fates.

After witnessing the murder of Khan by Baba Quan, Thanh carries her fear and sense of guilt from the Old World to the New World, saying, “*I fear our family history*

of sin, revenge, and murder and the imprint it creates in our children's lives as it rips through one generation and tears apart the next" (Cao, 1997c: 252). This somehow explains the novel's epigraph from *The Waste Land*,

(Come in under the shadow of this red rock),
And I will show you something different from either
Your shadow at morning striding behind you
Or your shadow at evening rising to meet you;
I will show you fear in a handful of dust.

When decontextualized from the original poem and recontextualized in *Monkey Bridge*, this quotation carries the overtones of fear and shadows connecting to past and future. How on earth do people face the fears and shadows that surround them? As a matter of fact, people's fear and shadows from past and future have to do with their attitude toward the present. In other words, past, present, and future are no longer separated or separable. And this was what Thanh learned from her painful experience: "*Karma is exactly like this, a continuing presence that is as ongoing as Baba Quan's obsession, as indivisible as our notion of time itself. Our reality, you see, is a simultaneous past, present, and future*" (Cao, 1997c: 252).

Whatever is done, good or bad, right or wrong, cannot be undone and has consequences; there is no escaping these consequences and yet there is always an opportunity for renewal and transformation, for better or for worse. Therefore, the past must be sought out and negotiated with not only for its own sake, but also for the sake of present and future. That is why Banerian reads this story "as an immigrant's spirit [sic] quest, an inquiry into her heritage in the hope of reconciling past and present and thus earning release for the future" (1998: 693). It was not only with "*moral duty and obligation*," but also with motherly love and "*repentance and atonement*" (Cao, 1997c: 56), that Thanh contemplated and wrote on her personal trauma as a daughter/wife/mother, as well as the collective trauma of her family and her nation. By facing her past and present squarely, Thanh hopes to usher in a better and unburdened

future for her daughter in the New World.¹⁶

When asked about the symbolic significance of a monkey bridge, Cao replies, “symbolically I wanted to talk about crossings and bridges, and for me symbolically the story is really about a wasteland . . .” She then goes on to explain the nature of this wasteland and the possibility of reconciliation:

It's a wasteland that in this particular case came from a war that was waged very tragically and very violently, but ultimately the crossing would be from that wasteland into a territory, and it probably would be a mental or psychological territory of reconciliation and peace. So it's a movement from war to peace.

Therefore, in addition to connecting two shores and symbolizing “a movement from war to peace,” monkey bridges also connect man and woman, self and other, friend and foe, as well as past, present, and future. Being an overpass, it serves as a channel wherein differences can be communicated and separation “bridged,” especially as immigrants try to strike a delicate balance between the Old World and the New World. As an immigrant with her past “baggage,” Cao says that she sees “an event . . . through two different cultural lenses almost simultaneously,” for “the past/present is simultaneous to me” (Cao, 2005: 174). Moreover, in her Bookgrrl interview, Cao has this to say about *Monkey Bridge*, “the sensibility of the book as a whole is one of personal evolution, from a wasteland of war (hence the T. S. Eliot epigraph) to a space of peace, from one border to another, whether physically or metaphorically, from immigrant to American” (Cao, 2001: 2).

Both Thanh and Mai experience an exile's fate, which, according to Edward W. Said, is “strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience” (2000: 173). Citing the example of Erich Auerbach, a famous Jewish refugee who fled Nazi Europe

¹⁶ In her interview with Jacki Lyden, Cao has this to say with regard to the epigraph and its meaning, “regardless of what happens, and regardless of the wasteland that one is handed . . . [t]here is in the end always the hope of reconciliation. And the hope really lies in the second generation. . . . [T]he second generation starts clean” (Cao, 1997a).

in World War II, Said argues that it was the possibility of writing that prevented Auerbach from “falling victim to the concrete dangers of exile: the loss of texts, traditions, continuities that make up the very web of a culture” (1983: 6). Significantly, it was through Thanh’s writing that the truth about scar/trauma was preserved and revealed and that her daughter was no longer fettered to her obsession with Baba Quan and an imaginary family history. And it is through writings such as *Monkey Bridge* that an alternative version/vision of “that war” is provided, giving people a chance to reinvent themselves.¹⁷ When interviewed by people from her alma mater Mount Holyoke College, where she took her B.A. (*magna cum laude*), Cao expressed her feeling about and fascination with writing, “I . . . have discovered, through writing, how exhilarating it is to look at our lives, the lives we see and experience, now and in the past, and reshape them in our imagination. I find that the act of re-imagining an event, of fictionalizing it, allows me to parse through it honestly, without constraint, and thus making it a very feeling experience” (Cao, 2003: 2). By crossing these verbal bridges, people come to know what has been hidden and repressed. With this new knowledge and understanding, a new present and future will emerge, hopefully, for the better.

¹⁷ In her interview with Lyden, Cao points out, “we were reminders of a war that the whole country was trying to forget.” In an implicit way, therefore, *Monkey Bridge* asks the Americans to face this ignominious past in a different light, especially the war which was “a very big psychological scar on the U.S.” (Cao, 1997b).

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渡橋走向過去：析論高蘭的《猴橋》

單德興*

摘 要

對越南裔美國人而言，過去與越戰密切相關。然而有關越戰的故事與經驗，幾乎毫無例外地都是從美國人的觀點來訴說。因此，高蘭撰寫第一部長篇小說《猴橋》的動機，就是從越南人，或者該說，越南裔美國人的角度，為越戰及其後果提供另類的觀點。本文旨在探討高蘭於越戰結束二十餘年後出版的《猴橋》。第一節指出作者身為第 1.5 代越南裔美國人的身分，以及她有心透過小說來探索個人與集體的過去。第二節討論小說中的母女關係，以及兩人透過各自的敘事尋求了解個人的處境。第三節檢視女兒身為文化翻譯者的角色，以及她在新世界中的存活與成功策略。第四節分析母女如何以各自的方式面對過去——不只為了了解，更是為了和解。第五節指出小說中帶入佛教的業力觀，藉由反省、處理創傷以轉化業力，而達到另一個層面。第六節強調將猴橋視為銜接過去、現在與未來的隱喻。藉由渡橋連結、喚起、重建被隱匿和壓抑的過去，並藉由這些認知與理解，期望促成更新穎、美好的現在與未來。

關鍵詞：高蘭、《猴橋》、越南裔美國文學、創傷、業

* 作者為中央研究院歐美研究所研究員兼所長，E-mail: thshan@sinica.edu.tw。