

Article

Strategic Use of Karma in Lan Cao's *Monkey Bridge*

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Abstract: Most critics focus on the pain and suffering of the first-generation Vietnamese immigrants depicted in Lan Cao's *Monkey Bridge*. This paper explores how Cao strategically uses the philosophy of karma in Vietnamese Buddhism to provide a method for alleviating their suffering in this novel. It argues that she employs karma to investigate the origins of the adversity and trauma experienced by the first-generation Vietnamese immigrants, including the pro-American attitude of the early Vietnamese authorities during the Vietnam War, the imperialistic actions of the United States, and the resulting karmic consequences. In addition, they demonstrate, through actions like forming "hui", a way to change their fate and heal their trauma for later generations of Vietnamese immigrants, emphasizing positive transformation of karma. This paper suggests that the Buddhist philosophy of karma provides an effective strategy for Vietnamese American immigrants to reflect on the Vietnam War, overcome adversity, and heal their own trauma.

Keywords: Lan Cao; *Monkey Bridge*; karma; Vietnamese American immigrants; trauma

1. Introduction

It is well known that first-generation Vietnamese Americans, having experienced war and tumultuous migrations, have endured physical and psychological suffering. For instance, Isabelle Thuy Pelaud writes "South Vietnamese had very little time to prepare physically or emotionally for their departure . . . some were left with a sense of incompleteness and at times guilt toward those who were left behind, a state referred to as 'unfinished business'. Once in the United States, they had a very difficult time adjusting to the new culture and environment" (Pelaud 2011, p. 10).

Vietnamese American novelist Lan Cao, born in Saigon (now Ho Chi Minh City), and a witness of the Vietnam War, was forced to migrate to the United States in 1975 and sought refuge with her friend, a U.S. Army General. In her 1997 semi-autobiographical novel *Monkey Bridge*, Lan Cao not only depicts the wartime trauma experienced by the first wave of Vietnamese immigrants in Vietnam but also portrays their struggles in an unfamiliar land.

Critics have predominantly focused on these two dilemmas faced by Vietnamese immigrants in *Monkey Bridge*. Stocks, for instance, believes that Cao aims to investigate "the implications of the divisive nature of war on the Vietnamese family" (Stocks 2004, p. 84), i.e., the traumatic historical memory caused by the Vietnam War. Vu delves more into the novel's American narrative, aiming to present the "invisibility, stereotyping or linguistic colonisation" (Vu 2010, p. 130) of Vietnamese immigrants.

However, Cao sets herself apart from other Vietnamese American writers. In addition to portraying the dual dilemmas and psychological challenges faced by the first-generation Vietnamese immigrants in the United States and Vietnam, she is more interested in revealing the origins of these difficulties through their experiences and exploring ways for subsequent generations of Vietnamese immigrants to change their fortunes. When discussing the creative process of *Monkey Bridge*, she openly confesses:



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“I am interested in the crosscurrent of past and present; in particular, how the past bleeds into the present. And the past doesn’t have to be historical past. History with a capital H. It can also be one’s personal history. ‘The past is never dead. It’s not even past’, as Faulkner said.

I find this very Vietnamese. For example, the concept of *lam phuoc*. I’m not sure how to even translate *phuoc*. I guess one could say blessing. The notion that is peculiarly Vietnamese is the notion that one can create this by one’s thought and deed. And not just create it but also pass it down to one’s children.” (Nguyen and Cao 2014)

In this interview, Cao emphasizes at least two of the primary intentions of her creative process. The first is the idea that one’s national or personal history continuously influences the present. The second is the belief that individuals can use their “thought or deed” to create or reshape fortunes for future generations. Specifically, Cao aims to explore through *Monkey Bridge* how the first wave of Vietnamese immigrants who moved to the United States after 1975 were influenced by their “past” and how they can transform this situation to create a better future for their descendants. To delve deeper into these two questions, Cao, who strongly believes in Buddhist philosophy, subsequently introduces the idea of karma. She continues: “Karma doesn’t just get reproduced and appear in next lives but even in this life. Same with *lam phuoc*. So the past (acts from the past—done by a person or a country) will have ripple effects that are felt in the present”. (Nguyen and Cao 2014).

Karma is a philosophical concept that has had a profound influence on the entire Asian region. As Zhang aptly notes, “Karma has influenced the entire Asian civilization. The majority of Asians have regarded the doctrine of karma as the philosophical foundation for their moral standards and religious beliefs” (Zhang 1989a, p. 5). Vietnam, deeply influenced by both Indian and Chinese culture, is no exception, as the law of karma has permeated everyday Vietnamese language and culture. According to the protagonist Mai, for instance, “In fact, the Vietnamese word for ‘please’, as in ‘could you please’, means literally ‘to make good karma’” (Cao 1997, p. 34). This Vietnamese language example is enough to illustrate the integration of the Vietnamese socio-cultural context with the law of karma. What is even more important is that many Vietnamese immigrants also firmly believe in the doctrine of karma and seek solace in this belief. According to Ting-Toomey, “many Vietnamese Americans believe in the Buddhist precepts of karma and rebirth . . . Thus, for many Vietnamese American immigrants, their past profoundly influence their present identities” (Ting-Toomey 1999, p. 62).

The philosophy of karma in Vietnamese Buddhism has its origins in the karma concept of Hindu philosophy. According to some scholars’ research, karma in Hindu philosophy encompasses four categories, i.e., *sanchita karma*, *prarabdha karma*, *aagami karma*, and *kriyamana karma*. However, Nguyen and Lutz suggest that in Vietnamese Buddhist philosophy, karma can be broadly categorized into three types: *prarabdha karma*, *sanchita karma*, and *kriyamana karma*. They write:

“First, *prarabdha karma* is built throughout the past lives of the individual soul and especially by the soul’s ancestors and family; the consequences of *prarabdha karma* have to be lived out and resolved in the current life. . . Second, *sanchita karma* represents past actions and issues still unresolved at rebirth; like the *prarabdha* concept of karma, *sanchita karma* is influenced by both the previous incarnations and one’s ancestors. The third concept of karma is *kriyamana karma*, the karma that a one creates in one’s current incarnation and that will bear negative or positive consequences in the future.” (Nguyen and Lutz 2009, p. 192)

Clearly, Vietnamese Buddhism does not emphasize “*aagami karma*”, which is “the Karmic Map that is coming, as a result of the merits and demerits of the present actions of your current birth” (Chakraborty 2014, p. 193), or the consequences of one’s present actions in this lifetime or in future lifetimes. However, from *prarabdha karma* and *sanchita karma*, it can be observed that Vietnamese Buddhist philosophy emphasizes that past actions

persistently and intricately influence the present, which Zhang refers to as “interconnected rebirth” (Zhang 1989a, p. 5). From *kriyamana karma*, it can be seen that Vietnamese Buddhist philosophy also emphasizes that present actions can immediately influence the future. In other words, shaping or altering the future depends on one’s present karma. Furthermore, the karma philosophy in Vietnamese Buddhism not only emphasizes individual karma but is imbued with Confucian elements, thereby also emphasizing familial and communal karma. According to research findings, “To the simple Buddhist notion of Karma, which applies only to individuals, the Vietnamese have injected a Confucian element, so that families and lineages as well as individuals are receptacles of good and bad Karma. The merit of one generation can improve the fortune of succeeding ones” (Committee on International Relations and Subcommittee on International Organizations 1977, p. 208). In a sense, these focal points of Vietnamese Buddhist karma philosophy align with the implied intentions of Lan Cao.

It merits attention that the applicability of karma within Vietnamese Buddhism that Cao believes in somewhat mirrors the engagement of Buddhism in Vietnamese society during the era of the Vietnam War. Notably, Vietnamese Buddhism played a role in political participation during the Vietnam War, with the self-immolation of the Vietnamese monk Thich Quang Duc being among the most iconic incidents. In 1963, to protest against the South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem’s exclusion and repression of Buddhism, Thich Quang Duc undertook a self-immolation on the streets of Saigon, an act also chronicled in *Monkey Bridge*. Cao notes, “In 1963, in an act that stunned the world, an elderly Buddhist monk stepped calmly from a car into the street, crossed his legs in a serene lotus position . . . the monk performed the ultimate act of sacrifice” (253). Subsequently, Vietnamese Buddhism continuously endeavored to propose an idealized neutral approach for resolving the myriad contradictions of the Vietnam War. According to Nguyen, “Whereas they insisted upon the constitution of a government representing truly all the political tendencies in order to negotiate a solution to the war, a disquieting feature of their pronouncements was the neutralism with which they appealed to a war-weary population. But their persistence until the last days of the Vietnam war in recommending the ‘adaptation of ideologies through a harmonious process that would respect the specific cultural traditions of the Vietnamese’ was not a very realistic vision” (Nguyen 1993, p. 114). The engagement of Vietnamese Buddhism during this period furnishes a context for Cao’s utilization of karma in her novel to reflect on the Vietnam War and to heal the war-related traumas of the Vietnamese people.

Based on the convergence of the law of karma in Vietnamese Buddhism and Cao’s use of this law in her creation, this paper aims to undertake an interdisciplinary study of *Monkey Bridge* from the perspective of Buddhist philosophy. It primarily employs the three types of karma in Vietnamese Buddhism, along with the focal points highlighted above, as a method to reinterpret the novel, with the aim of uncovering new themes latent within it. Additionally, when addressing the theme of changing karma within the novel, this paper will utilize the karma transformation in psychotherapeutic theory as a research method. This research falls within the realm of interdisciplinary studies in the American literature and Buddhist philosophy, which already has a foundation, notably in works such as *The Emergence of Buddhist American Literature* (2009) and *Writing as Enlightenment: Buddhist American Literature into the Twenty-first Century* (2011) edited by John Whalen-Bridge and Gary Storhoff. These works explore “how Buddhism partly shapes the forms and meanings of American literature” (Whalen-Bridge and Storhoff 2011, p. 13). This paper aims to contribute to this research tradition.

Furthermore, this paper also aims to investigate the application of karma, particularly in the context of psychotherapy, and to offer some reflections. While there has been considerable research and debate within academia regarding the philosophy of karma, studies on the practical application of its fundamental principles are scarce, especially in areas such as social governance, ethical education, parenting, and psychotherapy. For instance, scholars suggest that the law of karma and its related topics can help “bridge

the gaps between our idealization of human harmony, our tendencies toward violent confrontation, and the need for greater social justice” (Watts 2009, p. ix). Lin and Yen argue that this law “can be used as an additional means to enhance moral education and spiritual development” (Lin and Yen 2015, p. 1). Most importantly, Kwee’s monograph *Psychotherapy by Karma Transformation* emphasizes through experiments and other methods that karma can be applied in psychotherapy. However, Kwee did not address the psychological trauma experienced by Vietnamese immigrants. Therefore, this paper aims to suggest, based on *Monkey Bridge* and the arguments of Kwee and others, that karma can be utilized in the treatment of psychological trauma among Vietnamese immigrants.

In the following analysis, I will discuss how Cao uses the law of karma to investigate the origins of the struggles of first-generation Vietnamese immigrants and, through their karmic transformation of actions, demonstrates a way to change their destiny and heal wounds for later generations of Vietnamese immigrants.

2. “For Every Deed of Destruction There Is a Consequence”: Investigation of Karma

First-generation Vietnamese immigrants, upon arriving in the United States, initially resided in refugee camps, were scattered across various parts of the country, and faced challenges in adapting to American life. However, their homeland and the memories of the Vietnam War continued to linger in their hearts. In *Vietnamese Americans*, Sonneborn maintains that “The 1975 refugees were strongly focused on making the most of their new lives in America. At the same time, Vietnam was never far from their minds. At quiet moments, the refugees could not help but wonder and worry about what was happening to the friends and relatives they left behind” (Sonneborn 2007, p. 40). In literary creations, first-generation Vietnamese American writers, including Nguyen Mong Giac, also narrate the “loss of country, of home, of relatives and friends, social status, and identity that came with defeat in the war” (Pelaud 2011, p. 23). Similarly, in *Monkey Bridge*, as a representative of first-generation Vietnamese immigrants, Thanh also finds it difficult to forget Vietnam. She expresses her experiences and observations during the Vietnam War to her daughter, Mai, through the form of two secret letters.

This might be an ordinary narrative of the Vietnam War, but Cao imparts a unique perspective to this narrative—karma. In the novel, Thanh declares in the secret letters: “No one can escape the laws of karma. Nor can a country divest itself of the karmic consequences of its own actions. That’s why I wasn’t totally surprised by what’s happened to us as a country. For every action there is a reaction, for every deed of destruction there is a consequence. It’s something as exact and implacable as the laws of physics” (Cao 1997, p. 55). In other words, Vietnam’s national destiny is permeated by the law of karma. In fact, many Vietnamese people and Vietnamese immigrants who adhere to Buddhism also believe that the Vietnam War is a “form of karmic retribution” (Kapleau 1989, p. 251), i.e., the consequences of certain wrongdoings. This section maintains that the law of karma is indeed one of Cao’s primary creative intentions, which involves using the law of karma to investigate the origins of all issues, particularly the trauma and agony experienced by first-generation Vietnamese immigrants during the Vietnam War and exile. This exploration encompasses the “actions” and “deed of destruction” of the nation and their resulting consequences, emphasizing the impact of the past on the present, as emphasized by Cao.

Why does the “deed of destruction” lead to a series of subsequent problems? In the Vietnamese Buddhist karmic philosophy, sanchita karma refers to the actions stored in past lives. As part of this, prarabdha karma is “the portion of karmic force that needs to be addressed in our present existence. It is also referred to as matured karma because it is a debt that has not yet been fulfilled but must be repaid” (Vaswani 2005, p. 80). Prarabdha karma and sanchita karma imply that one of the characteristics of karmic force is what Zhang refers to as “interconnected rebirth”, meaning past actions are bound to have an impact and, under appropriate conditions, inevitably lead to a certain result in the present, thus perpetuating a cycle. In the article “Theory of Buddhist Karma”, Zhang vividly

clarifies the “interconnected rebirth” nature of karmic force using the metaphor of the development of the American West:

“When developing any virgin land in a frontier, it is necessary to first build roads or railways. Building a railway is an action, and from this action, various new forces will emerge. For example, more financial resources, manpower, and materials will all come successively to various points along the railway. These new forces inevitably compel people to engage in new activities, thus generating new forces once again.” (Zhang 1989a, p. 6)

In this metaphorical analogy, the act of developing the West inevitably leads to the construction of roads or railways. The construction of roads or railways, in turn, triggers further investment of financial resources, manpower, and materials, and so forth. The operation of karmic force is much like the ongoing and interconnected chain reaction observed in the development of the American West.

What is the “deed of destruction” (the root of the dilemma) referred to by Thanh in the context of the nation? How does it lead to the consequences of interdependent arising? Mai, Thanh’s daughter who has been deeply influenced by her idea of karmic force, echoes Thanh’s statement by saying: “To commit ‘one wrong move’ was to invite catastrophe, to go against an irresistible movement, to be on the wrong side of a metaphor. To be guilty of ‘one wrong move’ was to be caught in the web of history” (Cao 1997, pp. 26–27). She further defines the “one wrong move” as:

“In 1945, as my father often recounted, an American plane had flown in salute, and a group of U.S. Army officers stood on a reviewing stand to listen to ‘The Star-Spangled Banner’, while Ho Chi Minh himself—his beard, my father described, silver and majestic like a thunderbolt in a dark night—asserted Vietnamese independence from the French by reading from the American Declaration of Independence.” (Cao 1997, pp. 25–26)

This scene aligns closely with historical records, as it documents Chairman Ho Chi Minh leading the Vietnamese people to achieve victory in the August Revolution and declaring the birth of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in Hanoi, proactively extending goodwill towards the United States. In his book *1961–1975: Insights into the Vietnam War*, Hu also writes: “On 2 September 1945, when a large crowd gathered in the square of Ba Dinh Park in Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh, in his impassioned independence speech, quoted the opening words of the American Declaration of Independence. General Patti also conspicuously appeared on the reviewing stand and stood beside General Vo Nguyen Giap, the Commander-in-Chief of the Viet Minh armed forces” (Hu 2009, pp. 61–62). Additionally, Mai also recounts that her father has mentioned the Vietnamese authorities writing a letter to “Truman—all unanswered—pleading for American recognition of an independent postwar Vietnam” (Cao 1997, p. 26). This is consistent with historical facts: “From late 1945 to the end of 1946, Ho Chi Minh continuously made calls or wrote letters to the White House, requesting the U.S. government to recognize the newly born country of Vietnam, but never received any response” (Hu 2009, p. 62).

Based on the above-mentioned historical details, the terms like “one wrong move” in the novel highlight Cao’s examination and assessment of the policies of the Vietnamese authorities in the early years of independence in the 1940s and 1950s. Via Mai, Cao maintains that the “wrong move” in these actions lies in their “pro-American” (Cao 1997, p. 26) attitudes, meaning a failure to recognize the sinister intentions of the U.S. government and holding illusions about it. In reality, although the United States assisted the Viet Minh in resisting Japanese forces during World War II, it had long coveted Southeast Asia, including Vietnam (not only for its natural resources but also to counteract communism in the region and especially in China). The phrase “invite catastrophe” implies that the country’s pro-American behavior as a source will eventually lead to dire consequences, creating a chain reaction of karma, as Zhang describes it, “Any action will naturally generate a force, and this force compels people to do new actions . . . interconnected rebirth” (Zhang 1989a, p. 5).

Secondly, besides exposing the pro-American attitude of the Vietnamese authorities in the early stages of the Vietnam War as a negative source, Gao Lan also, on a smaller scale, utilizes Ba Xuyen, a village in rural South Vietnam, to explore the karma of the pro-American stance, specifically the detrimental effects of U.S. intervention on the rural areas, agriculture, and farmers in Southern Vietnam.

According to Ha, Cao only reveals the “‘karmic consequences’ of ancient historical actions”, (Ha 2015, p. 87) and does not delve into the “karmic consequences” of U.S. intervention. This is not the case, because she unveils the imperialistic nature of the United States through Ba Xuyen village. In the novel, in the second letter from Thanh, Ba Xuyen is her beloved hometown, located in the Mekong Delta of South Vietnam. Originally, it was a small village “that carries life” (Cao 1997, p. 173), abundant in rice production and a microcosm of self-sufficient rural South Vietnam. However, the intervention of the Americans shattered the tranquility of this place. Strangely, they surrounded the village with “corrugated tin, black asphalt, and cement blocks” (Cao 1997, p. 235), gave the villagers brand-new stoves, and “began to shower us with more presents—soap, candy, hydrogen peroxide, and Mercurochrome” (Cao 1997, p. 239). They even opened “nutrition and personal-hygiene classes” (Cao 1997, p. 239) for the villagers. This scenario depicts the reality of the “Strategic Hamlet Program” initiated in the 1960s by the United States in collaboration with the puppet government of Ngo Dinh Diem in South Vietnam, a crucial component of the Vietnam War. Based on the political situation in the southern part of Vietnam, the Kennedy administration in the early 1960s proposed and funded the establishment of “strategic hamlets” in rural areas by the puppet government of Ngo Dinh Diem. In his article, Wang argues that the strategic hamlets were designated in areas where Viet Cong guerrilla activities were more prevalent. Special villages were demarcated, and strict surveillance was imposed on the villagers with the aim of “controlling the countryside and subsequently controlling the sources of food and recruits, thereby achieving the goal of crushing the Viet Cong” (Wang 2003, p. 34). In the novel, despite the meager benefits the farmers receive from the U.S. military, the original village is dismantled, and the farmers are forcibly displaced from their ancestral homes, fields, and ancestral graves. This exposes the destructive impact of the “Strategic Hamlet Program” on the rural communities in South Vietnam.

Subsequently, in the novel, the counterattacks by the Viet Cong reveal the true nature of the U.S. military. They engage in a frenzy of destruction of rural land and forests, reflecting the devastation wrought by the “Strategic Hamlet Program” on agricultural production in South Vietnam. In the novel, the U.S. military conducts terrifying acts of destruction in their efforts to search for and suppress the Viet Cong guerrilla forces:

“In their final and deadliest charge yet, the elephants rolled out drum after drum painted with orange stripes and sprayed our crops overnight with a special kind of poison, a mixture so powerful that it could command even the most majestic of tress to prematurely drop their leaves . . . As a gush of sourness bellied from our earth, sumac bushes, papaya trees, jackfruits, everything and anything that could hide the enemies withered into a deep, slow burn of ash and cinder overnight.” (Cao 1997, pp. 244–45)

This scene shows the infamous “Defoliation” operation conducted by the U.S. military in the 1960s in central and southern Vietnam. The operation involved the use of chemical warfare, such as the use of “Agent Orange”, to eliminate jungle hiding places of civilian guerrilla groups and disrupt their sources of food.

Furthermore, Cao also describes another atrocity committed by the U.S. military—the use of napalm bombs for military airstrikes: “Everything was on fire . . . I could see the gathering red that poured from a lacerated sky, the red of fire bisected by a black, black smoke as far away as the untouched line where heaven meets earth” (Cao 1997, pp. 250–51). This is the equally brutal “blockade bombing” by the U.S. military, which involves airstrikes on villages where armed civilian forces are stationed or could potentially be stationed. Both the “Defoliation” and “blockade bombing” caused deadly destruction to the population,

the ecological environment, and especially agriculture in South Vietnam. In the novel, although Thanh's father tries to improve the soil by bringing in earthworms from elsewhere to restore cultivation, he finds that "Nothing, not one blade of grass, not even the sturdy betel vine that had mythically survived even the most calamitous drought in the history of the country, could grow from dead soil" (Cao 1997, p. 245). This detail implies that the agricultural ecology in the southern part of Vietnam suffered extensive and lethal devastation during the U.S. military's terror operations, making it impossible for farmers to resume cultivation.

In the novel, this plan not only brings devastating consequences to the rural areas and agricultural production in South Vietnam but also acts as "the karma that has pursued our family like a hawk chasing its prey" (Cao 1997, p. 251), inflicting severe harm on Thanh's parents, a typical southern Vietnamese rural family. Thanh's family belongs to a conservative southern rural household deeply influenced by Confucian traditional thoughts, such as the emphasis on female chastity before marriage. Thanh's father, Baba Quan, initiates the family's decline by allowing his wife to have an affair with the local landlord. However, what truly leads to the downfall of Thanh's family is the heinous actions of the U.S. military, such as the "Defoliation" and "blockade bombing". After the U.S. military's "Defoliation", Thanh's mother succumbs to despair over the inability to cultivate and dies. Baba Quan, who joined the Viet Cong movement, becomes temporarily missing after killing the landlord. Thanh, severely burned by napalm during the burial of her mother's body, flees to Saigon to live with her husband. Through the fragmentation and dispersal of the entire Thanh family, Cao highlights the destructive impact of U.S. military intervention on rural families in the 1960s. Due to the degradation of farmland, livestock deaths, and poisoning of the population, numerous southern Vietnamese rural families disintegrate, and the surviving rural population is forced to flee elsewhere.

In the conclusion of the second secret family letter, Thanh reflects, "Karma is exactly like this, a continuous presence . . . Our reality, you see, is a simultaneous past, present, and future" (Cao 1997, p. 252). Cao, through this reflection, investigates and criticizes the root of all evil karma, namely the early pro-American stance of the Vietnamese authorities during the Vietnam War and the imperialistic actions of the United States. This source of internal troubles and external threats gives rise to the continuous karma, as summarized by Zhang's philosophy of karma as a "interconnected rebirth". Looking back at the two family letters, the pro-American stance of the Vietnamese authorities in the 1940s leads to imperialistic aggression by the U.S. military in South Vietnamese rural areas, such as the "Strategic Hamlet Program", "Defoliation", and "blockade bombing". Subsequently, this results in the destruction of rural families like Thanh's family, forcing them to flee to the United States in the 1970s. This, in turn, leads to Thanh's concluding description of her exile in the United States: "In a room far away from Ba Xuyen, I can sit in my bed, close my eyes, and still hear the wails of ghosts and the cries of demons submerged in the blood and flesh of my body" (Cao 1997, p. 252). This is the plight of exile and the psychological trauma manifested in the form of "repeated flashbacks, nightmares, and other repetitive phenomena" (Caruth 1996, p. 91).

In interpreting *Monkey Bridge*, Tuon believes that Cao pays relatively little attention to the concerns in the narrative of the Vietnam War, unlike most Asian American writers who "focused on the experience of Americans of Asian descent, examining issues of race, class, gender, and sexuality that affect the way Asian-Americans are perceived, act, and understand themselves as Americans" (Tuon 2012, p. 3). This assessment evidently does not examine the significant role played by the two secret family letters of Thanh in the novel. On the contrary, it is through these two letters that Cao, with a unique perspective on karma, traces the origins of the difficulties faced by first-generation Vietnamese-Americans and their real experiences during the Vietnam War. Therefore, *Monkey Bridge* is widely recognized in the literary community as the "the first novel published by a major press (as there were Vietnamese language publications, for example) about the War written by a Vietnamese American" (Nguyen and Cao 2014).

3. “The Life Itself Was Utterly Beautiful and Blessed”: Transformation of Karma

Although first-generation Vietnamese immigrants could not forget the pain of the Vietnam War, after arriving in the United States, like most immigrants, they strived to settle down and change their destinies. They worked hard to learn English, understand American culture, make friends with fellow countrymen, seek job opportunities, and enroll in schools. According to Sonneborn, “They became maids, cooks, and factory laborers, working jobs that required little training and only the barest proficiency in English. Amazingly, by 1977, just two years after the refugees first arrived, 95 percent of Vietnamese-American men and 93 percent of Vietnamese American women were employed” (Sonneborn 2007, pp. 39–40).

In the American section of *Monkey Bridge*, Cao also recounts the struggles of the first-generation Vietnamese immigrants, focusing on Thanh and her daughter’s journey of settling, entrepreneurship, and pursuing higher education in the United States. While this is an ostensibly ordinary narrative, she imparts a karmic perspective to their story. Early in the novel, Cao, through the character Mai, reminisces about the scene where, under her mother’s guidance, they purchased birds for release:

“To the side, in giant paper bags slit with round openings, were canaries and hummingbirds which my mother bought, one hundred at a time, and freed, one by one, into our garden; it was a good deed designed to generate positive karma for the family. . . in that swift moment of delight when the bird’s wings spread over my head as it contemplated flight, I believed life itself was utterly beautiful and blessed.” (Cao 1997, p. 34)

In this scene of releasing the birds, Thanh imparts a lesson to her daughter Mai: negative karma is not fixed and unchangeable; it can be created and reversed through positive efforts, leading Mai to believe in the “beautiful and blessed” life. Shan suggests that the transformation of karma provides the characters with a “positive direction to generate good outcome” (Shan 2010, p. 35). However, he does not delve deeper into the connection between karma transformation and trauma. This section argues that Cao also explores the active transformation of karma by the first-generation Vietnamese immigrants in the novel. In doing so, she provides guidance for them and their descendants on how to change their destinies and heal from trauma by addressing and transforming their karma positively.

What needs to be pointed out is that karma transformation is, in fact, an important component of Vietnamese culture and serves as a behavioral guideline for many Vietnamese Americans. Cao herself emphasizes when discussing this aspect of Vietnamese culture that “The notion that is peculiarly Vietnamese is the notion that one can create this by one’s thought and deed. And not just create it but also pass it down to one’s children . . . You might have heard people say *lam phuoc cho con*. That has to mean you, the parent, do something to create good blessings, luck, and that luck/blessing can be passed down” (Nguyen and Cao 2014). In other words, the Vietnamese people uphold a cultural tradition of creating positive karma, changing destinies, and passing it down to future generations.

This Vietnamese culture is rooted in the philosophy of Vietnamese Buddhism, particularly the doctrine of karma. Within the three components of Vietnamese Buddhist karma philosophy, *kriyamana karma* represents actions performed in the present that will inevitably influence the future. Some religious scholars liken this concept to a “future karma improvement kit” (Ashley-Farrand 2006, p. 18). Zhang believes that karma in Buddhist philosophy is not deterministic. Apart from the extremely difficult-to-change collective karma, individuals can make efforts to alter their individual karma. He writes:

“What one creates or the situations one finds oneself in, while having a certain constraining nature, also possesses a degree of variability. With one’s own will, one can engage more, less, or not at all in certain karmic actions. Therefore, one can experience more, less, or no corresponding karmic consequences. Although the current consequences or destiny have their inherent qualities that influence individuals, one’s efforts can also bring about a transformation, purification, or elevation, achieving a certain degree of change.” (Zhang 1989b, p. 12)

The distinctive feature of the karma philosophy emphasizes that one's negative karma and its consequences are not immutable; they can be transformed through present positive and virtuous actions to create a more favorable outcome. In other words, one's misfortunes can be altered through current positive behavior.

In the field of psychology and psychotherapy, an increasing number of psychologists are exploring the therapeutic benefits of Buddhist karma philosophy. In the book *Buddhist Psychotherapy: A Guide for Beneficial Changes*, Matthias Ennenbach dedicates a chapter to discussing how Buddhist karma philosophy can help individuals in distress accept their current circumstances and give them the courage to take positive actions for the future, providing psychological comfort. American psychologist Karen Kassel Wegela is also an expert in this field. In her book *The Courage to Be Present: Buddhism, Psychotherapy, and the Awakening of Natural Wisdom*, she suggests that simply helping trauma survivors recall their traumatic experiences can potentially "retraumatize" them. Following the principles of karma philosophy, encouraging them to take positive actions can help them forget the past, focus on the present, and rekindle hope. In her psychotherapy cases, Wegela finds that when a client engages in transformative karmic actions, such as volunteering in the local community, it not only helps break negative behaviors like overeating or self-denial but also makes the client feel needed by the community. Wegela adopts the perspective of Vietnamese Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh, stating that this helps "plant good seeds" (Wegela 2009, p. 24) for psychological trauma survivors, providing them with reasons to have a positive future. From the aforementioned theoretical framework, it is evident that employing karma in psychotherapy is not aimed at ensnaring victims in the quagmire of past sufferings. Instead, the emphasis lies on grounding in the present, igniting hope for the future through the transformation of karma in the present moment, thereby facilitating the healing of their trauma. In discussing the process of karma transformation, Kwee elucidates: "In Karma Transformation client and therapist usually dig into the karmic feelings/thoughts/activity of a past event, when things went wrong, in order to ameliorate future emotional episodes. Hence, the focal point is here-now, even if the intentional activity was originally created in the past (*puranakamma*): one cannot but live in the present. If discussed here-now, emotional events that took place in the past are something of the present and usually one also gets the same feelings" (Kwee 2013, p. 105).

It is of paramount importance to articulate that the trauma experienced by Thanh and her daughter Mai within the confines of the novel's narrative may be construed as exemplars of individual trauma that are intrinsically embedded within the larger context of collective trauma. Kai Erikson, a seminal figure in the academic exploration of trauma, established a foundational differentiation between individual trauma and collective trauma as early as the 1970s. He described individual trauma as "a blow to the psyche that breaks through one's defenses so suddenly and with such brutal force that one can not react to it effectively" (Erikson 1976, p. 153), whilst collective trauma is delineated as "a blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairing the prevailing sense of community" (Erikson 1976, p. 154). Drawing upon Erikson's conceptual demarcations and furthering the discourse through the integration of observations from other scholars, Kidane posits that collective trauma induces "disruption across many spheres and to many interconnected people, disrupting those connections and processes" (Kidane 2021, p. 67). Moreover, Kidane employs the notion of "individual trauma in the context of collective trauma" (Kidane 2021, p. 67) to accentuate the profound impact collective trauma exerts on the personal experiences of trauma by individuals. In *Monkey Bridge*, the depiction of psychological disintegration experienced by Thanh and Mai is categorically classified under "individual trauma". Nonetheless, it is fundamentally the dismemberment of "the basic tissues of social life" and its subsequent ramifications in the aftermath of the Vietnam War that imbue them with trauma. Hence, it is elucidated that individual trauma and collective trauma are not isolated phenomena but are intricately interwoven in the experiences of Thanh and Mai. This synthesis underscores the nuanced

perspective that their trauma, while personal in nature, is significantly influenced and shaped by the pervasive force of collective trauma.

In *Monkey Bridge*, Cao initially highlights the karmic creation attempts of the first-generation Vietnamese immigrants in forming the “hui” by Thanh. Upon arriving in the United States, Thanh, like many Vietnamese immigrants, faces the dual trauma of the Vietnam War and migration. However, she firmly believes in her ability “to repair generation after generation of past wrongs by healing the faces of karma itself” (Cao 1997, p. 52), that is, transforming family karma and reversing personal/family destiny. After events such as relocation and a stroke, Thanh, gradually recovering, starts organizing a grassroots credit financing project called “hui”. The “hui” prevalent since the 13th century in Asian countries such as China, Japan, and Vietnam is a grassroots cooperative organization where participants (relatives or fellow villagers) contribute fees each period and regularly receive the entire pooled amount for that period. It facilitates participants in raising a large sum of money or earning interest in the short term. In the novel, it also aims to “give those who would otherwise be unqualified for bank loans immediate access to a lump sum of cash” (Cao 1997, p. 141). From its functionality, it is evident that Thanh’s establishment of the “hui” is a positively intentioned act of transforming karma, assisting all participants in acquiring a substantial amount of funds for entrepreneurial endeavors within a single session. As the organizer, she not only benefits herself but also serves the interests of other Vietnamese immigrants.

The success of the “hui” reflects the effectiveness of the first-generation Vietnamese immigrants transformation of karma, i.e., what Zhang calls “transformation, purification, or elevation”. In fact, the first-generation Vietnamese immigrants, like Thanh, were forced to migrate to the United States and brought this form of private financing to the United States, using it to establish themselves in this unfamiliar land. Kolker observes: “In the three decades since they arrived here, Americas estimated 1.1 million Vietnamese immigrants have deployed thousands of hui in the same way, launching businesses here and providing for families left behind in Vietnam” (Kolker 2013, p. 21). In the novel, this organization not only helps other Vietnamese immigrants open small businesses such as ice cream shops but also sponsors the unemployed Thanh to open a small workshop providing French bread and other baked goods for a grocery store in the Little Saigon area, allowing them to have a job and income to support their families in a foreign country. At the same time, the association also brings Vietnamese immigrants from Little Saigon together at Thanh’s home for frequent dinners and gatherings, fostering friendship. These details illustrate that the association helps the first-generation Vietnamese immigrants settle quickly in the United States, start businesses, establish themselves, and also made them more united in a foreign land.

Moreover, the “hui” also helps Thanh alleviate various psychological challenges. In the novel, benefiting from the “hui”, she happily organizes regular meetings and cooks for the members. She believes that “next year things will change” (Cao 1997, p. 143), and her daughter Mai also notices “this was a different mother, a more optimistic mother” (Cao 1997, p. 141). From Thanh’s own actions and words, it can be seen that, like the patients of psychologist Professor Wiegler, she shifts her focus on positive “hui” activities (rather than the traumatic history of the Vietnam War and exile), focusing on the future of the association. As a result, she becomes the optimistic and confident mother in the eyes of her daughter. It can be said that the association “plants good seeds” for Thanh. In a similar vein, Kolker describes in detail the scenes of several Vietnamese immigrant association gatherings in Houston. All participants are cheerful, and the atmosphere is joyful. Vietnamese immigrants also find that “It alter behavior. . .it somehow manages to make frugality fun” (Kolker 2013, p. 22).

Although Thanh’s transformation of karma is not complete (she ultimately commits suicide), it brings blessings to the descendants, creating positive karma. Cao, through the story of Mai’s transformation of her karma inspired by her mother, illuminates the Eastern philosophical path of changing destiny and healing trauma for future generations

of Vietnamese immigrants. Mai, leaving war-torn Vietnam at a young age to seek refuge with a U.S. Army General friend, belongs to the 1.5 generation of Vietnamese Americans—born in Vietnam, migrated to the U.S. between the ages of 6 and 16, received education, and are familiar with both languages, cultures, and values of Vietnamese immigrants. They have not escaped the trauma of the Vietnam War and migration; Tuon believes that Mai possesses the “traumatic 1.5 generation memory” (Tuon 2012, p. 2).

In the novel, influenced by her mother’s idea of karma, Mai understands that “karma means there’s always going to be something you’ll have to inherit” (Cao 1997, p. 20) and is taught the need to “generate positive karma” (Cao 1997, p. 34). Therefore, despite the memories of Vietnam and the Vietnam War, she still follows her mother’s advice and actively applies to American universities: “You can lose a country, but no one, no war can take away your education . . . You will have the best education in America” (Cao 1997, p. 31). In other words, under her mother’s influence, Mai knows that going to college is a proactive step in transforming karma, arming herself with knowledge, and she wholeheartedly puts this into practice.

Furthermore, Cao also highlights the effectiveness of transforming karma for future generations of Vietnamese immigrants through the psychological process of Mai receiving her college acceptance letter, demonstrating the gradual healing of psychological trauma. In the novel, Mai, through her efforts, successfully gains admission to Mount Holyoke College. On the eve of entering college, she makes a concerted effort to bid farewell to her mother’s passing: “Her death seemed final” (Cao 1997, p. 259). To some extent, Mai’s mother does represent the “past traumatic memories” (Wegela 2009, p. 24). Here, “final” implies that Mai is beginning to make a concerted effort to forget this painful history. Subsequently, she examines the present: “There is always order to tend to, chaos to push swiftly away” (Cao 1997, p. 259). This indicates Mai’s gradual liberation from the traumatic memories of the past, placing herself in the “reality of the nonthreatening present” (Wegela 2009, p. 24) as described by Wiegler. Finally, she looks hopefully at the promotional brochure sent by Mount Holyoke College. Her optimistic confidence demonstrates that the transformative action of attending an American university not only reverses Mai’s destiny but also repairs her trauma.

In fact, Mai is the most autobiographical character in the novel, as Cao, also belonging to the 1.5 generation, came to the United States in her youth, earned a Bachelor’s degree in Political Science from Mount Holyoke College, then went on to Yale Law School for a J.D., eventually becoming a successful lawyer and law professor in society. Through her own novel writing, she confronts the painful history of the Vietnam War and exile. This autobiographical setting implies that Cao is using her own experiences to demonstrate to future generations of Vietnamese immigrants that transforming karma will inevitably lead to a reversal of fate and healing of trauma.

Pelaud argues that Mai’s survival strategy in the United States is focused on “controlling her environment through the power of her mind and intellect” (Pelaud 2011, p. 94). From the perspective of karma philosophy, however, the term “transformation” more accurately describes Mai’s survival strategy. Cao, through the autobiographical character of Mai (including her mother), demonstrates to the 1.5 generation and subsequent Vietnamese immigrants that positive action can change destiny and heal trauma.

4. Conclusions

In *Monkey Bridge*, Lan Cao cleverly explains her deeply held karma belief with the metaphor that “a pebble dropped into a pond makes circles after circles of ripples” (Cao 1997, p. 170). On one hand, ripples are inevitably caused by throwing a pebble, meaning that the current situation is inevitably shaped by past actions. On the other hand, karma is not equivalent to determinism because whether to throw a pebble can determine whether ripples appear on the water’s surface, indicating that present actions can influence future outcomes. Cao, drawing on this Eastern philosophy, investigates the roots of the challenges faced by the first-generation Vietnamese immigrants. Through their positive actions of

transforming karma, she demonstrates to future generations of Vietnamese immigrants how to reverse fate and heal trauma. As Cao herself summarizes, her karma story can add “our point of view to the orchestra of voices on Vietnam” (Nguyen and Cao 2014). Indeed, this law of karma, originating from the East and integrated into Eastern life, provides an effective strategy for Vietnamese immigrants to examine the Vietnam War, overcome challenges, and heal trauma.

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