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: 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 during 1985–87, *A Sanctuary for the Despairing*, about the inhumane conditions in a camp for 600–700 "mentally ill" war veterans, was destroyed by security police under orders of party secretary Nguyen Van Linh. In 1988, *Paradise of the Blind*, Duong's third novel, was denounced by Nguyen, who issued a second banning order. In 1990 *Novel Without a Name* was sent to France and the United States since publication was forbidden in Vietnam; the third banning order identified this novel. None of her recent novels or screenplays, including *Memories of a Pure Spring* (1996) and *No Man's Land* (1999), has been published in Vietnam.

An advocate of democratic reform, specifically supporting multiparty politics, Duong in July 1989 was expelled from the Communist Party (party officials say she resigned), accused of espousing heresies about democracy and human rights. On April 13, 1991, she was arrested and imprisoned without trial. She was charged with having contacts with "reactionary" foreign organizations and with having smuggled "secret documents" out of the country. Duong responded to these charges by asserting that she was expelled from the Party because of her dissident views; the "secret documents" were her writings, including the manuscript of *Novel Without a Name*. She was held in prison for seven months, first in a compound outside Hanoi and then in a prison. She described her cell as having "no windows—only a door with a hole for me to look out of." She was not done any physical harm, but she lost nearly 35 pounds because of inedible prison food. She commented: "They wanted to know if I had communications with anybody who was dangerous—foreigners or overseas Vietnamese. It was all a pretext to harass me, to frighten me." She was released in November 1991.

In 2002, having published one of her controversial articles in a Vietnamese newspaper in Australia and another, "The Flap of Raven Flock" ("Tung Vo Canh Cua Bay Qua Den") in the *Saigon Times*, she was identified as a "national traitor," a "woman ungrateful for what Vietnamese martyrs have done for the country's liberty." In the cited articles, she expresses Vietnam's past as "the ill-fated history of a humble nation in which any brave soldier can become a dim-witted and cowardly citizen … and authority in Vietnam lies in the barrel of a gun held by right-wing extremists and village bullies."

An alternative interpretation of the banning of Duong's works indicates that they are not formally banned except in effect: "Government-controlled publishing houses will not reprint the popular old works, nor will they publish her new works." Her books, among the most beloved works in modern Vietnamese literature, are difficult to obtain. A bookseller in Hanoi said, "We all love her novels, but we cannot have them on our shelves."

During a 2005 visit to France—only the second time that she has been allowed to travel to Europe—Duong asserted that her priority is to denounce the Hanoi government as irremediably corrupt and abusive. "It is my mission to do so on behalf of those who have died under this shameful regime…. I have to empty what is inside me to keep my conscience clear. The people have lost the power to react, to reflect, to think. Perhaps I will give people courage." Duong has been living in exile in France since 2006, but she has not chosen—or sought—political asylum.

Duong Thu Huong was nominated for the 1991 Prix Femina Étranger. On December 13, 1994, she was awarded the French chevalier order of arts and letters. The Vietnamese government in Hanoi expressed unhappiness over this "deplorable action"; the incident caused a rift—*un coup de froid*—between the two countries. France was accused of "a new form of colonialism" for
giving an award to a dissident Vietnamese writer.

Further Information


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