

Brief Biography of Nguyen Chi Thien, Vietnamese dissident poet

Nguyen Chi Thien was born in Hanoi on February 27, 1939. His father, Nguyen-Cong Phung (1898-1976), was a clerk in the Hanoi Tribunal. His mother: Nguyen-Thi Yen (1900-1970), was a traditional housewife and little merchant. The family fled war in Hanoi to their natal village My-Tho, in the district of 4 Binh-Luc, Ha-Nam Province, northern Viet Nam on December 19, 1946, and returned in 1949. In 1956, after completing high school at private academies (very common for the time), Thien and his parents moved to Haiphong to live with his elder sister and family. Ill with tuberculosis, Thien read his own education and began to compose poetry for his friends. These poems became more and more critical of the Communist regime as that government grew more repressive on its citizens and waged war on South Vietnam.

Nguyen Chi Thien was a political prisoner of the Communist regime in “re-education” prison camps and the Hanoi Central Prison for twenty-seven years between 1961 and 1991. During this time he composed poems in his memory, denied paper and pen. During a brief period of release Chi Thien wrote down and brought his manuscript of 400 poems, “Hoa Dia Nguc,” to the British Embassy in Hanoi on July 16, 1979. He was refused asylum and arrested outside the gate. He was imprisoned for a period of twelve years, the harshest of his incarceration.

The manuscript was sent to the University of London, in care of Professor Patrick Honey (1925 – 2005) In 1980 the poems were published in newspapers and books by Vietnamese exiles in the USA. In 1982 “Prison Songs” were published in English, French, and Vietnamese by Que Me (Action for Democracy in Vietnam). In 1984 "Hoa Dia Nguc" (Flowers from Hell) was translated into English by Huynh Sanh Thong of Yale University and a bilingual edition which re-established the Vietnamese Studies program (Lac Viet #1) published. In 1985 Nguyen Chi Thien received the International Poetry Award in Rotterdam. It was not known if he were alive or dead, or where he was imprisoned – in fact at the Hanoi Central Prison since 1979. He was moved to the interior jungle in 1985 and nearly died of starvation and solitary confinement.

Amnesty International began a letter-writing campaign as early as 1981, when the name of Nguyen Chi Thien headed their list of Prisoners of Conscience in North Vietnam. In 1988, after a hearing about his arrest in 1979, his plight was broadly publicized by Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch. His sister, Nguyen Thi Hao (1924 – 2004) sent his photograph to Vietnamese refugees abroad asking for help. Many letters of protest were sent to the Vietnamese

government, including the President of Senegal Leopold Senghor (also a prison poet), King Hussein of Jordan, and Prime Minister John Major of the United Kingdom. By 1990 Thien was moved to the Ba Sao prison camp and given medical attention. In October 1991 he was released to the care of his sister in Hanoi, just ahead of inspection by the International Red Cross.

Nguyen Chi Thien immigrated to the USA on November 1, 1995, in the care of his brother, Nguyen Cong Gian (1932 -), who had been a Lieutenant Colonel in the South Vietnamese army and an adviser at the Paris Peace Accords in 1972. Mr. Gian was the only member of the family to migrate to South Vietnam in the 1954-1955 open border period. He was imprisoned for thirteen years after 1975. Mr. Thien's first action was to write down and publish the poems he composed in prison since 1979 in a second *Hoa Dia Nguc*. They were translated and published in bilingual editions by Nguyen Ngoc Bich of Virginia in 1996.

In 2005 Nguyen Chi Thien was the first featured author in the Viet Nam Literature Project, writing his "Autobiography" in English (www.vietnamlit.org), which has since been published in *Beyond Words: Asian Writers on Their Work* by the University of Hawaii Press (Manoa Journal). In 2006 a complete edition of the 700 "Hoa Dia Nguc" poems composed from 1957 to 1996 were published in Vietnamese by the East Coast USA Vietnamese Publishers Consortium.

Nguyen Chi Thien received an International Parliament of Writers Award in 1998, living in France for three years and writing in prose, *Hoa Lo Tap Truyen*. The seven stories of actual events and persons were published in Vietnamese in 2001 in Virginia and reprinted many times. English translations were published by Yale University Southeast Asia Studies as the *Hoa Lo / Hanoi Hilton Stories* in 2007. Two of these stories are published in bilingual English and Vietnamese text by Allies for Freedom publishers of Palo Alto, California, in 2008, entitled *Hai Truyen Tu – Two Prison Life Stories; Nguyen Chi Thien's prose in bilingual text*. ISBN 978-0-3638-6-5.

The poet is, since 2004, a U.S. citizen, living in Orange County, California. In early 2008 his original manuscript was returned by Vietnamese friends in London who obtained it from Professor Patrick Honey at the School of Oriental and African Studies before he died in 2005. The manuscript is now safely in the possession of the creator, poet Nguyen Chi Thien.

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