

Life is “Tragic and Comic at the Same Time”: Kim Thúy and Her World

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Kim Thúy is without a doubt one of the best known and most celebrated Canadian writers of Vietnamese origin today. She has won many prestigious awards, including the 2010 Governor General’s Literary Award. Most notably, she was one among the 4 finalists (along with Neil Gaiman, Maryse Condé, and Haruki Murakami) for the Nobel Prize substitute—The New Prize in Literature 2018. Born in Saigon in 1968, Kim Thúy was one among more than a million Vietnamese refugees who fled from Vietnam after the fall of Saigon. Safely reaching the Malaysian shore and having spent four months in a refugee camp there, her family was granted refugee status and resettled in Granby, Quebec, in 1979.

Kim Thúy’s debut novel, *Ru* (2009), is a semi-autobiographical fiction recounting her and her family’s experiences crossing the ocean as a refugee. The title comes from the Vietnamese word for “lullaby,” and the French word for “a small stream.” And according to the epigraph, it also figuratively means “a discharge—of tears, of blood, of money” (Thúy, par. 1). Her other works of fiction include *Man* (2013) and *Vi* (2016). She has written a collaborative work as well with the French writer, Pascal Janovjak, called *A Toi* (2011). Her most recently published work is a Vietnamese recipe book filled with anecdotes of her mother and her five maternal aunts—*Le Secret des Vietnamiennes* (2017).

Ru is not written in chronological order. *Ru* uses the narrative technique of stream of consciousness, revealing the inner psyche of the narrator/protagonist Nguyen An Tinh. It follows Nguyen’s memory, travelling back and forth in time and space. Each chapter is very short. *Ru* could be read as a collection of verse poetry or short essays, and/or a memoir, an autobiography, or a novella. “It is suitable,” Kim Thúy makes a jest, “for someone who has a very short attention span” (Thúy “Crossing”). Each chapter flows like a stream into the next chapter, taking up the subject, thought, or a word from the previous chapter. Rhythm is thus very important. The rhythm produced by these short chapters effectively captures the narrator’s experience in Vietnam and Canada from multiple angles. *Ru* is not just about an individual story, but embodies stories and memories of her family and other Vietnamese refugees, making it into a collective story/history of the people at the mercy of the Vietnam War and its aftermath. It depicts tensions between Canada and Vietnam, North and South Vietnam, pre-war and post-war Vietnam, and the wealthy and the poor.

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I first met Kim Thúy in August 2018, at the Festival of Written Arts held at Sechelt in British Columbia, Canada. Kim Thúy was one of the guest speakers at the event. It was such a pleasant honour to meet her again and to welcome her to give a talk at Sugiyama University a year later on June 25, 2019. This paper introduces some passages from *Ru* along with Kim Thúy's explanation based on questions I asked throughout this event.

I

Ru begins with the birth of the protagonist, Nguyen, during the Tet Offensive. The Tet Offensive was a very important turning point in the Vietnam War, as it led to the fall of Saigon.

I came into the world during the Tet Offensive, in the early days of the Year of the Monkey, when the long chains of firecrackers draped in front of houses exploded polyphonically along with the sound of the machine guns.

I first saw the light of day in Saigon where firecrackers, fragmented into thousand shreds, coloured the ground red like petals of cherry blossoms or like the blood of the two million soldiers deployed and scattered throughout the villages and cities of a Vietnam that had been ripped in two.

I was born in the shadow of skies adorned with fireworks, decorated with garlands of light, shot through with rockets and missiles. The purpose of my birth was to replace lives that had been lost. My life's duty was to prolong that of my mother. (1)

According to Kim Thúy, although she was born in September 1968, she strategically set Nguyen's date of birth "in the early days of the year of the Monkey" (1) when the Tet Offensive started in order to create a dramatic, chaotic opening in Vietnam. Contrary to this chaotic opening, the novel ends in peaceful Canada where the protagonist is cradled in love and lullaby. According to the author, this contrast between the opening and the ending had been an intentional narrative strategy to emphasize her long journey to safety.

Yukiko Toda (YT): I understand that *Ru* is a semi-autobiographical fiction based on your life. Can you tell us why you named the protagonist Nguyen An Tinh instead of your own?

Kim Thúy (KT): Because if I had to write based only on my story, this book will only last three pages, and it would be over, finished. We were very lucky. When we escaped from Vietnam, we didn't meet any pirates and we didn't have a storm. We didn't have anything, so then I would not be talking about the majority of the Vietnamese who escaped from Vietnam. But let me first tell you why there were so many Vietnamese who escaped from Vietnam at that time.

YT: Yes, that was actually my second question, perfect.

KT: So in 1954, Vietnam was divided into two—the North and the South—a little bit like Korea. In 1975, the North won against the South. The North was communist, so the whole country became communist. Before 1975, the South was supported by the United States. So when the North won against the South, there was a change of political regime—not of a political party but a political regime. And when there’s a change of political regime, there’s persecution against those who lost.

I’ll give you one example. During the darkest years of Vietnam after 1975, everything was rationed—you cannot buy meat when you want to. If we talk about meat, for example, one family can have 100 grams of pork per month, which is about one hamburger. Everything that you owned in your house became the government’s property.

So even the farmers who owned the pigs—all the pigs became government property. So the government would take all the pigs and then give back 100 grams per family. But when you forbid something, there’s always a black market. So the farmers would hide one pig from his or her 100 pigs and then would make the pigs travel from the region to Saigon, to the city, where most people with money lived.

And the best way to hide the pig is to put it in a coffin. Nobody would open a coffin because of its smell. You put the pig in the coffin so that they can travel. Otherwise, you have inspectors at every corner who will open your bag, open many things, but not a coffin.

When they arrived in Saigon, the merchants or the vendors would strap meat on them so they could go to houses to sell the meat. For example, in our house, we had 10 soldiers living with us. Every time we would go in and out of the house, the inspector would touch everything and inspect you. The vendor who comes to our house would have meat on her, and every time she came in, the inspector would touch her, but would only think that she’s fat—that she has love handles. And the vendor would come into the bathroom, open her shirt, and my mom would choose 50 grams from here, 20 grams from there, 100 grams from here . . . and the vendor would cut the meat, and we would buy it. The vendor would put on her shirt again, go out, the inspector would touch but does not remember where the meat or the fat was.

YT: So was the meat on the vendor’s body in one piece?

KT: No, smaller pieces. You know? She just sticks them onto her body everywhere.

So there were many, many, many changes in our everyday lives, and that’s just one example. But the reason why we left Vietnam was that when you were 18 years old, and if you were a boy, and if you were not admitted to a university, you would go directly to a battlefield—the battlefields then were in Cambodia and at the border with China. If you went to Cambodia, you wouldn’t come back alive because it was very, very dangerous. Admission to the university was not based on your academic merits but your family history. If you were from the South and the enemy side, you would never be admitted to a university, and for sure you would die in Cambodia or at the border of China.

And the only way to leave Vietnam was to flee by boat because you no longer had the freedom of movement between the countries. Even at five years old, I could not go to my cousin’s house

five streets from my house without the specific authorization from the police station. No more planes were coming in, and no more train tickets you could buy. Because Vietnam was surrounded by water, that was the only way for us to flee Vietnam.

I have two brothers and an uncle who was seventeen years old, so we knew that all the boys would die. So we decided to flee. When my mother asked my grandmother to let my uncle come with us, my grandmother said we would die because many boats sank. My mother just said, “Okay, your son is already dead. You choose if you want him to die in Cambodia, at the border of China, or at sea. But at least at sea, there is 1% or maybe 0.1% chance you will survive.”

YT: How old were your brothers?

KT: They were much younger. . . . We were lucky. We arrived in Malaysia, alive. When we got off the boat, within fifteen minutes, the rain came down, and our boat broke in front of our eyes. So if we had stayed on that boat for fifteen minutes more, I would not be here with you.

And when we were in Malaysia, we had the chance to be selected by Canada, and that’s why we arrived in Canada.

YT: You said you were “selected,” can you tell us how they selected people?

KT: There were Vietnamese going to different countries—Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia. . . . Some even would go to Hong Kong. We did not know where we were going. They just landed somewhere. And different countries that wanted refugees would come into the camp and select the refugees. Each country would have different criteria. For example, Sweden selected people based on humanitarian reasons, so they only took families who had someone with a handicap.

There was one man on the boat who put a diamond into the hole of the molar of his tooth to hide it from pirates. You know, each of us would hide the gold or dollars differently. Some of us would roll the dollar bill (American 100 dollar bills) really tight, and swallow it, hoping to find it at the other end.

YT: Can you explain more about these “pirates”? Who were these pirates? Were there pirates everywhere?

KT: Yes, there were pirates everywhere at sea, so when you would cross you might meet a pirate. I’ll give you some stories of pirates. Pirates knew that the Vietnamese would leave with all the goods that they had, you know, all the properties, the gold, and the dollars. Many of the pirates were just fishermen. It’s a boat of five or seven fishermen, and they would stop a Vietnamese boat in order to steal whatever we had on the boat.

YT: So pirates were fishermen?

KT: Very often, yes.

YT: Fishermen from Vietnam?

KT: From Thailand, Malaysia, and so on. . . . Sometimes, we would roll up the one hundred dollar bill, and we would push it up into the anuses of children so we could hide it. When one woman saw the pirates coming, she swallowed the diamond earrings that she had. And some days later, she could see one earring. But for the last forty years, she is still looking for the second earring. Maybe she can go for a scan. Maybe it’s stuck somewhere here (laugh).

For a pirate boat to steal, the best way is raping. Because when you’re only five or seven, and you meet a Vietnamese boat of 50, 100, 200 Vietnamese, how can you control them? The best tool to use is raping. It’s very quick and it’s very efficient.

YT: It’s very shocking

KT: Yes, and the best way to do it is to separate the men from the women, and start raping the women in front of the men. Those who didn’t listen, obey, were thrown off the boat. So very quickly, the raping would freeze everybody.

I have another story. I met this one woman who explained how all the women were forced to jump from the Vietnamese boat to the pirate boat, and there was this one woman who was so scared that when she jumped, she fell in the middle between the boats, and because of the waves, the boat cut her legs. Somehow the pirates got scared, they picked her up and didn’t rape anybody.

YT: Why were the women jumping over boats?

KT: The pirates wanted that, so they asked all the women to jump to the other boat.

I can tell you so many stories. I just met one woman a month ago, and she said that luckily she had her period, so she was not raped. But her friend was raped, and all her facial bones were broken because she was pushed by all these pirates. So when she arrived at the camp, her bones healed by themselves, but not in the right way, so her face was completely disfigured.

Okay, I will stop talking to you about raping.

So we were lucky to arrive in Malaysia, and the criterion for Canada was that you had to have a sponsor—someone who would sponsor you to come to Canada.

I forgot to tell you about Sweden . . . that they only accept people related to someone with a handicap. My father thought that the man with the diamond was handicapped because he spoke like this and couldn’t speak. My father told him that he should apply for Sweden. But then actually, he was not handicapped. It was just that his tooth got infected from the diamond, and that’s why he couldn’t speak normally. So he didn’t get to go to Sweden, because the Swedish saw that it was just an infection.

We went to Canada because my father volunteered as an interpreter for the Canadian delegation

who came into our camp. We didn't know, but they offered a place for the interpreter at the end of the day.

We didn't plan on going to Canada, because as Vietnamese, we knew about the French of France because we were a colony of France for 100 years and we knew the Americans. Every Vietnamese wanted to go to France or the U.S., not Canada because the only image we had of Canada was an igloo and an Eskimo with a fishing rod and a fish—no vegetables. That's what we thought. There was no Internet, so we could not know anything about Canada. We thought Canada had winter 12 months out of 12. But the condition was so bad that we said we're going to the igloos, it doesn't matter, let's leave. That's how we ended up being in Canada, and we are so lucky because Canada is the best country of all countries.

II

After these questions, Kim Thúy continued to read from *Ru*:

Because of our exile, my children have never been extensions of me, of my history. Their names are Pascal and Henri, and they don't look like me. They have hair that's lighter in colour than mine, white skin, thick eyelashes. I did not experience the natural feelings of mother I'd expected when they were clamped onto my breasts at 3 a.m., in the middle of the night. The maternal instinct came to me much later, over the course of sleepless nights, dirty diapers, unexpected smiles, sudden delights.

Only then did I understand the love of the mother sitting across from me in the hold of our boat, the head of the baby in her arms covered with foul-smelling scabies. That image was before my eyes for days and maybe nights as well. The small bulb hanging from a wire attached to a rusty nail spread a feeble, unchanging light. Deep inside the boat there was no distinction between day and night. The constant illumination protected us from the vastness of the sea and the sky all around us. The people sitting on deck told us there was no boundary between the blue of the sky and the blue of the sea. No one knew if we were heading for the heavens or plunging into the water's depths. Heaven and hell embraced in the belly of our boat. Heaven promised a turning point in our lives, a new future, a new history. Hell, though, displayed our fears: fear of pirates, fear of starvation, fear of poisoning by biscuits soaked in motor oil, fear of running out of water, fear of being unable to stand up, fear of having to urinate in the red pot that was passed from hand to hand, fear that the scabies on the baby's head was contagious, fear of never again setting foot on solid ground, fear of never again seeing the faces of our parents, who were sitting in the darkness surrounded by two hundred people. (3—4)

YT: This episode describes Nguyen's experience on the boat. More than 200 people are squeezed into one another on the boat, in fear of many things, among which you talk about is the "fear of poisoning by biscuits soaked in motor oil" (3). Can you explain this? So people were eating

biscuits?

KT: No, you know, we could not bring anything with us, because the boat was only 10 meters long, and we were 218 people. We didn’t have enough space to bring anything with us and so the only food that was prepared by the boat, the organizers, was the dry bread—you grill it and they become like biscuits. Sort of like crackers, you grill it on low heat, dry it completely, and they will become very, very light. When you eat it and drink water, it will fill you up. But there was no space on the boat, so the crackers, or the bread, were put next to the oil tank. So it absorbed the smell of oil.

YT: I see. And it tasted like motor oil as well?

KT: Yes.

So in the boat, in order to have 218 people, they had to build a second floor. So when you are in the belly of the boat, you don’t have a lot of air. The only opening was a square through which people went down. And the problem is when you are so close, when you throw up, you throw up on the other person. And the other person throws up on you.

But it was very good that people threw up on me because I was born very weak, I was allergic to fish, seafood, milk, the wind, the cold, and so on. I was allergic to everything. But after the four days, when we arrived in Malaysia, the first meal we got from the Red Crescent (the Red Cross but Malaysia is Muslim so it’s called the Red Crescent) was sardines. I ate it and no reaction. From that point on, I lost all allergies. And I think it’s because in the boat, people were throwing up on me, I acquired their immunity system, so now, nothing can kill me. In the camp, we ate, six out of seven days, fish, and the fish was rotten. You know, there were many worms inside. I think all the worms had eaten all the allergens of the fish, so I could eat it without any allergic reaction.

Okay, let’s go have dinner now! (laugh)

YT: But since we’re on the subject, let’s move on to an episode about dinner. This episode occurs after the war when the North won, and Vietnam became a communist country. Ten young inspectors from the North come and take over Nguyen’s house in order to keep watch on Nguyen’s family. One day, these inspectors interrogate Nguyen and her family about why the fish they had kept for dinner in the toilet bowl disappeared:

The young inspector had been marching in the jungles since the age of twelve to free South Vietnam from the “hairy hands” of the Americans. He had slept in the underground tunnels, spent days at a time in a pond, under a water lily, seen the bodies of comrades sacrificed to prevent cannons from sliding, lived through nights of malaria amidst the sound of helicopters and explosions. Aside from his mother’s teeth lacquered jet black, he had forgotten his parents’ faces. How could he have guessed, then, what a brassiere was for? In the jungle, boys and girls had exactly the same possessions: a green helmet, sandals made from strips of worn-out tires, a uniform, and a black and white checked scarf. An inventory of their belongings

took three seconds, unlike ours, which lasted for a year. We had to share our space by taking ten of those girl and boy soldier-inspectors into our home. We gave them one floor of the house. Each of us lived in our corner, avoiding contact except during the daily searches when we were obliged to stand face to face with them.

One day our ten roomers dragged us to their bathroom, accusing us of stealing a fish they'd been given for their evening meal. They pointed to the toilet bowl and explained to us that the fish had been there that morning, hale and hearty. What had become of it? (31)

These young inspectors who had spent their whole lives in the jungle had never seen or used toilets before, and so obviously did not understand how the toilet drainage system works, and that their fish would go down the drainage pipe. When you say "young," how old were these inspectors?

KT: They were 18, 20, 22. . . .

YT: So they had never seen or used toilets because there are none in the jungle, right? So this episode with the fish is based on what happened?

KT: Yes, yes!

In the jungle, the soldiers only had what I described. But the women had two more things. I just met a female soldier some years ago who told me that women had two more things than men—two facial towels and two pins. When they have menstruation, they can fold the towel into three, and pin it to the bottom of their pants. I asked this woman whether that was enough, and she said it was because they didn't eat so much. Every day, the ration they had was just one bowl of rice, and the rice was so rotten that they had to wait for it to cool down so that the smell won't be so bad. In order to mask the hunger, she only ate one grain at a time. And because you don't eat so much, your menstruation is very light. Usually, the ration she had was 30 grains of salt per day, and that's why the towel was enough for the menstruation.

She said that one day the messenger who brought the food to the jungle couldn't reach them, so she didn't have salt for many days. When you don't have salt for many days, you know, you start swelling. So there's one boy soldier who was in the jungle with her and still had 15 grains of salt left in his pocket. He gave the 15 grains of salt to her and proposed because he was in love with her. And they got married and had three children together. And she said that, at that point, 15 grains of salt was worth more than any diamond, because 15 grains of salt could save her, but not the diamond.

That's why they didn't know what the toilet was, and so our question was, if they put the fish in the toilet bowl, where have they been going for the toilet? Right?

YT: So where did they go?

KT: We don't know, they never told us.

YT: You never asked?

KT: No, because they were our inspectors. They were our bosses, you know? So you don’t dare to ask.

YT: My question, here, is that in this episode, as well as in an episode where a woman dies in a septic tank at the refugee camp, you always combine tragic story with humour...

KT: Yes.

YT: Is that sort of like your strategy—to use humour as a form of relief to make it easier for the readers to accept the agonizing reality?

KT: No, that’s just life—tragic and comic at the same time. I’ll give you another example.

We had found the Canadian agent who had selected us, 40 years later in Canada. So he told us that he was in one of the biggest camps with 60,000 Vietnamese on that island. He has granted immigration to a woman who had survived raping, stealing, and losing all of her family because the boat broke at sea. She survived all of this. She came for an interview, she got accepted, and when she left the place with a roof where the immigration agents were, a coconut fell and hit her head, and she died. And this is a true story. If she had just bent her head, the coconut would have touched her head in the back. Or if she had bent it a little backward, it would have broken her nose. Or if she had made it a little bit faster, she would have survived.

So is this story tragic or funny? You know, thinking that a coconut fell and killed her. This is very funny. It could be in a funny movie.

YT: Indeed, and yet it’s true that this is what happens in real life.

KT: Another story, which I told in this book, is how I learned English. We didn’t have enough money to go for private lessons, and we went to school in French. So my mom sent me to a place for cadets, for young people to train for the military, and it was an English camp, and so it was for free. She told me to go there and learn English. And the camp was just in front of the house. I had to go every Friday. The first Friday when I arrived there, you had to wear a uniform, a military uniform. We then had to line up. We were all twelve, thirteen or fourteen, and our inspectors or our superiors were maybe sixteen, seventeen. But you know between twelve and sixteen, there is a big gap. You know, in voice and size and everything, so our superior would go in front of each of us saying, “Oh, your hair is not well cut,” “You haven’t ironed your shirt very well,” or all kinds of things, but I had no idea what he was saying. And then he arrived on my row and stood in front of my neighbour for a long, long time, and he started going, “Rahrahrharhahra, asshole! Rahrahrharhahra, asshole!” right? And I didn’t know what “asshole” was, so I thought it was the name of my neighbour. At the end of the day, I had to practice my English. I had to say hello to

somebody, or good-bye to somebody. So I went up to the only person I knew, who was “asshole,” right? So I went up to him and said, “Good-bye, asshole.” And he looked down at me, pulled his fist up, and said, “Rahrahrahrha,” and I didn’t know what he said. So I said, “Ummh, good-bye?” and he, I think, because I looked so stupid, thought I was handicapped and so didn’t hit me. But he could have hit me. He was fourteen, and I arrived from a refugee camp. I was this big, and I went up to this big boy and said, “Good-bye, asshole.” So you know, is it tragic or comic? It was both.

So do you have any equivalent word for “asshole” in Japanese?

YT: Well . . . we don’t use such a word, so shall we say that we don’t know?

KT: When you swear, in Quebec, we use words from churches, because the church was very powerful. So when you’re angry, you use some words from the church. Here in Japan, which words do you use?

YT: Maybe scatological.

KT: Ahhh . . . (laugh).

YT: You know, we need to almost stop. Are there any questions from the floor?

KT: If not, I just want to tell one story. You know, Japan has accepted some Vietnamese boat people. And there’s one man, when the accident happened in Fukushima, who volunteered to go to Fukushima even though his wife and his daughter didn’t want him to go. But he said that Japan has given him a second life, so it was his time to give back to Japan, and so he went to volunteer in Fukushima.

And I also want you to know that when Vietnam opened up its doors in the 1990s when they allowed foreigners to come in, Japan was one of the first countries to come in and help the Vietnamese with all sorts of programs. So there are many, many young Vietnamese in the 90s who could speak Japanese. So you can be proud.

YT: Thank you. I think it’s time. Let’s give a big round of applause for Kim Thúy. Thank you so much.

KT: Thank you. And you should tell everybody how we met.

YT: Oh, yes. We met at a writers’ festival in Sechelt last summer. Kim Thúy was one of the guests speaking at the festival, and I asked if she could give a talk at Sugiyama, and one year later, it has really happened.

KT: But you know, I said “Yes,” to her but I never thought it would become true. So I feel really, really privileged. This is like a dream come true.

YT: It’s been an honour to have you with us here today. Thank you very much.

KT: Thank you, and good luck.

III

Kim Thúy’s talk at Sugiyama was quite a timely event, since five days before the event was the World Refugee Day. The United Nations General Assembly decided in 2000 to commemorate June 20th as an international observance day to honour all refugees and raise awareness.

Kim Thúy undoubtedly raises awareness through her work *Ru*. It has been translated into more than 25 languages around the world (“Kim Thúy” 1). Moreover, she gives talks around the world, giving detailed accounts about the historical and political backgrounds of Vietnamese refugees that are not described in *Ru*, the text. Many people at the Sugiyama event commented that they were able to visualize what it was like to flee on a boat after hearing Kim Thúy’s talk.

One of the questions written on the comment paper in response to the Sugiyama event asked about why Kim Thúy did not write those details in her work in the first place. Kim Thúy explained that it was important that her work evokes senses and emotions rather than provide facts and details. She introduced a story about a woman who came up to her one day after she gave a talk somewhere in Europe. This woman, who was also one of the boat people, thanked Kim Thúy for writing her story so well. Kim Thúy says that it is exactly because she tries to write how it felt like, and by doing so, aroused various senses, that readers—including other boat people—can imagine and/or feel that *RU* is their own story. Being able to write a story that other people can feel as their own, that, Kim Thúy says, is the best praise she could have for writing *Ru* (personal communication, June 29, 2019).

At the event, Kim Thúy kindly praised Japan for accepting Vietnamese boat people, and for being one of the first countries to help Vietnam after it opened its doors. Although she was too respectful to mention anything negative, it is important to remember that Japan accepts an extremely low number of refugees—42 out of 10,493 applicants in 2018, 20 out of 19,629 in 2017, and 18 out of 10,901 in 2016 (Ministry of Justice 1). Canada, on the other hand, resettled 28,100 refugees in 2018 (BBC News 1). The recognition rate is 67% in Canada, 41% in Germany, 62% in the U.S., 33% in the UK, and 21% in France, whereas it is only 0.3% in Japan. Compared with other G7 countries, the accepted number and the recognized number of refugees in Japan is incomparably low (Japan Association for Refugees 1).

At the Sechelt Festival of Written Arts 2018, Kim Thúy explained how all her family members who resettled as children are now all grown up and leading very successful lives as lawyers and doctors. At the same festival in 2017, Zarqa Nawaz, a Muslim Canadian writer of Pakistani origin, said the same thing. Zarqa encourages immigrants like her to work hard to succeed, earn lots of

money, and pay lots of tax to repay Canada. Both Kim Thúy and Zarqa Nawaz emphasized the economic benefits refugees can bring to the receiving country and community that host them.

Unlike Canada, Japan is more concerned about the negative impacts that accepting refugees would have on public security. The refugee system in Japan seems to be currently trying to “control” rather than “protect” refugees. Moreover, public awareness, concern, and understanding of refugee issues appear very limited. It is thus important first to objectively understand our current refugee system and status in Japan and then to think of ways we can help refugees in need as well as about various benefits they can bring to the country. *Ru* gives rise to such awareness and encourages us to be hopeful and optimistic even in the most tragic and challenging situations, for as Kim Thúy revealed profound insight, life is after all, “tragic and comic at the same time” (“Crossing,” June 25, 2019).

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