

Daughter of the Phoenix - return date

LOAN – I wanted to capitalize all the letters of her name – as her daughter, the author Isabelle Müller, used in her literary work of the same name. That thought helped me feel more comfortable as I went back with Isabelle to the memories of my mother, of her life of more than 7 decades of resilience as a “phoenix” always spreading its wings towards the blue sky and her deep longing for her homeland.

My meeting with Isabelle took place just after she completed a 10-day trip to three mountainous provinces in northern Vietnam, Lao Cai, Yen Bai and Ha Giang, to implement a number of projects for children there.

If she did not say it, no one would think that this woman with a “typical” European appearance has half Vietnamese blood. And, if they did not meet her, few people would understand that behind those seemingly stern and cold eyes is a person filled with compassion and especially her heart for her mother’s homeland – where her mother had a fierce childhood, a fierce half of her life... Isabelle Müller – a child of mixed Vietnamese and French blood, who started a business and married a German man – is devoting all her efforts to building the LOAN Foundation – to implement social charity projects for children in some northern mountainous provinces.

Risking life

LOAN is the name that Mrs. Dau Thi Cuc gave herself. According to Isabelle’s memory, her maternal hometown - where Mrs. Dau Thi Cuc was born - was a coastal village near Ha Tinh town. According to Isabelle’s expression, I understand that her maternal grandfather was an ethnic minority (possibly Muong) and because of that, her mother also

belonging to that ethnic minority. Born in the late 20s of the last century, in such a remote countryside, in a society that still heavily favored boys over girls, it is not difficult to understand why little Cuc was not allowed to go to school. However, the desire to go to school made Cuc’s childhood filled with days of beatings that almost killed her just because she ran away from home to secretly study.

At the age of 12, she made a bold and even life-threatening decision to run away from home to avoid being sold off by her family and to end the days of suffering from beatings by her father and brother. Facing death many times - being humiliated by the legionnaires and becoming pregnant... were the most bitter things that Dau Thi Cuc had to go through after running away from home.

Pay off debt of gratitude

In the flashbacks of her mother’s life, Isabelle’s voice sometimes faltered with emotion. It is difficult to imagine how an Annamese girl who ran away from home and became pregnant could survive and give birth in a society where feudalistic thinking still surrounded and suffocated every human destiny. However, the effort to survive and the instinct of motherhood helped LOAN survive and find a place to settle down in her life.

Fate brought LOAN to meet Isabelle’s father - when he was just a young soldier in his twenties in the French colonial army, who had just left his family to fight in Vietnam. That young French soldier brought LOAN a gesture of kindness that she later devoted her life to repay. The young soldier accepted as father the son that LOAN had used her life to protect. That was the boy in the photo of LOAN that Isabelle used as the cover of her book.

Since then, LOAN’s life has been a struggle with her husband’s migration to the South, and then following him to France, living amidst the harsh discrimination of her husband’s family. Her husband rejected her request to study in a French school – along with the children, because according to him, an old woman who was illiterate was a disgrace to the family. However, in her own way, that woman taught herself to speak and write, and later became not only the economic pillar, but also the person in charge of all paperwork and administrative procedures of the family.

Bringing the homeland to France

5 years after arriving in France, LOAN found a way to bring her little son over.

reunited with her family. By 1970, she opened “Vietnamese restaurant” in a countryside near Tours. Talking about her mother’s “Vietnamese Restaurant” – where she was “recruited” by her mother to work as a waitress since she was 8 years old, Isabelle’s eyes lit up with pride. Mrs. LOAN’s restaurant serves diners all the traditional Vietnamese dishes such as rice rolls, spring rolls, spring rolls, pho, vermicelli... Among those dishes, not only many diners but also Mrs. LOAN’s children are crazy about chicken vermicelli. That is also the Vietnamese dish that her children later became crazy about.

“The wonderful thing is that later, when I came to Vietnam, I tried all the dishes that my mother used to cook in the restaurant in France and found that their flavors were strangely similar,” Isabelle shared. She still remembers the year 1992, on her second return to Vietnam, when Ms. LOAN and Isabelle stayed at the Caravelle Hotel (Ho Chi Minh City).

For some reason, that day both mother and daughter were restless, had trouble sleeping and craved beef noodle soup. “To please us, the hotel chef at that time lit the fire to cook pho for the two of us at 3am. I thought, that could only happen in Vietnam. I will always remember the feeling of

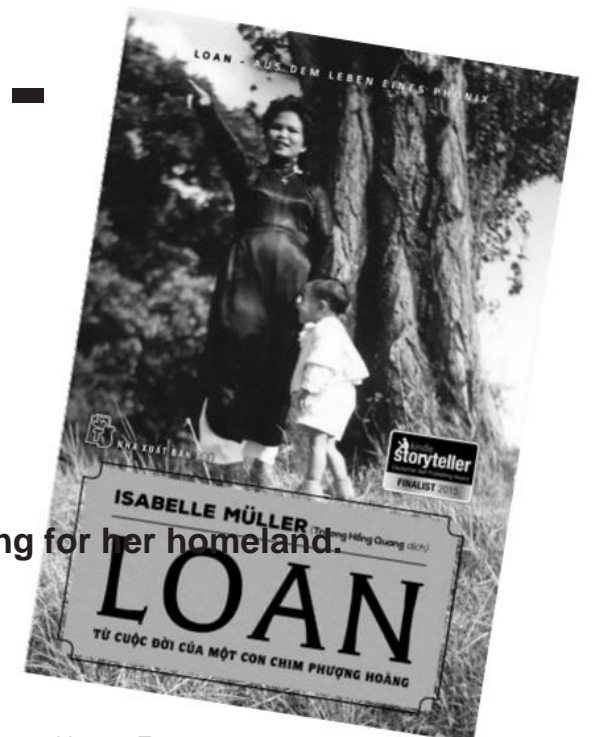
I try spoon

I had my first pho that day because it tasted exactly like the pho my mother cooked in Tours. What was even more surprising was that when I shared it with my mother, she said: “So I have successfully brought my homeland to France for you.”

Return Trips for Children

In the midst of her thoughts, Isabelle suddenly hummed the melody of a Vietnamese folk song. “I can’t sing it in Vietnamese like my mother can, but she told me that the song describes the sound of Vietnamese farmers going to work in the fields. It was just one of many songs in her Vietnamese tape library – which she kept in a place where no one in the house was allowed to touch,” she explained.

It can be said that, throughout her childhood, Vietnam for Isabelle was the dishes her mother cooked, the folk songs that her mother often listened to and translated for her. However, since returning to Vietnam for the first time with her mother in 1990, witnessing the deprivation of children in poor rural areas of Vietnam, Isabelle wanted to do something.



Isabelle Müller on a trip to Bac Me district (Ha Giang), May 2018. (Photo: Corinna Buchholz)

Since childhood, author Isabelle Müller has cherished the idea of writing a book about her mother’s life, but 30 years later she had the opportunity to write and complete the work after 2 years. The life of LOAN - the main character, with her victories over the harsh storms of life, recreated a vibrant period in Vietnamese history.

After its release, the book "LOAN - from the life of a phoenix" became a best seller for two consecutive years on Amazon (Germany) and entered the top 5 finalists of the Kindle Storyteller Award in 2015. All royalties from this book will be transferred to the LOAN Stiftung, a charity founded by the author, to support ethnic minority children in Northern Vietnam.

Sharing about the work LOAN and the trips back and forth between Vietnam and Germany like a shuttle, she said: “The motivation for me to do all the projects now is to make up for the work after 2 years of childhood - the childhood of a girl born and raised in a society full of disadvantages. If my mother could not go to school, I would do everything to send the students in the highlands to school.”

Saying goodbye to Isabelle, I still felt her wish in my heart: “How wonderful it would be if the work about LOAN’s life was included in Vietnamese high school textbooks, because it reflects the Vietnamese people’s desire to understand and rise up. I want all Vietnamese children to never give up on their dreams, no matter how difficult their circumstances are, and I want them to live a truly meaningful life.”