



**Between Two Deaths:  
Representation of the 1968 Huế Massacre 1968 in  
“Song for the Dead” of Trịnh Công Sơn**



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[ *Abstract* ]

The 1968 Huế Massacre is a horrifying event rarely mentioned today in Vietnamese history and mass media. It is forgotten perhaps because it is simply indescribable. This study reads a song by Vietnamese musician Trịnh Công Sơn, where he attempted to chronicle the catastrophic images of the massacre. We use the notion of symbolic death in psychoanalysis to interpretation of the song, and shed a new light on how it captured this historical event which eludes understanding.

**Keywords:** psychoanalysis, symbolic death, the Real, Trịnh Công Sơn, Huế Massacre.

“Song for the Dead” (Bài ca cho những xác người) emerged from the early period of the career of Trịnh Công Sơn. It first appeared in the debut album *Yellow Skin’s Songs (Ca khúc da vàng)* released in 1969. This album was first released in 1967 without the two songs on Huế Massacre “Song for the Dead” and “Singing on the Dead.” The two were added in the 1969 release.

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As one of the few Vietnamese composers who became popular outside Vietnam, Trịnh Công Sơn was famous for his mysterious lyrics and deep meditations on life, especially love and war. During the Vietnam war, he composed numerous anti-war songs, denouncing the deception and emphasizing the meaninglessness of the civil war between North Vietnam and South Vietnam.

These anti-war songs often possessed melancholy and lament shared with everyone. “Song for the Dead” has that same tone, yet it somehow possesses a haunting effect much stronger than any of the other anti-war songs as it had reached a level of absurdity. This made scholars shy away from studying, much less interpreting it.

## **I . The Forgotten Massacre**

With regards to Vietnam War history, people more often remember the My Lai Massacre, also in 1968, as having compelled widespread anti-war protests in America in the 70s. Little has been said about Huế Massacre, when the People's Liberation Armed Forces engaged in a surprise attack throughout South Vietnam.

In January 31, 1968, the North Vietnam Army operated multiple attacks in many cities including Huế. Within a month, the Communists seized control of Huế City before they were pushed back by the South Vietnam Army and American Forces which utilized overwhelming firepower and napalm bombs. When Huế was recovered by the Americans and South Vietnamese, thousands of people have already gone missing or have been killed. The survivors dug up common graves to find their dead relatives. In the following years, numerous common graves were found inside and around Huế City. Casualties were pegged between 2000 to 5000.

Compared to My Lai massacre, the massacre at Huế was much larger, in terms of area covered and death toll. This however was

not enough to be remembered, though it had become a means to question the legitimacy of Vietnam War, as well as to make the North Vietnam Army responsible.

A few months after the war, Nha Ca, a known supporter of the government of the Republic of Vietnam wrote the *Mourning Band for Huế* (Giải khăn xô cho Huế), a record of the tragedy. This is considered a most important document about Hue massacre.

In the US side, news of the massacre was quickly dislodged by a series of other major events. Olgar Dror (2018) reported:

While the discoveries of mass graves unfolded in Huế, the attention of Americans was diverted to the shocking domestic events of 1968: On March 31, President Johnson announced that he would not run for reelection; on April 4, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated, an event that provoked days of rioting in American cities; on June 6, Robert F. Kennedy was assassinated; in August, violent clashes between police and protesters accompanied the national convention of the Democratic Party in Chicago; finally, the presidential campaign resulted in the election of Richard Nixon. The fate of the Huế victims did not break through these headlines.

Then, even though in Huế local people continued to unearth corpses of missing people and the number of uncovered bodies was rising into the thousands, the news of another tragedy overshadowed Hue again. On March 16, 1968, less than a month after the events in Huế, American soldiers entered the hamlet of My Lai and killed between 300 and 400 of its inhabitants, including children, old men and women. When they found out in 1969, Americans were rightly appalled by the actions of their countrymen in Vietnam, and the My Lai victims and the American perpetrators pushed the Hue victims and the communist perpetrators out of the American media and, by extension, out of the attention of the American public and of world opinion (Dror 2018).

Compared to the My Lai Massacre which shocked the American because of the investigations that ensued, the Huế Massacre has received little attention. It was even reported to have been carried out by way of the point-and-kill policy of Northern

rulers. Anyone reported to be collaborating with enemy forces was summarily tried and executed. Some sources even claimed as North Army retreated, they decided to kill prisoners and bury them in mass graves: "In the final stage, when it is clear they are being knocked out of Hué, The Liberation National Front forces executed witnesses—anyone who knew their faces was killed and buried" (Pike 1970: 54-55).

However, many people expressed doubts about the authenticity of the documents on the Hué Massacre coming from the US and Vietnam Republic. For example, Gareth Porter argued that the Hué Massacre was an exaggeration created by the American propaganda machine. There are pieces of evidence that tend to deny the massacre. Firstly, the government did not allow independent reporters to inspect the mass graves. Secondly, there were also contradictions in the Douglas Pike report, which seem to exaggerate the number of casualties and conceal US responsibility (Porter 1974). Some raised that the Hué Massacre was used to legitimize US presence in Vietnam. Dorr noted that Americans only saw " his event mainly from a political perspective" (Dorr 2018).

North Vietnam was mum on the issue. Communist leaders who participated in the war, while unofficially admitting to the purges, maintained that people died because of US Army gunfire. This is a report by Hoang Phu Ngoc Tuong, which many officials and researchers agree with:

About those killed in battle, of course some of them were killed by revolutionary guerrillas. When we entered the houses to call them out, they shot back; they shot to the point where some of our soldiers were injured; then we had to shoot back and kill those people. In that case there is a deputy governor of Hué...There were cases of people tortured and arrested by the Saigon government and then had a chance to strike back. When the revolution broke out, they regained the power and eliminated those poisonous snakes who could have committed more damage if they lived longer...

Most of our prisoners were taken to re-education camps in the forest. Most of them were released. Only a few of them got sick because of the climate in the forest. They all returned to their families. But some were killed. Most of these people were killed and buried in the city by us, then excavated by the US and the Saigon Government for filming. Those people were killed by US bombs during the counterattack. American planes dropped a bomb that hit a hospital in the Dong Ba neighborhood, killing and injuring over 200 people (Tuong 1982).

In addition to the lack of consensus by those who participated in the 1968 Offensive, there was also no official condemnation from the Vietnamese government about the event. It remains a sensitive and hardly mentioned. Đức added:

The battle for Huế went on for 26 days, and proved to be one of the bloodiest. The northern forces had more than 5,000 casualties; the combined American and South Vietnamese forces has 600 dead and almost 3,200 wounded. In Vietnam today, this event is described in heroic terms, and the state propaganda machine still goes into overdrive to celebrate it every few years.

But of a massacre of thousands of Huế civilians? Not a word. No one knows exactly how many people were killed; several accounts put it at more than 3,000, most of them civilians. They died in a deliberate campaign by the Communist forces to destroy The Huế government. This massacre is appears in Western accounts but is seldom discussed in Vietnam. And yet, in what was, for the Vietnamese people, a civil war, the fratricidal nature of this event could not have been more stark (Đức 2018).

Although the Vietnamese government organized several events in 2018 to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Mau Than campaign, there still was little mentioned of what happened in Huế. The word “massacre” (thảm sát) seemed to have become a taboo as observed by Olgar in a seminar in Moscow:

In 2012, while giving a presentation on the Huế Massacre and Nha Ca’s account of it at an academic conference in Moscow, I was told that we must focus on the atrocities committed by Americans and

by their South Vietnamese “puppets.” I expressed agreement that we must and will discuss American atrocities, but that we should not overlook what the other side did. No, I was told, the communists fought for the right cause and we must focus on the American perpetrators, an exchange that was reported in the conference’s proceedings. From out of 50 or so people in the room, no one voiced any support for my view; later, it was related to me that there was no need for my “Western objectivity” (Dorr 2018).

Huế is forgotten, despite its violence and horrifying number of casualties, because unlike My Lai, where the culprit is easily identifiable, the said tragedy seemed to have been caused by both the US and Vietnam. What makes this worse is that the victims were dragged inadvertently and helplessly into the battle, only to fall from memory.

It also seems, at present, that unlike My Lai Massacre is challenging to historicize. The silence of parties involved and unreliable accounts from the West make it difficult to even reconstruct it. We only see and touch the surface of signifiers, the mass graves, but fail to name the haunting event, the massacre itself. However, the dead of the Huế Massacre, having fallen out of history, would never rest in peace but symbolically return, having been repressed. What Žižek said may resonate with this observation:

let us then ask a naive and elementary question: why do the dead return? The answer offered by Lacan is the same as that found in popular culture: because they were not properly buried, i.e., because something went wrong with their obsequies. The return of the dead is a sign of a disturbance in the symbolic rite, in the process of symbolization; the dead return as collectors of some unpaid symbolic debt (Žižek 1992: 23).

Lacan took a classic example from the *Hamlet*: the king's specter never stopped haunting the living until the symbolic debt was repaid. The dead in Huế may also be said to be undergoing a similar process. They were not properly buried, and only in mass

graves and even for unknown reasons. The killers are also unknown. Their massacre is challenging to recreate, much less, imagine in history. Zizek added:

It is precisely for this reason that the funeral rite exemplifies symbolization at its purest: through it, the dead are inscribed in the text of symbolic tradition, they are assured that, in spite of their death, they will "continue to live" in the memory of the community. The "return of the living dead" is, on the other hand, the reverse of the proper funeral rite. While the latter implies a certain reconciliation, an acceptance of loss, the return of the dead signifies that they cannot find their proper place in the text of tradition (Zizek 1992: 23).

## II. Trịnh Công Sơn on The Massacre

Despite these difficulties, what did Trịnh Công Sơn write about the event? Since he did not necessarily take sides, his song may be considered a minor, independent languaging of the terrors of the massacre. In fact, even if he lived under the South Vietnam regime, after the Communist Army reclaimed Saigon on April 30, 1975, he still wrote and sang "Join the Big Arms" (Nối vòng tay lớn), which called for peace and unity over Sai Gon radio. This made him particularly disliked by both governments. Vietnamese Republicans criticized him for being weak, for being "just a reed, moreover, a weak reed [though, as they say "the reed knows how to think"]" (Ban Mai 2008:28), while communists saw him as lacking in political stance. The reunification of Vietnam in 1975 led to the banning of his music which lasted a long time. This did not prevent people from listening to his songs secretly.

Trịnh Công Sơn's standpoint is clearly expressed in his verse. He was the only one who called the Vietnam War a civil war, in "Mother's Fortune" ("Twenty years of civil war", "Hai mươi năm nội chiến từng ngày"). The deaths in his lyrics are mainly observed from

the perspective of trauma rather than from a political or ideal standpoint. Oftentimes, he does not hesitate to erase the ideal often attributed to a death:

Tôi có người yêu chết trận Ba-Gia  
Tôi có người yêu vừa chết đêm qua  
chết thật tình cờ  
chết chẳng hẹn hò  
không hận thù, nằm chết như mơ

[I have a lover who died in the Battle of Ba Gia  
I have a lover who just died last night  
died accidentally  
died without a date  
without hatred, lying dead like having a dream]

In this song, the soldier death was described as surreally accidental, without the tone of hatred. Trịnh Công Sơn was obsessed with human death and trauma, but was determined to stand outside the language of the opposition, as also observed here: “In his anti-war music, Trinh Cong Son did not have any political intentions. He followed his heart...a kind, sensitive, honest heart which only speaks of his passion for his homeland and nation, despite the absence of a political attitude” (Buu Chi 2005). In “Song for the Dead,” Trịnh Công Sơn shows an altogether unusual perspective:

Xác người nằm trôi sông, phơi trên ruộng đồng  
Trên nóc nhà thành phố, trên những đường quanh co.  
Xác người nằm bờ vợ, dưới mái hiên chùa  
Trong giáo đường thành phố, trên thềm nhà hoang vu  
Mùa xuân ơi, xác nuôi thơm cho đất ruộng cày  
Việt Nam ơi, xác thêm hơi cho đất ngày mai  
Đường đi tới, dù chông gai  
Thì quanh đây đã có người  
Xác người nằm quanh đây, trong mưa lạnh này  
Bên xác người già yếu, có xác còn thơ ngây  
Xác nào là em tôi, dưới hố hầm này



Trong những vùng lửa cháy, bên những vòng ngô khoai

[The corpse is lying on the river, on the field  
On the roof of the city, on winding roads.  
The corpse is lying helplessly under the eaves of the temple,  
In the city cathedral, on the deserted terrace.  
Hey, Spring, corpses nurture plowed fields!  
Hey, Vietnam, corpses bring breath to the tomorrow-soil!  
The road ahead, though thorny,  
There are people around here.  
The corpses lie around here, in this cold rain.  
Next to corpses of the old and weak, there were corpses of young ones.  
Which corpse is my brother, under this tunnel,  
In the flames, beside the corn and potato farms?]

The song lists what the speaker is supposed to have witnessed in the massacre. The catalogue is panoramic: river, field, roofs in the city, streets, pagodas, churches, houses. The listing is almost random but horrific, with the intention of reproducing an overall picture of the city with dead bodies scattered everywhere.

The middle part of the song however pivots to hope amidst the sense of nothingness in the landscape. Here, the corpses are assigned to certain functions: cultivating plowed fields, giving breath to tomorrow-soil, and being a part of the future of the nation. The musician may be described as weaving the dead into history, a process of historicization: corpses in an unknown city (for the song does not mention Huế) were connected to the future of a named nation.

However, this act of historicization immediately opens the domain of the Real. The Real, for Lacan, "in the formulations of the Imaginary and the Symbolic, [is something] that was always being 'left out'...the Real is what is expelled when a signifier becomes attached to some morsel of reality: it is the bit that the signifier fails to capture" (Bailly 2009: 83).

It may also be said that Trịnh Công Sơn tried to capture the

reality of the massacre by way of the signifier "corpse", as well as "spring," "nurture plowed fields," and "tomorrow." The connection between reality and these signifiers leads to the fact that a part of that reality is excluded from the connection between the symbolic and the imaginary. Bailly added: "In terms of Hegelian dialectics, the Real must exist in tension with the other two—for something to exist, its inverse must exist as well; and for existence to be, there must also be a state of non-being. Lacan borrowed a term from Heidegger when he said that the Real ex-sists, because the Symbolic and Imaginary exist" (Bailly 2009: 83).

The attempt to reality exists will create its opposite, a *das Ding* without being, which is invisible. Bailly wrote: "The Real is best thought of as ineffable and unimaginable—a state perhaps only experienced pre-birth, as even the act of birth introduces a 'cut' in the featurelessness of the baby's universe. Even the newborn has the proto-concept of duality—that there is presence and absence—and by this understanding, it can begin to know that things exist. It is the perceptions of the Imaginary that create ridges and flaws, differences in temperature and texture, interiors and exteriors. Then, the baby learns to attach signifiers to things—which have already made their existence known in the dialectic of presence/absence—and to their properties" (Bailly 2009: 84).

Therefore, the Real in this case, does not appear on the significance's surface, but lurks underneath the symbolic structure, preventing all light of the signifier from touching it. All that can be recorded is a bit of significant noise leaking from the symbolic structure, a mistake, a bluntness.

Hey Spring, corpses nurture plowed fields  
Hey Vietnam, corpses bring breath to the tomorrow-soil  
The road ahead, though thorny  
There are people around here

It may be noted that the last two sentences continue to weave the dead into history (here, the future), but in the end the composer uses “people” instead of “corpses.” This is the only time the word “people” (and perhaps, “the living”) appears in this song, which is often overlooked, considered meaningless or a just a deviation. Theoretically speaking, attributing the signifier to the signifying structure erases the very signifier. We cannot name *das Ding* because any signifier will immediately slip out of its smooth and undifferentiated surface.

Examining the word "person" at the end of the verse, it may be said that it is creating a significant noise, which shakes the existing connection between the signifier and reality. It creates a situation of in-between deaths. Those who died during the actual massacre are in a a sort of limbo, an unrecognizable space that cannot be determined. They are the living dead.

The word "person" appearing at the end of this paragraph has no meaning, but it is just a fantasy to hide the traumatic kernel in the core of the symbolic structure. Zizek explained that in the final stage of his career, Lacan believed that:

the unconscious 'structured like a language', its 'primary process' of metonymic-metaphoric displacement, is governed by the pleasure principle; what lies beyond is not the symbolic order but a real kernel, a traumatic core. To designate it, Lacan uses a Freudian term: *das Ding*, the Thing as an incarnation of the impossible jouissance (...)

the final moment of the analysis is defined as 'going through the fantasy (*la traversée du fantasme*): not its symbolic interpretation but the experience of the fact that the fantasy-object, by its fascinating presence, is merely filling out a lack, a void in the Other. There is nothing 'behind' the fantasy; the fantasy is a construction whose function is to hide this void, this 'nothing' - that is, the lack in the Other (Zizek 2008: 148).

Trịnh Công Sơn's act of historicization may be considered a

creation of symbolic order to grasp reality. At the core of this symbolic order is trauma, which is impossible to symbolize [the word "corpse" for instance, will immediately exclude the mass of this reality, and turn it, or its remains, into a simplified signified, such as the number of deaths in official report]. There is, then, an immense gap.

The word "people" therefore functions as a patch filling the void. It may be meaningless, hiding everything the word "corpse" cannot symbolize, thus a failure in naming. In many ways, the word "corpse" used in the song refers to something, but the word "people" refers to nothing: it is brought here merely because it is the opposite of corpses, the opposite of life and death. The absolute "person" does not have a direct connection with *das Ding*, it is similar to *das Ding* in that they all have a negative relationship to "corpse."

Make no mistake, the word "person" does not directly refer to *das Ding*. *Das Ding* has nothing in common with the connotation of the signifier "people." The word "people" here, while it conceals what is lacking, also has another function: it creates a limit, a contour of the *das Ding*, a boundary of the indescribable and unknowable. However, we understand that it exists there, the reality that always avoids being signified. The dead and the living create a limit that refers not only to what they are but rather to what is *between* them: the living dead. The victims of the massacre fell into the middle of two deaths: the real death and symbolic death. According to Lacan, while biological death is the death of the physical body, the symbolic death is the destruction of the symbolic order.

In the case of the massacre, biological death came first, but its horrors and meaninglessness could not be symbolized, which therefore postpones the second death. It was the dead who didn't know they were dead, and so they continued to live, borrowing from

Zizek. The abysmal hole has created a haunting dimension in Trịnh Công Sơn's song: the remains of the dead in the city will survive without disappearing, because they are still alive.

### III. Conclusion

Trịnh Công Sơn's "Song for the Dead" provided a narrow way into this most blurred yet terrible event in Vietnam War. It showed us the fate of Hue people in the massacre: they were neither from South Vietnam nor North Vietnam, but were represented as innocent Vietnamese stuck in the middle of the war between capitalism and communism. Their deaths were therefore rendered meaningless, being stuck between real and symbolic deaths. The horror that may be felt from this song evokes the recognition of the in-betweenness of the nature of the massacre which still obsesses the living because it has never ended.

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