

## About the Cover

# Cover Essay: Whither Goest Thou, Sacred Cow?

Thành Chuong's paintings of people, water buffaloes, and bright colors evoke the Southeast Asian countryside. Thành was born in 1949 in Nha Nam, north of Hanoi, beneath the foothills of the Ngan Son and Bac Son mountains—in the upper Red River Delta. Here the landscape is dominated by sun-spangled rice paddies framed by humps of limestone wedged beneath the bright white confectionary of cumulus clouds: a scene stirred only by the occasional squabble of ducks or the churning of somnambulant beasts hitched to ploughs plodding through the wet, silty soils. Over the next 50 years, both Thành and the landscape have funneled into Hanoi—downstream where at night and even during the day, Hanoi is a helter-skelter, garish orange and red, sien-nas and Mediterranean pink welter of a city. Chaos predominates—the result of an incestuous coupling of history and geography: the intertwined flows of humanity and the river.

At first glance, Thành's paintings present the colors of the urban center—something distanced from his ancestral hometown—but he includes pastoral elements: the oxen, the block and tumble grid of the rice fields, and, suffusing and languid, the sunshine.

In this light, Thành's three young daughters sleep while the water buffaloes stand watching, nurturing, and sustaining. In reality, at the time of the painting, they lived in Hanoi, amidst this palimpsest of a city. The Fauvist colors resemble neon lights, but also the shocking lime green of the new rice fields they dance through in their dreams. The children's eyes are closed, turning inwards through the layers, their dreams flowing through the temporal shift from skyscraper to farm. The buffalo, though, can see; each with their cyclopsian eye. They see us. They see the children. They see the past and present. Indeed, they provide the conduit in this scene between the old and the new—literally the means of transport between the wilderness at

one end of the Red River and the urban nexus of Hanoi downstream.

Thành's ideal of country life is, of course, flawed.

The verdant rice paddies plowed by water buffaloes across Asia are also a source of schistosomiasis and malaria, and a host of other vector-borne diseases. Peasant life over the past century has remained a hard one with high childhood mortality, the threat of poverty, famine, and political upheaval. Indeed, galleries that sell Thành's paintings often mention his transition from his rustic origins into the tumult of the Vietnam war, the historical tipping point of perhaps most significance to us in the West.

Thành is a prime example of the pantropical migration of people from countryside to cities—that are the origins themselves, now, of a series of new diseases. It is the idealistic yearning for the remembered simplicity of rural life that gets to the heart of Thành's art, here symbolically represented by the water buffaloes. His art encapsulates ecohealth; the striving to understand and find a balance in the perception and reality of life on an urban-to-rural gradient. In the decade when the majority of the global population may make a critical shift to urban life (Crane and Kinzig, 2005), we all live somewhere along this gradient, somewhere along our own Red River.

## The Artist

Thành Chuong is one of Vietnam's most internationally renowned artists. Born in 1949 and recognized for his talent from a very young age, he has had a strong influence on a generation of Vietnamese artists. In 2000, the United Nations chose one of Thành's images for a set of stamps, thus putting him in the company of such artists as Picasso and Dalí. Thành Choung draws on folk images: water buffalo, women and children, and conical hats. He uses strong, Fauvist colors

and odd juxtapositions, evoking with celebration and poignancy the ephemeral nature of traditional village life. In this way, he creates direct emotional links between our modern world and that of our ancestors, between us and our childhood. Thành believes that “painting is not just a way to recognize the world, but also a way to love the world.”

“Children’s Play” was painted in 2007 shortly after Thành’s youngest daughter had come home after a prolonged medical treatment in Singapore. The painting expresses his wish that his three daughters always be, both in memory and in life, healthy and happy (Huong, 2008).

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## REFERENCES

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