For 10 years, starting at age 21, Duong Thu Huong led a Communist Youth Brigade unit at the front during the Vietnam War, living in tunnels and underground shelters alongside regular North Vietnamese troops. She was part of a theatrical troupe, responsible for arranging performances to entertain soldiers and people in bombed-out areas. Their purpose was to enhance morale. She was one of three survivors of a unit of 40 men and women.

After decades of activism with the Vietnamese Communist Party, Duong became disillusioned; in the 1980s she wrote and spoke about the political and spiritual chaos of Vietnam, for the most part at official Party and Writers' Union Congress functions or in interviews with official Party literary magazines. The first censorship and banning of Duong's books occurred in the early 1980s. In 1982 she publicly protested, at the Third Congress of the Writers' Union, the censorship of a screenplay. Between 1982 and 1985, a party banning order ensured that none of her work was published. A documentary she had independently produced, A Sanctuary for the Despairing, about the inhuman conditions in a camp for 600–700 "mentally ill" war veterans, was destroyed by security police under orders of Party Secretary Nguyen Van Linh.

Published in 1988, Paradise of the Blind, Duong's third novel, was denounced by Nguyen Van Linh, who issued a second banning order. It outraged Vietnamese leaders, particularly the sections describing the 1953–56 land reform campaign—its excesses and its mismanagement, its destructive effects. Nguyen publicly excoriated Duong as "a whore"; he issued a second banning order. However, all 60,000 copies were already sold out; no copies were available for confiscation and destruction.

Duong, in an interview in 1995, acknowledged that most of the reprehensible characters are based on party functionaries: "In general, my writing is based on what I see in life…. [Chinh is] based on a man who is a leading cadre of the Vietnamese trade unions. He lives in Hanoi, and unfortunately his type is very common in Vietnam."

The land reform program, the spine of the novel, is based on the reality of the 1953–56 campaign which, as translator Nina McPherson declares,

triggered a wave of violence: terrified villagers were forced to denounce their "landlord" neighbors to guerrilla "security committees"; and by 1956, tens of thousands of villagers—some of them with only a few acres of land—had been arrested. Nearly 100,000 "landlord" farmers were sentenced to forced labor camps by courts that were often composed of no more than a handful of illiterate peasants. In the chaos, many of the Communist cadres administering the land reform engaged in factional struggle, and some took advantage of their power to spare their own relatives or seize the property of the accused for themselves.

Duong's depiction of these situations and their repercussions established her leadership of the dissident movement, leading to her arrest and the banning of her works. Please see the censorship history of Novel Without a Name for an expanded discussion.

Further Information
