

Book review

"Totenkranz" Who would have thought Hanoi could be such a good setting for a film noir?

Britta Schmitz

End of January in Hanoi: the Tet-festival – Vietnam's New Year's celebration – has brought a pause to the usual hustle and bustle in the city. People have left the capital and returned to their home villages. Even the police headquarters is deserted. This is the only reason why political commissar Hung calls criminal detective Pham Van Ly, who had been suspended from duty 10 months before. An old woman was found dead on a construction site. Only a few hours later a Chinese real estate investor dies from what looks like food poisoning. What first seem to be unrelated incidents turn out to be a series of murders with the killer leaving a track of mysterious funeral wreaths. Ly jumps at the chance for this case as he sees it as the only way to get his suspension lifted. His investigations lead quickly into the corruption and nepotism related to Vietnam's real estate market. And while the grumpy detective with a taste for Thang Long cigarettes and beer is solving the case, the reader travels into the dark side of Vietnamese society with its corrupt officials, poor farmers and ruthless property sharks from China.

Film noir – or in this case roman noir – was the first thing that came to mind here. Hanoi, with its maze of old town alleys, its corruption and the hardly covered-up prostitution, in my opinion, is a very good setting for a "noir story." In this novel it is a dark, cold and often colorless Hanoi we are drawn into, not the exotic tourist destination which some might expect. Readers looking for some kind of feel-good book should better stay away from Detective Ly.

"Roman noir" is a subgenre of crime literature. Noir fiction mostly takes place in urban settings, usually rather

seedy corners of large cities. The protagonists are often described as alienated, anti-social loners with a pessimistic worldview. The crime in noir fiction is rooted in the social circumstances, the protagonist does not save the world and there is no happy end after the crime is solved.

Detective Ly is quite the anti-hero. Ly has been recently suspended from his job because he bought some forbidden tiger bone paste for his mother – clearly the sort of thing a higher ranking official with a good political network would have easily gotten away with. Now he is slowly losing control

over his life. It is a patriarchal world order he lives in. However, this order begins to crumble when his wife Thuy decides to take the fate of the family into her own hands and prepares to move to Singapore – without Ly. This hits the detective hard and adds to his existential angst. In Ly's world a man has to work, to provide for and protect his family and Ly is just about to fail in all three aspects. So, it would appear that Ly is the weak one. He is surrounded by stronger women: His wife Thuy, who takes her life into her own hands, his mother, being the matriarch of the house, his capable assistant Lan, and last but not least his daughter Huong, who understands the family dynamics much better than him. Lacking quite a bit of emotional intelligence, he is not able to show his emotions or to reach out; making it impossible to cope with the situation at home. His last resort is to solve the new series of murders and to get back into his job.

The author created with Detective Ly a deeply troubled figure, struggling to find his way in a time of social and economic transition, trying to follow his own moral compass and failing at times. The creation of such a character seems to be evident with regards to Vietnam's current transformation. After all, the noir genre and

its anti-heroes also became popular in the Western world in times of major social transformations and increasing urbanization.

The question is: How Vietnamese is Detective Ly after all? The author Nora Luttmer studied Southeast Asian Studies, speaks Vietnamese and knows Vietnam well from many stays there. However, in the end she is not Vietnamese. Within the Detective Ly novels she assumes the perspective of a middle-aged Vietnamese man. This works, in my opinion, mainly because she is writing for a Western audience. Nevertheless, there are certain cultural experiences, which a foreign author will never be able to transmit. But we should not forget that this is an inherent problem which many authors face when writing from the perspective of the opposite gender or creating a protagonist with a different cultural background. This is why Donna Leon's Commissario Brunetti novels will probably never be translated into Italian even if they are bestsellers in so many other European countries. Unfortunately there don't seem to be many Vietnamese crime novels translated into

English or German. It would be nice to see what a fictional Vietnamese detective written by an actual Vietnamese author would be like.

As a European reader with some experience of Asia, I find that Luttmer's story and characters are believable. Luttmer got the idea for parts of the story from a real case of land theft and property speculation in Northern Vietnam. With a realistic plot "Totenkranz" works very well as a story and surprises towards the end with an unexpected twist. The characters are not overly complex, but they are credible. What's more, on top of an entertaining mystery the reader can also learn a lot about people's everyday life in Vietnam. Luttmer's vivid descriptions of Hanoi's markets, streets, cookshops or *bia hois* reveal her journalistic background and eye for detail. She takes the reader even deeper into the lives of average Vietnamese people when she portrays the cramped housing situation of Ly's family or when she describes the Vietnamese belief in ghosts and spirits.

This is already Luttmer's third Detective Ly novel after "Schwarze



Schiffe" and "Der letzte Tiger". Together with "Hanoi Hospital" by David Frogier de Ponlevo (see my book review in "Pacific Geographies" issue #46) this might be the beginning of a Vietnam-wave in the German crime fiction market. Readers of "Hanoi Hospital" can gain deep insights into the lives of Hanoians from all social classes, thus getting a much broader view into the Vietnamese soul. David Frogier de Ponlevo has a truly an extensive knowledge about Vietnam and the Vietnamese culture. Indeed, his book at times is overloaded with facts. Nora Luttmer's "Totenkranz", on the other hand, has a gripping story and will also interest readers with little knowledge about Vietnam just looking for a good mystery novel.

"Totenkranz" is a solid reading pleasure and I can recommend it to all fans of mystery stories or friends of Vietnam - provided they read German.

Bibliographic information

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